The Arky Squarks

A Collection of Short Stories and Poems

Jim Macnamara

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Foreword

The Arky Squarks is a collection of short stories and poems that reflect and celebrate life in a pared-back, essential, and existential form. They represent lived experience stripped down to its heart and soul.

In one sense, the stories are of a particular place and time. Many are derived from the author's young life growing up in the Australian bush close to Nature and observing characters living in small isolated country towns like the mythical Baxter's Junction, where throwing 'skimmers' across a dam was the height of weekend entertainment. Others travel through sprawling suburbia. Some bear witness to the collision of cultures and worldviews as horizons expand. A few peek into the future, wondering wide-eyed and curious.

Many speak of simpler times, somewhere between the 1960s and the end of the 20th century, before post-industrialization, globalization, and post-truth society. Times when the internet was a new-fangled invention. Times when the only screen to view the outside world was in a movie theatre and phones were tethered to cables slung from decapitated trees.

But they are also stories of and for any time—a lexicon of life today and for tomorrow. While varying widely in terms of the topics and issues addressed, *The Arky Squarks* contains one consistent theme. The contents reflect a search for meaning and meaningfulness in the world.

This search is not conducted in high intellectual spaces or in institutional contexts. The setting of this journey is the *everyday*. While some stories and poems address profound subjects that eternally trouble the human mind, most discuss day-to-day issues, such as negotiating shopping megamalls, dealing with committees, doing handyman activities around the house, living in a small town or village, getting along in families, debating politics in the pub, interacting with bosses, and 'fitting in'—or not.

The title of the book and the first story, *The Arky Squarks*, reflects this grounded everyday representation of human experience.

At one level, these are prosaic stories of ordinariness. However, while anchored in the everyday, all the stories and poems try to peer below the surface. All try to reveal hidden and overlooked significance. All speak a truth to some power—whether it is external, or our own prejudices and fears.

The voices that speak are somewhere between Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke*[1] and the droll but insightful humour of Australian comedian Carl Barron.[2] Barron's home town of Longreach in North West Queensland is not far from and not unlike that of the author. Both went on to travel and observe the world, and the author went on to postgraduate and then doctoral study at university. This deposited further layers on the landscapes of Baxter's Junction, Millstown and Planet Man, like alluvial soil from long-lost streams and glacial flows.

The struggles and strivings portrayed in this volume are eternal. And, like naïve art, the everyday simplicity will resonate and be refreshing for many in a complex contemporary age.

It is likely that everyone will find something of interest, something of their world, and something of themselves in *The Arky Squarks*.

1 Paddy Clarke is the central character/narrator in the novel *Paddy Clarke – Ha Ha Ha* by Irish writer Roddy Doyle, winner of the Booker Prize in 1993.

2 https://www.carlbarron.com

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The Arky Squarks

It all began the day of the killing. That was when I found out about the Arky Squarks.

Cheryl Taylor called it murder, but it wasn't murder. However, it changed everything. After that, things would never be the same again. The innocence of childhood had passed and the first fateful steps of my journey had begun.

It was several months before I learned the true identity of the Arky Squarks. And much longer before I understood their real significance. There were so many mysteries and myths that I was to discover along the way.

My Uncle Bill and Auntie Edna were Arky Squarks, I discovered. So were my mother and father. That meant I was one as well, although I refused to accept it for a long time. Long after the killing.

It happened in seconds, and I regretted it the instant it occurred. Or perhaps even a moment before. But a moment too late.

As the weapon sped on its way, I wished it back in my grip, or sheathed safely in my pocket. Better still, with 20-20 hindsight, I wished I had never acquired the lethal missile in the first place. Remorse rolled in like a summer thunderstorm from the west, enveloping me in its inky gloom and a still breathless dread, like the poignant frozen moments before rain.

But there was no going back. No undoing what happened. Even if the victim rose from the dead, the feelings that the moment created in me would never be erased. The course of my life seemed to be set, by not only this one ignominious instant, but even more so by what happened afterwards.

The immediate implications were actually less than one might expect. In one sense, it looked like my friends and I had got away with it. We hid the evidence, so no one ever found out. It might have appeared that we got off scot-free. But the moment was a turning point for what was to come.

The stone hurtled through the air, a shiny missile on its way to destruction. In the blinking of an eye, it struck the small bird on the chest. It fell abruptly in a shower of grey feathers and dust stirred up by the desperate flapping of its wings as it struggled to hang on to the air—and life.

My heart was racing wildly as I edged hesitantly towards where the small creature was lying on the ground. It was already dead by the time my friends and I arrived on the scene. The last jerky movements of its wings abated as nerve signals ebbed away and the cool stillness of death set in.

Its eyes were still open, small black beads with a curious and uncomprehending stare. One leg with its rubber-like foot lay twisted behind its back, broken by the impact of the stone. Its feathers were dishevelled and several were missing from its chest where a wound oozed a trickle of purple blood.

"Dead hit. You got it," Pete Young shouted.

"Yeah," I said, trying to hide my surprise and suppress the tremor in my voice caused by hyperventilation and a strange feeling welling up inside me.

"Bewdy," Pete said. "Look at the little bastards go. That'll show 'em."

The others remained silent, stunned. Even Pete's excited shouts faded quickly into an eerie, lonely stillness. The other birds had scattered into the trees in a flurry of flapping and squawking and an uneasy calm returned. With it, a heavy and confusing feeling was tightening its grip like a claw around my heart. What seemed like a heroic conquest just seconds before, now in the clear air of cooling emotions dissolved to reveal an unseemly and untoward attack, an act of brutality. I saw for the first time a glimpse of a primeval force that seemed to lurk in men – or, in our case, half-men.

I was a victim of the mist. I didn't know it then. This condition was not explained to me until my grandfather shed light on it many years later. I was to suffer this mysterious male affliction many more times before I came to recognize its symptoms and learn how to deal with it. At first, I thought I was the only one who suffered from it.

But then I found out that the mist affects many boys and young men, sometimes with dire consequences.

As I peered down at the bird I killed that day after school at Baxter's Junction, I was filled with a seeping, silent remorse. Moments before, pubescent muscles and sinews flexed taut and hard, fed on a potent cocktail of adrenaline and newly released testosterone. I was a hunter, responding to ancient instincts. My aim was precise, a warrior skill of which I was proud and for which I was admired in our gang.

Then, when I looked down at my victim lying in the dust, I wished it had been left in the jungle along with stone axes and spears of my Cro-Magnon ancestors.

My friends shuffled about nervously kicking at cans or staring at the ground looking for imaginary treasures like lost marbles—anything to avoid the reality. Matt Brody bolted. He always did when he thought there could be trouble. We called him a wimpy chicken. Whenever the shit hit the fan, Matt couldn't be seen for dust.

Nick Calamari edged nervously towards the back of the group so he could make a quick getaway if necessary. His real name was Oppa-doppa-loppa-lus, or something like that. His father, who owned the general store in town, was Greek and he was very strict. Even worse than our dads. Nick used to get a belting when he got into trouble. That's why he was twitchy when I killed the bird.

Alan Egan was there as usual. He and I were inseparable during primary school and in the first years of high school at Baxter's Junction. His parents owned a farm like mine did and we often spent holidays together. He was like an older brother or a twin, although he was very different to me. Al was the serious one, always piping up with a sensible view when I was losing my head or falling victim of the mist. I hated him sometimes. But we were best mates.

Cheryl Taylor hung around, half disgusted, half impressed. She moved to the area with her family from the city half way through year seven. Her father managed a bank. My father hated bank managers because they were always saying they were going to have to take the farm. But Cheryl seemed alright. Her nostrils flared slightly and her eyes brightened whenever she got excited. Danger seemed to excite her. Moments before, Pete Young had been sitting on the grass with her trying to put his hand up her dress. When the commotion happened, Cheryl was on her feet in a flash. She was much more interested in the dead bird than 'sex'.

Pete knew about sex from sneaking in to the R-rated movies with his older brother. He told us about what he saw sometimes. We didn't know much, although we didn't let on. Pete was a year and a half older than the rest of us, and more sophisticated. His mother said he was "shooting up", referring to his height, which is probably why he could get into the skin flicks. A civilization away in the Big Smoke, her proud description of her son meant something else quite different, as I was

later to discover. But we were at Baxter's Junction in the middle of nowhere.

I felt especially isolated after killing the bird. Despite the blood brother oaths that we took in the gang—and blood sister oaths in the case of Cheryl—I felt alone and sad. But shame and remorse were not feelings that were displayed in the gang, particularly among the boys. You'd get called a 'mummy's boy' or a 'gutless wonder' if you went soft over something and you'd be teased about it for weeks—or maybe forever. My father, and other men I knew like my grandfather and Uncle Bill, told me that men never back down or show weakness. "And they don't cry," they counselled. My father didn't explain whether these universal laws applied even when you were wrong or did something stupid. And I was too scared to ask him. Even that would have been questioning his authority. His edicts on how men were meant to act were repeated so many times that I assumed they were inviolate, like the Ten Commandments.

As I stood there feeling sorry and confused, something even worse was about to happen.

"Is that murder?" Cheryl asked.

"No, course it's not murder. Murder's when you kill a person. This is just a bird. And it's only a lousy, ugly bird anyway," I snapped. My palms were sweaty and the tips of my ears prickled like heat rash from my rising blood pressure, as I tried to rationalize what I had done. There was no going back. Men stand their ground, I recalled. They are meant to be strong; resolute; inscrutable. My father's sermons resonated like thunder in my twelve-year old, thunderstorm-frightened soul.

"Yeah. It's not like killing a human bean," Nick chimed in nervously from down the back where he was keeping an eye out just in case his father spotted us and came to inquire. Nick was trying to be supportive; to say the right thing. There was no meanness in Nick. He wouldn't kill a bird like I did, but he wasn't the type to dump on me for doing it either. He was what my mother called "nice natured". Whenever there was a fight, Nick would volunteer to hold a combatant's marbles or hat or school bag. And he'd loan you his clean handkerchief to dry the blood if you got a cut lip or something. Most of us never had a handkerchief, let alone a clean one.

Matt the Rat, who had gingerly re-joined our little huddle after doing a runner when the commotion happened, said nothing. He was still suffering his customary case of wimpy chickenitis.

"That's right. It's just a bird. And a stupid ugly one at that. Always making noise and squabbling. It's not like you killed an intelligent or beautiful bird like an eagle ... or a corella ... or a cockatoo," Pete offered, pulling himself up from the kikuyu and trying to sound authoritative. I could tell he was talking more to impress Cheryl than support me.

Cheryl ignored him as she had before. She was still looking at the bird and trying to make up her mind whether I was a hero or a villain—or whether it mattered.

Pete was right on one point and it gave me some consolation. The bird I had killed was a very ordinary, undistinguished species. A dusty charcoal grey creature with a raucous, unmelodic voice. They didn't migrate to other lands in winter, or soar high like the eagles. They didn't have the intelligence or instincts to find their way over long distances like homing pigeons. They couldn't dive for fish in the lakes or ocean. They didn't sing like nightingales or talk like cockatoos and parrots. And they weren't beautiful like rosellas or parakeets. They just scratched around in the dirt looking for grubs and worms, or sat squawking in the trees.

"What kind of bird is it anyway?" Cheryl asked.

"I reckon it's some kind of jay," Pete replied, determined to maintain his all-knowing, manly composure.

The species of the bird provided a fresh topic of conversation for the group and an animated discussion started. Nick thought it was a type of pigeon. "Bullshit," the others scoffed. "It's not a pigeon. You just hope it's a pigeon 'cos you'd like to eat it. You Greeks eat weird stuff, don't you," Pete quipped. Nick took no offence at these comments. He was used to them. They ran like water off the galvanized iron rooves of Baxter's Junction.

Everyone had an opinion, except Cheryl who stood over the bird peering down, unmoved by any of the suggestions made and waiting for a more convincing identification. I wondered whether she felt it was part of the bird's burial ritual that we should know what it was before bearing it to its leafy grave, or whether she just enjoyed seeing us show our ignorance. I sensed she knew the answer all along. She was always smart in school.

I could have stayed silent and focused on concealing my misery. But I had been familiar with these birds since I was a small child. They lived in the trees around the homestead on my family's farm. As long as I can remember, they were there squawking and squarking, scavenging for food and fluffing up their feathers in the dust to treat their lice. Often, they kept up their racket all day. My mother used to throw them bread crusts and scraps as they congregated in the tall gum trees in the mornings and in the shade under the steel water tank where it was cool in the summer afternoons. Sometimes there would be hundreds of them. A charcoal grey swarm of feathers and noise. A flying thunderstorm.

They would flock into the backyard in a noisy grey cloud and steal the dogs' food. But even the dogs never seemed to mind them too much. One old sheepdog used to chase them occasionally, but it was always a half-hearted attempt—a kind of dog thing designed to show the other dogs that it was his territory—more than an attack on the birds.

My mother could recognize some that regularly hung around our house. She said they kept in family groups, although I couldn't tell one from another. She admired their strong bonds of kinship because she said the family was everything. Encouraged by the local Parish priest who said mass on Sundays and sometimes visited our house to drum up business, my mother also fervently believed in the saying "The family that prays together stays together" and she constantly admonished my sisters and me to be good Christian souls. She would have been livid if she knew what I had done.

After everyone in our gang made guesses ranging from black jays to mutton-birds, I could not keep silent any longer. It was like being in class. No matter how much you want to keep a low profile, you can't stop putting your hand up when you think you know the answer to a question. Sometimes you just blurt it out. You can't help yourself. Some people think it's showing off. But in my case, it usually was that I was so excited to know the answer to something. Like now. I was sure about the bird's identity. As sure as I was about anything in life.

"They're Arky Squarks," I blurted out.

The conversation stopped abruptly. Everyone turned towards me at once and looked at me with curious, puzzled expressions.

"Arky Squarks?" Cheryl asked with an incredulous tone.

"Arky Squarks!" Pete Young repeated, looking at me with a strange grin. "That's a good one," he added, letting out a roar of laughter.

"That's funny," Cheryl said quietly, giggling.

My heart sank even lower as I realized I had said something wrong, but I was at my wit's end to know what it was. Everyone was staring at me and laughing. I didn't know where to look, or what to do next. Embarrassment stings like potent poison ivy on tender young skin. And I stung that day. My face burned with its hot prickles as I desperately searched for a mental exit sign. But there wasn't one. Humiliation and depression descended like rain clouds, sucking me into their gloom and a vortex of swirling emotions.

It never occurred to me that the small grey birds that lived around our farm and in town were anything other than Arky Squarks. That's what my mother always called them. I assumed the whole world knew them as Arky Squarks.

Nick decided that his father would come any minute, so he'd better get going. Pete was still falling about with exaggerated laughter five minutes after my affliction with foot-in-mouth. He had his arm around Cheryl, who appeared to have changed her loyalties one hundred and eighty degrees. Matt hung around, but avoided eye contact.

I hoped Al would come to my rescue. Say that he knew for sure that the birds were scientifically known as Arky Squarks. I needed his support. I needed him to come up with something sophisticated. But Al couldn't lie to defend me. That wasn't in his repertoire. He stayed neutral. So, I faced my crisis alone.

Why couldn't I have killed some other bird I knew for sure—like a crow or a magpie? Why couldn't I have missed? Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut?

As my heart pounded and my mind raced, it was no longer killing the bird that was my primary concern. A darkening realization set in. My thunderstorm began to reveal itself as the first advance of a monsoon, a 'Big Wet' that threatened to cut me off and leave me stranded like sheep shivering on small islands in a sea of Outback floodwater. I was familiar with isolation. I could feel its cold breath now. I was on the 'outa'—on the outside looking in, like a kid with no money outside a candy store. Just when I was starting to make friends and be

one of 'Them'. Somehow, I had blown it. I was a gangly, dumb country boy. The other kids said my family and I were hicks. That's what they called people who lived on remote farms and sheep stations. People like us. People like me. "How could my father and mother do this to me?" I asked myself. They were supposed to prepare me for life, to teach me stuff—Grown Up stuff, not stupid made-up names and childish myths.

"Arky Squarks! That's a good one," Pete said, still grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Arky Squarky. Squark, squark, squark," the others teased, making mocking sounds, like we made chicken noises when Matt Brody run off. "Pluck, pluck, pluck," we used to call after Matt. Now I was in the firing line. Kids, who were my friends just moments before, closed ranks. I was an outsider in a one-gang town.

"I know, I know," Cheryl chimed in excitedly. "Squawk squark, is it a lark? No, no, it's an Arky Squark." Everyone laughed.

I tried silently reciting a rhyme my mother taught me as a mental shield against taunts and teasing: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." But it didn't work. Words can hurt. "Arky Squark. Arky Squark." The two words resounded in my ears, barely abating as I walked away. I could still hear them when I was long out of earshot. Their echo haunted me for months. In truth, while I did not know it then, they would stay with me all my life. Like memories of thunderstorms. And lightning scars.

As I trudged down the dusty road past The Junction to my parents' farm house that fateful day after killing the bird, kicking clods, crestfallen and dejected, I passed my own crossroads. It was then I decided that I was going to leave Baxter's Junction and be somebody. I didn't know who or what. But I would show them. I was not going to be like that bird, whatever it was called. Ordinary. Insignificant. Defenceless. Dumb. A nothing. Scratching around in the dust of life. I wanted to get out of there. Out of Baxter's Junction. And out of my predicament.

That night I had a dream that I would have over and over in the years to come. It was one of those half-awake, half-asleep dreams; a kind of night time daydream that I had as I lay there staring into the dark. I dreamed that when I became Grown Up I would go away, far away. Sydney. London. Paris. New York. I would become rich and important. People would know my name. I would become sophisticated like the

people in the TV commercials. I would be somebody. Life would be exciting and I would be happy.

But in the harsh reality of daylight, the dream seemed like a taunting mirage on the horizon for a struggling farmer's son. Baxter's Junction was just a fly spot on a map to most people. We were a poor Irish Catholic family to boot. That meant lots of kids. And lots of bills. And lots of praying and asking God to help us. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me," I prayed as a confused lonely adolescent looking at the dusty horizon stretching to infinity.

Not that I knew I was lonely at the time. You can't miss what you don't know. But somewhere deep down inside me something was stirring. A kind of low grumble like distant thunder. Or hunger pains. Hunger pains of the soul.

I sensed there was something beyond the curtain of sky that fell listlessly to the ground at the end of Highway 41 and Highway 7 which converged at the T-intersection on the outskirts of Baxter's Junction. Somewhere beyond those invisible borders, the world's secrets waited. There my dreams hung in suspended animation. There, I was confident I would make it—whatever 'it' was. There, far away in the magical world of the future, there would be no Arky Squarks.

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Life gathered momentum after I went away to boarding school to complete the last years of my secondary education. I hated boarding, but I was pleased to get away from Baxter's Junction. Horizons beckoned. A spark had been lit.

A few weeks before I "went away" to boarding school, I found out the real name of the birds. When I finally plucked up the courage to ask Auntie Edna about them one day when she was visiting, I discovered that they were called Happy Families by everyone except my country bumpkin family who used their own made-up names for lots of things. "They're also known as Apostlebirds," she informed me nonchalantly, as if it was nothing. Something that everyone knew. That was the first time I ever swore in front of any of my family. Auntie Edna threatened to slap me for my outburst, but at last I felt I could put the ordeal behind me. A belated memorial service. A summer Requiem. The time of grieving was over.

Storm clouds lifted momentarily. A new world beckoned. A world without Arky Squarks. I re-dreamed my dream. But life is never what we imagine in our half-awake, half-asleep night time daydreams. A long journey lay before me, a journey much longer than the lonely bus ride from Baxter's Junction to The City through patchwork fields and grey gum forests. I headed down a road that I would be on for many years. Decades. A road that would lead to unforeseen places. Unforeseen events. My dream was to turn into a nightmare on occasions. Like the day of the killing. But I went like a young man eagerly and blindly into his first battle. A soldier on a McCafferty's bus.

When a university place was offered interstate, my bags were packed a week early. When an opportunity for graduates opened up at a city accounting firm, I applied with a 20-page dissertation on why they should select me, and I was hired. Accounting afforded a respectable and respected field central to the battleground of commerce. Partnership took just six years. Six years of working late at night and on weekends. Post-graduate study followed, and a posting overseas. I was determined never to be an ignoramus again. Or poor. On the outside. My new friends and I were smart and cool and educated. Marketers created labels for us like Yuppies (Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals) and DINKS (Double Income No Kids) for those with partners. It was a new world, far from Baxter's Junction.

Over the years, the Arky Squarks faded from my mind, forgotten or hidden away along with all the other paraphernalia from childhood like broken toys, games with missing bits, promises to be blood brothers forever, and grown out of clothes. I never told anyone in the firm that I came from Baxter's Junction. They assumed from my *alma mater* and rapid rise that I was 'Establishment'. It seemed like harmless gilding of the lily to allow and even contribute to this narrative of myself.

Along the way, I married and my wife had a child. I say it that way because it was *her* child. I provided the sperm. That was the sum of it: fatherhood. Once the pregnancy test came in positive, the doctors took charge of all matters maternal in those days. Fathers were banished from the surgery during pre-natal check-ups. A nurse told me sternly to wait outside when I took my wife—the woman I loved—to the labour ward. I prowled the waiting room with half a dozen other frazzled fathers to be. We were the ones with our noses pressed flat against the window at the hospital delivery ward and a wild stare in our eyes. Outside looking

in, wondering what it was all about. Wondering what we were supposed to feel. Wondering why there was a strange ache and emptiness in our hearts. Afterwards, long hours at the office meant missed smiles and bedtimes.

A few years later, my wife and I divorced—shortly after the second 'killing'.

That fateful event in my life arrived as unexpected and unplanned as the first, a few weeks before a 'big birthday'. Perhaps it was turning 40 that lit the fuse. Or perhaps it was simply a chain of events that escalated out of control after a meeting in which I asked the managing director about promotion to the senior executive team.

"You need to be a little more creative," he suggested. Seeing my puzzlement, he elaborated. "You work on our biggest account. They are going through a hard time with the regulators. You could make that go a lot easier with a few computer key strokes."

"I can't approve things that haven't received due diligence," I stated.

"No, no, of course not. It's a question of degree. I can't tell you your job. But we're here to help our clients. Facilitate. At the end of the day, you have to weigh up whether something is important, or simply bureaucracy that we can help our clients cut through." His words glided smoothly over the sharp edges of issues, like oil over rocks.

I got his drift and promised I would think about it. My mother's voice harped in the back of my mind and I felt an instinctive uneasiness. But membership of the biggest gang in town was at stake. All I had to do was impress them and I would be 'in'. It would mean status and recognition and respect. It was as if a stone was in my hand again. My weapon on this occasion was computer files and my slingshot was e-mail. As files sped on their way, I felt a familiar surge of adrenalin tinged with a dry, foreboding fear. Distant memories stirred with a shiver. A faint squawk, like the sound of a creaking chair, resonated in the room. But, like a missile, an audit approval cannot be recalled. I had mastered my new skills well and my seminal stone flew straight and true to its target.

A few months later, after a series of mysterious meetings between the firm's directors and dark-suited visitors, my ears were ringing with the sounds of flapping wings. When the intercom summons to a meeting in the boss's office came, my blood brothers and sisters suddenly had

other important things to do and other places to be. A cool stillness set in around me. Then, as I tried to answer their questions, all I could hear coming from my mouth were the words "They're Arky Squarks."

On this occasion, there was no laughter. Admonition and ostracization grow up to become censure and what corporate lawyers euphemistically call 'adjustment' and 'outplacement'. What happened in the moments following the sinking realization of my folly remains a blur, only the most salient splinters of conversation stuck painfully in my memory. Because it was a first offence, I would not face criminal charges, an official from the Auditor-General's office said. But, my boss advised that I was being "let go"—an ironic phrase for someone who only ever wanted to be let in. And I would be ejected from the gang permanently by being officially 'struck off'. The words came from invisible mouths hidden in an ink-like gloom that spun around me, a wintry thunderstorm that chilled me to the bone. I had faced southern winters before and I steeled myself against the icy embrace.

As I walked slowly down the street with a small box under my arm and my Bally bag slung over slumped shoulders, I thought of all the paths I could have taken. The summit of the office tower was behind me, disappearing into the clouds. I was on the descent, facing a blizzard. But more than a storm, which would pass, the wintry desolation that I was feeling was the beginning of a long exile. The boardroom where the war of business was waged had become Waterloo. And I was on a storm-tossed ferry heading for Elba. My wide world had shrunk to an island, a small nowhere place like the tiny place in a sea of land from which I had fled.

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As the cliché says, time marches on. A new decade dawns. A new millennium too. Anticipation grows and builds. There is a sense that everything will be different. It is a new era. Somehow, everything is different. I go to sleep at night with new dreams.

I see a deep violet sky, arched towards the horizon in each direction. It is neither day, nor night. There is no sun; no moon; no stars. But it is light. A soft illumination like moonlight falls across this vast empty sky.

Then, suddenly, the first one comes. A rush of air and the sound of speed, a compressed whoosh. Then it is gone, even before the eyes

have time to focus. The nerve-processing centre of my brain can only piece together the faintest shape of an object, a blurred shadow that rushes by. It appears to be a small flying object—no, a creature.

Then another one passes. It is travelling at the same high velocity. It appears dark, almost black. A glint bounces off what seem like dark staring eyes. Flashes of yellow are visible at the front of its head and on its trailing legs, suggestive of a beak and feet. Memories of birds fill in the missing pieces of information.

Logic says a hawk, or falcon, or seabird, diving into the green depths of the ocean in search of fish. Logic strives to dominate in our lives. But something is missing. Something is not right. There is no long, elegant neck. No slim tapered body. No tail feathers flared like an aileron creating uplift, or twisting like a rudder to provide steering. The shape is small and plump. The wingspan is short. The motion through the air purposeful rather than performance.

But they flash by at amazing speed. The dark arc of the stratosphere below indicates enormous height. I am left puzzled and wondering in their wake. More come. Hundreds. Thousands. Now the sky is full of them. Some get closer. As the brain registers more impressions, I begin to identify a familiar form.

They can't be. It's impossible. I'm hallucinating.

They are Arky Squarks. All around me. Flying. Soaring. Diving. They look elegant and agile. They fly with grace and majesty, no less than eagles. They call to one another no less exquisitely than the most beautiful songbirds.

Suddenly, I am not anchored; no longer tethered to the world. I am flying with them. Below me, there is nothing but the inky darkness of the sky. I float on a cushion of air, discovering the feeling of flight. It is breathtaking and exhilarating and terrifying. I do not fall. Something holds me up, an invisible cushion and I feel a oneness with the sky. And with the Arky Squarks. I am elevated with them. I have risen with them from my terrestrial world. I fly, higher and higher. Still they soar above me. High. Powerfully. They are magnificent.

The experience continues till I feel I must fall to the ground exhausted. They fly around me, watching me. They seem to be trying to communicate. It is as though there is something they want me to see. I look down, but there is only the empty void of the sky. The earth is so far below that it is barely discernible. Above me, I see nothing but more

Arky Squarks. To my left and right also. They appear to be flying in formation, slowing to allow me to take in what I am experiencing. But they are not escorting me, because we continue to slow and, rather than looking ahead like birds migrating on an instinctive compass bearing, they are watching me, looking at me as if I should understand and know what to do next.

I screw up my face in the shape of a question. But no answer comes. Several let out a faint sound, a single monotone 'squark'. It sounds like an expression of annoyance and they nod their heads towards me. Some are so close I can see their beady black eyes as they stare at me. They appear curious, more than angry or aggressive. They are watching me. And I them.

Then I realize that we are totally stopped. I am floating in space, weightless. Instead of looking up or down, or sideways, I look inwards. I am suspended outside my body and being, and see myself.

*****

It is wet next to my face where perspiration has seeped into the pillow. I sense that there may have been tears also, because my eyes are blurred and damp as I open them. I notice there is sunlight in the room. The arc of sky and the Arky Squarks have gone. Workday life rushes in to fill the space left vacant by the receding dream. The muffled rumble of traffic assaults my ears. Smells of frying bacon and eggs drift in through the open window and tease my olfactory senses. The distant thunder of a jet builds in a crescendo and then fades. The images of flying Arky Squarks are pushed aside by raging reality.

But during the days that followed, I found myself unable to get them out of my mind. Nor forget the sensation of my dream. The soft-focus images of unreality had a strange clarity and emotional connection. Memories of it drew me back again and again in my thoughts at night. However, the dream never came again. I wanted it to. I realized that I yearned for the feeling of freedom and spiritual weightlessness that it brought. But unconscious journeys eluded me, and soon unconsciousness itself became unreachable. I lay awake battling insomnia, wondering why I dreamed about flying with nondescript little birds and thinking of them fluttering and flapping in the trees at Baxter's Junction.

It was during one of those sleepless nights with a thunderstorm rumbling outside and slicing the sky with lightning strikes that it occurred to me. The Arky Squarks had always been with me, even though I thought I had escaped from them. All that journeying. All that travelling to the far sides of the earth. All that living. All that running. They had followed me and found me. They swarmed around me. The office workers. The cleaners. The 'check-out chicks' and guys at the grocery store. Taxi drivers and policemen. Stop-go men and women on the highway. Farmers. Mine workers and labourers. Fishermen and sailors. Soldiers and clerks. I am one of them. I am an Arky Squark.

But even Arky Squarks can fly.

The Choosing Ones

We are not the chosen ones.
Not God ordained. Our might,
intelligence, our dominion
is due to chance, to evolution.
No, we are not the chosen.
But each of us can choose.
Be caretakers or conquerors;
Be protectors or plunderers.
We are not the chosen ones.
Not the chosen, but choosers.
What will we choose to do?
Who will we choose to be?
We are not the chosen ones.
We are the choosing ones.

The Lake that Couldn't Find the Sky

Out across the plains where the mirages grew and shimmered in summer, there was a low flat expanse of whitish clay surrounded on each side by ochre red sand hills. The flat was treeless and bare except for tufts of a thick, primitive grass that grew grey-green and silvery in the dry desert climate.

A geologist passing through told us that the flat was the bottom of an ancient lake, a remnant of the inland seas that once covered much of the area where we lived. Now the flat was barren and ghostly white and grey all year round. Except for special times when the big rains came.

I was turning eight that autumn. The rains were unseasonal. Usually they came in spring. But, without warning, a big change moved in from the north-west. A cyclone had crossed the coast at Darwin and headed inland, the weather reports said. It was bringing monsoon rains across the Outback.

Only a few drizzly showers fell on our land—just enough to settle the dust. But we heard on the radio that it had rained a lot to the north. We didn't need to hear the reports to know that because the creeks started running, cutting the roads to town. Fed from headwaters far away, they spread out like wide brown ribbons across the flat plains and we had to move sheep and cattle out of the lowest paddocks.

I was out with my father checking the livestock when I saw what happened to the flat. It was covered with yellowish brown water. At first, it was only ankle deep, evident by the tufts of grass sticking out. Then, when we returned the next day, the grass was barely visible. A huge brown lake had mysteriously appeared, almost overnight.

Something about the lake puzzled me. I looked in my geography books and a junior encyclopaedia that my grandmother bought me for my birthday to find pictures of lakes. None looked anything like our lake. I lay awake thinking about it for hours that night. At breakfast, while my father was eating toast and drinking his 'morning cuppa', I asked him a question that was going around and around my mind.

"Dad, why isn't our lake blue like other lakes?"

"Well, that's because …" He hesitated, chewing.

My mother helped him out. "It's because water, when it's clear, reflects the sky. Like a mirror. But our lake is muddy from the red dust and soil washed into it."

"Why haven't other lakes got mud in them? How do they get clear and blue?" I asked the way eight-year-olds do.

"Well, in time the mud settles to the bottom—and then they reflect the sky."

"Will ours settle and become clear?"

"I'm not sure." My mother's knowledge of local geography ran out. She was a city girl before she married my father and moved out west.

"Probably not," my father said with the unemotional pragmatism of a bushman. "The water will evaporate and soak away before it gets a chance to settle."

"That's sad," my sister, Molly, who was listening in, muttered glumly.

"Sad?" my father said, looking at her over the rim of his steaming tea mug.

"Yes. The lake is looking up at the sky. But it can't see it."

"Well, maybe it will last longer than usual. There's been a lot of rain up north so there's more water coming down," Dad said, consoling her.

*****

Every day for the next week Molly and I nagged our father to take us out to the lake to look at it. We peered expectantly through the windscreen of our four-wheel-drive as our father drove down the drying dirt track. But every day it was brown. Murky dull brown.

Then, after five days, the tufts of grass started sticking out again. The lake seemed even browner, even though the sky was clear and blue.

After a week, patches of white cracked mud appeared like tiles peeling off the bottom. We could tell the lake was dying. A few ponds lingered in the lowest parts near the middle. We walked out across the hardening cracked mud to inspect them.

"Look. Look. Tadpoles," Molly shouted.

In just a week, life had sprung up in our lake. As well as tiny tadpoles hatched from long-dormant eggs, dragonflies buzzed across its surface. Mosquitos stung our ankles around the shores. "It's a real lake," Molly said hopefully. But still it was brown, and then greyish white as the crusted clay began to show through.

In a few more days under the baking sun, it was gone. Our lake died without ever finding the sky.

*****

It's funny how things like that come back to us. Or stay with us. Fragments of images like jigsaw pieces. We search for the sense in them, wondering where they fit. Often putting them aside. Then, in a moment of insight, or accident, discovering their place in the scheme of things.

Here I am, all these years on. A world away. Trying to make sense of my life. Trying to rationalize what I have done—and not done. Trying to find my way back to the simple and the serene; to rediscover perspective in a world of sensory overload.

And there it is, shining in the evening sun in my subconscious. I am a lake paddler again.

I remember the excitement and thrill of discovery. I smell the evening wind off the water. Hear the frogs' chorus after dark. Marvel at the birds that find their way to the water, guided across simmering plains by some primeval instinct. I loved that lake more than any I have seen in all my travels since. More than watery vistas mirroring eternity.

Its memory reminds me of my own temporality; that perceptions of the small and seemingly insignificant are only refractions of perspective. And greatness is almost always a reflection of other greatness around us.

My lake has at last found the sky.

Lake Cawndilla, near Menindee in western New South Wales, which is dry during many years. Photo: Jim Macnamara.

The Brolga's Dance

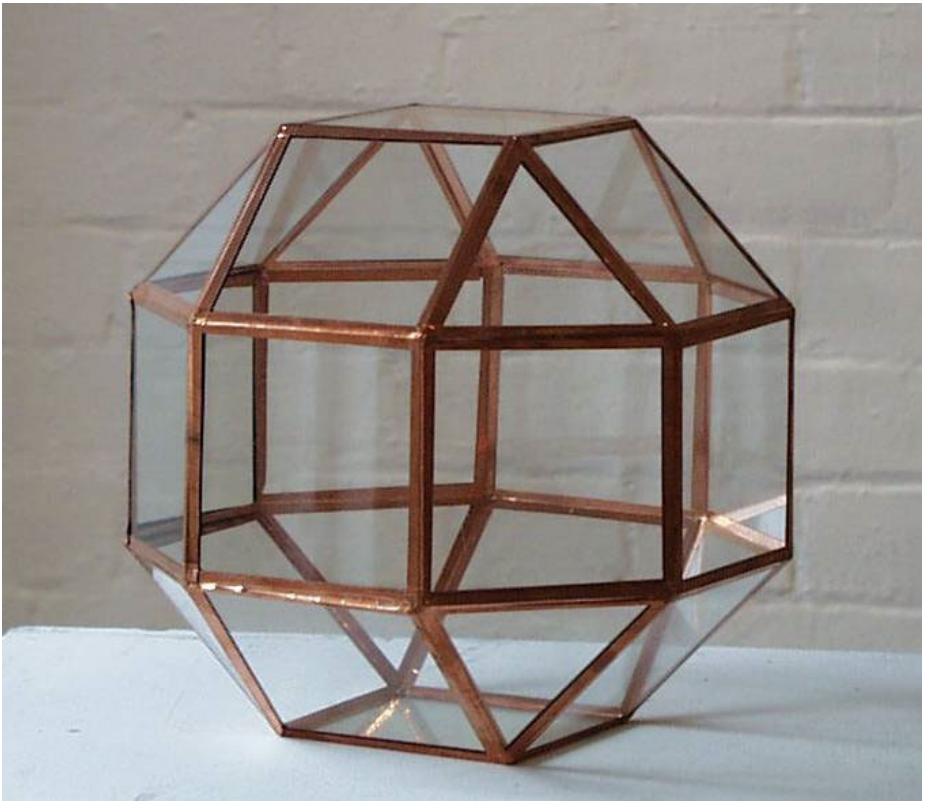
Dance around me Brolga, dance.
Your beauty captivates and intrigues.
Stalking the plains in full view,
yet unseen; unknown; unapproachable.
Weave your mystery, trace your patterns,
silhouetted shapes under the sky.

Dance around me Brolga, dance.
Replenish my soul seeking art and
craving culture in the wilderness.
I watch you dance, so near, so far,
revealing only glimpses of yourself,
then retreating into enigma, lost in silence.

Yet I know you Brolga, and your dance.
I met your spirit in the desert
that I traversed on my journey here.
I looked into your soul, saw your dance
which many think your destiny and desire,
is not enough. An illusion. A shadow play.

Your eyes revealed you yearn to fly.
The dance was only preparation.
A primeval instinct pulls—no, possesses you.
And now it possesses me. It binds us.
A thousand years of preparation,
a journey only just begun.

Fly Brolga, fly. Stretch your wings.
Let your spirit soar, set it free.
Don't look down. Don't look back.
I will guard your plains, protect your nest,
Provide a haven, be your rock,
And dance when you return.



Buckyball of glass and copper. Artwork: Gail Kenning. Photo: Gail Kenning.

The Committee

The Committee meets Thursdays. Ms Ruth Parkinson-Jones is The Chair.

"Chair! How can a person be a chair?" Freddy Turner asked the night she got elected. A murmur of disquiet spread around the room. "No, I want to know," he continued. Freddy is the local real estate agent and auctioneer with a voice that could talk over jackhammers. There was a real hullabaloo that night over nomenclature. Betty Friedman, Germaine Greer, and Andrea Dworkin were in Millstown in spirit.

Miles Chadwick entered the fray, arguing that the term 'chairman' was nothing to do with being a man. He went to a private school and learned Latin, which he quoted *ad nauseam*, pardon the pun. His soliloquies were punctuated with phrases like *ipso facto* and *a priori*. Miles told the gathered assembly that the 'man' in Chairman was derived from *manus*, Latin for hand.

"A chairman is the hand that takes the chair. It comes from the days when the head of a group sat down and the rest stood up," Miles informed the assembly in the best-educated and most cultured accent that he could recall from his private school days.

But Ruth Parkinson-Jones-Friedman-Greer would have none of it. "I will be called The Chair," she ordered and plonked her largish frame into the pale aqua plastic namesake at the centre of the top table. The chair—the plastic one—creaked and bowed. Its stressed aluminium legs with rubber caps made little squeaking noises on the wooden floor of the hall.

Miles and Freddy, who were re-elected to the Committee, attempted a further protest on principle, but it was evident that the battle was lost. Richard Higgenbottom, a public servant from the Department of Urban Planning, moved meekly to his seat at the top table where the Committee members sat, and Grace Sherrington, a first-time Committee member, nodded and clapped her approval.

"Hear, hear," she said, reciting Committee speak that she had heard from her years as a member of the 'rank and file'. Grace had been a member of the organization for eleven years and, in her words, "knew where the skeletons were kept".

"Meetings will be the first Thursday of every month," Ruth Parkinson-Jones declared and banged the small wooden hammer provided to The Chair on the table to declare the meeting closed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please help move the tables and chairs back to the rear of the hall where they came from," she called over the din of scraping chairs and a rising conversation from the disassembling assembly, preparing to go home feeling self-satisfied at having elected a committee. All were content to slip into another year of complacent disinterest until the next Annual General Meeting.

"Come on then, Ruthy. All chairs to the back of the hall," Miles Chadwick quipped with the thin smile of a sore loser.

"You're a patronising old coot, Miles. You can take my chair, but you don't get me."

"That's a relief," Miles said grinning.

With that, the meeting to elect the Committee was definitely over and the ground was set for what would ensue the first Thursday of every month in Millstown. A ritual was being played out in Millstown as it is in every small town and suburb and city hall. The ritual of *committeeship*.

Four weeks after the AGM, the Committee convened on a warm autumn evening in the hall at Millstown and, under the guiding hand of Ruth Parkinson-Jones, got down to business.

"I think we need a strategic plan," Miles Chadwick said after 10 minutes or so of debate about what direction the Committee should take.

"Definitely," Freddy Turner agreed.

"Hear, hear," Grace Sherrington applauded.

Clearly annoyed that she hadn't proposed it first, Ruth Parkinson-Jones took the idea a step further. "I believe we need to set up a sub-committee to investigate and come back with recommendations on a strategic plan." She surveyed the group to gauge how well she had regained the initiative, a committee storm trooper who had survived many campaigns.

"I'm not sure we need a sub-committee," Miles Chadwick responded cautiously. "I mean, there's only five of us on the Committee. Who's going to be on the sub-committee that's not on the Committee?"

"There're other things that we need to do. So, I suggest a small sub-committee of two or three." It was clear that Ruth was going to have her way. So, focus shifted to who would comprise the sub-committee.

"I think Richard should head the sub-committee. After all, he works for the Department of Urban Planning. We should tap his planning expertise," The Chair added. And so, it was agreed. Grace Sherrington was duly appointed to assist him to maintain a gender balance.

"What's Richard and Grace going to address in the strategic plan?" Freddy asked.

"Well, that's up to Richard and Grace to determine. I don't think we should pre-empt their recommendations," Ruth said, giving him a 'don't argue with me' glare over the top of her glasses.

"In that case we should adjourn and wait for the sub-committee's report," Freddy Turner proposed. "I'm off to the pub for a refreshing ale. Anyone coming?"

Two meetings passed much like that. Short and neatly punctuated with protocol and political correctness. "Through you, Madam Chair." "May I speak to the resolution?" "Point of order." "I move that the motion now be put." "Resolution carried."

Richard Higgenbottom went to work developing a strategic plan for the Committee. Three months after the election, he presented a short progress report. It advised that he had "conducted a needs analysis and a cost-benefit comparison of a range of strategic options". But "more work needed to be done".

At the fifth meeting of the Committee, almost halfway through the year, he tabled a 24-page report. It was circulated in advance, but Miles Chadwick and Freddy Turner admitted that they hadn't read it.

"Not enough time. We're too busy," Freddy said. Richard Higgenbottom proposed that the draft plan needed close attention and proposed a special committee meeting.

"Too many meetings," Freddy howled. "We're busy people. We have lives, you know. I got a business to run."

"We could have virtual meetings," Grace Sherrington interrupted. "I have been reading up on the Net and my kids have a computer at home. We could send each other e-mails and have a chat room to discuss these proposals."

Everyone looked at Grace.

"Well, everyone is on the Net. So why can't we meet in cyberspace?" Grace asked, determined not to let her shot at making it into the Minutes evaporate in the climate of tepid indifference.

"Well, I'm not sure how we can consider plans and things like architect's drawings by e-mail," Miles questioned.

"That's no problem. We can send out plans and drawings and even photos as attachments. They can be sent as JPEGs, PDFs or TIFF files. We do that all the time in The Department," Richard said.

"We don't want any more tiffs in this Committee. Or funny pegs whatever they are," Ruth announced from the chair.

"J-PEGs Ruth. They're graphics files," Freddy counselled, eager to display his Net knowledge.

"Whatever. Jay pegs, clothes pegs, nose pegs. All this computer gobbledygook makes me dizzy."

Despite some misgivings, the Committee agreed to undertake a trial of virtual meetings. They swapped e-mail addresses with all the fanfare and ceremony of Japanese executives exchanging business cards. Freddy and Miles said they had e-mail access at work and Ruth was instructed by Richard on how to set up a Hotmail address. Grace said the moment was a great turning point in Committee history. "We'll save time and get more done," she said, her eyes shining with reformist zeal and the anticipated pleasure of hearing her name read out in Minutes at the next Committee meeting – and maybe even the AGM.

But after two months, Ruth Parkinson-Jones called the Committee together again at the hall in Millstown. Her face was red with frustration and rising anger as she addressed the Committee members, informing them that not one detailed response to the sub-committee's draft plan had been received. She could see her term of Chairship sliding into forgettableness.

"My computer has been down," Freddy mumbled.

"I don't read e-mails," Miles Chadwick nonchalantly informed the meeting.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" The Chair thundered, plastic protesting beneath her.

"I tried to warn you against the idea." Miles fumbled. "Actually, I don't use a computer much." The awful truth dawned on the Committee that Miles probably didn't know how to turn a computer on.

"I haven't been able to get on the computer because my kids are using it all the time," Grace Sherrington, the proponent of Internet meetings, confessed.

Much finger pointing followed until The Chair angrily called the meeting to order.

"Alright. Alright. We'll go back to the good old-fashioned way. Grace, I want five photocopies of the sub-committee's draft plan to be distributed to the members of the Committee.

"I have one," Richard Higgenbottom, the author, interjected.

"OK. Four copies."

Grace scurried out of the hall to the library next door and made four neat piles of paper which the Committee members were ordered to read and be ready to comment on by the next meeting.

A disaster struck the Committee after that. Richard Higgenbottom went on long service leave. He was owed three months and was ordered to take it by his Public Service superior. So, the Committee's plan was put on hold. "We can't very well discuss it without our planning expert and head of the sub-committee present," The Chair reasoned.

So, it was well into summer before Richard Higgenbottom and Grace Sherrington could 'walk the Committee through' their draft plan. Ruth Parkinson-Jones thought it was excellent. "It needs some further development, but we're on the right track," she said.

However, with the holiday season imminent, the Committee felt that it could not give the plan the attention it deserved until after the break. "We need a full attendance," The Chair proclaimed. "This is a very important matter."

"Hear, hear," Grace chorused.

And so, it was in the dying days of summer after the holidays that the Committee convened to decide on the draft plan. Richard Higgenbottom talked to the draft for 20 minutes. Freddy Turner dozed off, until Grace Sherrington gave him a shove. Miles Chadwick said he couldn't really make sense of it.

"It's simple," Richard Higgenbottom informed him and the meeting. "What the draft plan proposes is that a detailed long-term strategic plan should be developed."

"What else?" Miles asked.

"Well, that's about it really. It is important that we work within a sound strategic framework. All options have to be explored and parameters have to be established. We must avoid people acting unilaterally. This is an important new initiative," Richard responded.

"What do you do at the Department Richard?" Miles asked.

"I plan."

"Yes, but what is the end result? What do you actually do? Do you commission road-construction or create parks?"

"No. We produce plans."

*****

It is 6 pm in Millstown. The local hall is ablaze with lights. From the street, a fine autumn mist forms a halo around each street lamp and illuminated window. Inside a rumble of conversation abates as Ruth Parkinson-Jones calls the gathering to order. It is the Annual General Meeting.

"My, how the years get away," she muses as she begins the Chair's Report from the lectern, standing erect and surveying the scene like a captain at the bridge. The Committee is lined across the top table like petty officers on a poop deck, scrubbed and polished for the occasion. The audience shuffles about in the uncomfortable aqua plastic chairs, wondering what time they will get home and if it will be early enough to see the movie on the telly.

After some initial formalities and meeting procedure, The Chair enthusiastically delivered her report of the Committee's activities during the year.

"I am very pleased to announce … that the Committee … after an exhaustive review … has developed a plan," Ruth Parkinson-Jones said in slow, deliberate tones to add import to her announcement. After a pause, she continued.

"This plan … will provide a framework … for a five-year strategic plan." Her voice rose to emphasize the culmination of the Committee's efforts.

"I commend the sub-committee on its work," she added.

"Hear, hear," someone called.

Millstown

It rose like a colossus on the flat, hot, dry western suburbs plains. A towering monument to air conditioning. A recognition of defeat by urban planners.

Its architects, and the politicians who paid them, accepted that the people who lived at Millstown could not easily commute to the city or other major centres. An hour on the train with a stroller and a toddler was too much for the young mums living in the Abrolhos of brick veneer that sprawled into the distance where The City joined The Country.

It was like living on the San Andreas Fault, Tina's husband, Mike, said. "We're on the edge of things. We could slip through the cracks of society and no one would know the bloody difference," he moaned over a stubby of beer at more than one barbecue.

Travelling back from distant Kmarts and Woolies with the kids and five bags filled with Coco Pops, chips, noodle soup, canned tuna, Coke, a kilogram of mince, and the week's special chicken was even more of an ordeal than getting there. "The Premier ought to come out here and see what we gotta put up with," Tina told her neighbour, Ruby, over the back fence a dozen or more times.

One day he did. Complete with a blow-waved entourage of TV journalists looking for a 10-second 'sound bite'. In Millstown, the rest of the world was 10-second sound bites. Mike and Tina knew all about the Taliban and the thinning of the ozone layer from television. And they knew that when the TV cameras turned up, it meant politicians were going to say something snappy for the evening news. God knows, no one was going to drive all the way out here to say nothing. The Premier rocked up in his black glass limo, looked around the desolate, flat plains of Millstown, shielded his eyes from the glare and heat, and announced: "My Gov'mint is going to build a major community centre at Millstown."

Community centre sounded better on television than shopping mall or collection of shops and clubs with poker machines. The Premier said *his* government's plans would provide a "town centre" and "bring a sense of community to the area".

That was two years ago. Over the next twenty-plus months, Millstown rose out of the dust and concrete foundations with metal spikes sticking into the air like a rusted porcupine. A mega-mall of

gigantic proportions. Two hundred thousand square metres of retail space. Parking for 15,000 cars. A food court that could feed the Army Reserve. Two cinemas and a baby health centre. All under a massive glass dome. There were six floors including car parks, connected by shiny new escalators positioned in various corners and ends of the mall, stairs behind bright red exit doors, and ramps in various locations for those with mobility challenges.

When it was finished, a big red neon sign went up facing the highway proclaiming it the Millstown Megacentre.

Tina loved the Millstown Megacentre. She was there at the opening and homed in on the best shops like a pigeon. "It's an instinctive thing with women," Mike said.

"Don't be so bloody sexist," Ruby railed at him, looking threatening in her size 16 pink tracksuit and white T-shirt with two koala bears riding on massive heaving breasts.

"That's not sexist Ruby. It's a fact. Women go to the mall and it's like they're on autopilot. Me, I can't find a thing. I went in once and couldn't get back to the car park for forty-five minutes. I read in one of those art columns in the paper that they reckon there's a *female aesthetic*. I agree. Women think shopping centres are beautiful. Men can't see nothing in 'em."

"You just don't like shopping. Youse men will do anything to get out of it."

"That's not fair, Ruby. There's something going on, I tell you. There's something going on with these shopping centres. They're built so you go around and around for hours and can't get out. That's how they get ya money."

"Men are just stupid," Ruby said. It was true her husband, Jack, was. He believed that the World Series Wrestling was real. And that the Labor Party still stood for the workers. To prove her point, Ruby said she and Tina would mow the lawns for a month if Mike and Jack could go to Millstown and do the week's shopping, go to the Autobank, put in a Medicare claim form, and be back in two hours.

"Go on. I bet ya can't."

"You're on." Mike accepted the dare before he had time to think about it. Anything to get out of mowing the lawn. "But I still think they're up to something with those shopping centres."

*****

'You are Here', the sign proclaimed, pointing to a red square in the middle of a diagram of the green floor.

"Good," Mike said. "This is easy. The ground floor is green and all the shops are called G1, G2, and so on. And there's a blue floor where all the shops re numbered B1, B2, etcetera."

"This is like 'Bananas in Pyjamas'," Jack quipped.

"C'mon Jack. This is serious. We've gotta show those two we're not stupid."

"Alright. Alright. Yellow is the Plaza where the shops are labelled P."

"Piece of cake. We'll go to Medicare first, OK, Jack?" Peering at his piece of paper, Mike checked the Medicare office address.

The sign said C15.

"C15. C15. Where's C, Jack?"

"Dunno."

"There's G and B and P. But there's no C floor. How we supposed to find C15?"

"Let's ask the woman in the information booth."

"Good idea Jack. There's no flies on you. Excuse me miss, how do we find C15?"

"Certainly, gentlemen. You go up two escalators and then down one and then straight ahead to …."

"Excuse me," Mike interrupted her. "Why go up two and then down one? Why can't we just go up one escalator and then straight ahead?"

"You can't. There's a wall. You have to go up two and then down one. Then you have to turn right and go outside the building."

"Ah, excuse me again. If I have to go outside, why can't I go back out the door that I just came in and go straight there."

"Because you can't," the information woman said, becoming exasperated. "There's a car park ramp. You have to go around this way."

"So, I have to go through the shopping centre, up two floors, down one, and then outside the building to get to a shop that's just outside?"

"Yes."

"I could have gone there before I came in here and saved myself the trouble?"

"You could have. Except you wouldn't have known where it was till you came in here to see the notice board," the woman said politely.

Mike said thank you and he and Jack headed off. Up two escalators. Down one. And then they turned right and stepped outside the building into a windy concrete canyon. They walked twenty or thirty paces. But no Medicare office. They then came to the door that they had entered to find the information booth, completing a circle.

"I'm not asking her for directions again. She'll think we're idiots," Mike muttered to Jack, bustling past the counter.

Up two escalators. Down one. Turn right. But, before they stepped outside the building, Mike stopped at a coffee shop and asked the waiter if she happened to know where the Medicare office was.

"Yes, certainly, Sir. Everyone has trouble finding that. You have to go outside the building and then as soon you go out, you have to turn right into a narrow doorway and go down a flight of stairs. That's where it is."

"Down a flight of stairs," Mike repeated, thinking they had just come up two levels and down one, so after descending the stairs, they would be back on the same level that they had started from, outside the building where they had started from, on a level that didn't exist on the sign.

"Jesus, Jack, what time is it?"

"Half past ten. We've been gone more than an hour already. And, shit, look at the queue. We'll be here for half an hour."

"Well, come on. Let's queue up. That's if I can figure out where to queue," said Mike, gazing at the maze of aluminium posts and red tape that filled most of the office reception. As he tried to work out where to enter the piped maze, two women whooshed by with their shopping faces on and trolleys in tow.

"Jesus, get in line or we'll be knocked down in the rush. It's like a livestock drafting race in here," Mike shouted.

"Mooo. Moooooooo," Jack replied, rolling his head back like a recalcitrant jersey.

"Baaaa. Baaaaaaaa," Mike replied. They both started laughing.

The Medicare woman at the counter frowned and fixed a serious Public Service stare on them. "You're in the wrong queue," she said almost expectedly as they reached the counter. "This is payments. You want claims. That's down there."

"It's ten to eleven," Jack said as they navigated the maze to the claims counter.

"We're gonna be mowin' the lawn next month, Jack. We may as well go to the bar for a beer. Might as well be cooked for a goose as a gander.

"Might as well. I wonder where the bar is?"

"It's back through the mall. I saw it on the diagram. On B for bar. We'll get the hang of this yet," Mike replied as they headed back into the mall, past the coffee shop, up one escalator, down two to 'You are here.'

"The bar's on blue. That's up one level."

"We just came down from there. I didn't see it."

"That's because it's at the far end of the mall. It looks like we have to go via the escalators at the other end," Mike said, pointing down a long corridor of shops bristling with shiny merchandise and throbbing with nervous sales energy and Abba music.

"Oh, you mean down there, up two, down one, turn left, turn right, down one and spend two grand on the way," Jack snarled.

"You're on to 'em too, Jack. They make ya walk all over the mall just to go 50 metres. Even if you want to go to the bathroom, you have to go past a hundred and twenty shops with permanent sales. I bet there's some people who've been lost in here for days."

"Weeks."

"I reckon you're right. They don't let you out till you're up to your credit limit. Then I bet there's a conveyer belt that spits you out into the car park on your butt."

"Let's find that bloody bar. The sun's over the yard arm, isn't it?"

"God knows where the sun is. Probably on P level, up two escalators past DKNY and Sportsgirl."

"They build 'em like this deliberately, you know?"

"Yeah. But we're no fools, are we Mike?"

Planet Man

Before voices
startled pigeons,
catapulting from their nests
into the brittle morning.
Before church bells
called men to pray
for peace and brotherhood.
Before the scarred escarpment.
Long before Man
came to tame and
spread a Christian message
among this gentile valley.
The morning sun rose
and kissed the mountains,
and the wind caressed the trees.
Robins sang love songs and
swallows etched their ballet
into the sky, applauded
by the gurgling stream. And
daffodils danced on Willow Bend.

Autumn Leaves

Clattering through brittle mornings
down windswept streets,
running like reluctant forward scouts
into an imminent battle.
Fighting battalions of wind
and regiments of speak-tipped frost;
lying like fallen comrades
in red-stained streets, waiting
the convoy of those who come
to tend the littered battleground.
Plucked from their flying formation,
falling from winged squadrons,
their disgorged belly of bombs
descend into a napalm autumn.

The Parting

Fragmented reality, torn up and scattered
like clouds around a wintry sky;
pumpkin dreams when midnight mattered
of Cinderella croakings and a cry.

Forging forgetfulness in a furnace of hell,
twisting emotions like tortured steel;
Blacksmith Heartbreak with hammers fell
stoke the fire and stroke the wheel.

Banished dreams and debauched hope,
even the memories seem to mock;
betrayed by body and mind can't cope
with the night and thrice-crowed cock.

The sob of rain and the wail of night
cries out like a bird in the lightning tree.
The Ghoul of Love in full-flown flight
is eating the heart out of me.

The Fixer Upper

My grandfather was a legendary fixer upper. So was my dad. They could fix cupboards, broken hinges, cars, blocked drains, conked-out washing machines, wobbly chairs, sunglasses with a missing screw, lifting shoe soles, knocked-over mail boxes, even the occasional electrical appliance.

Most of the time.

Sometimes the fixed things ended up worse than they were before. Like when grandpa took the vacuum cleaner apart and, after reassembling it, had four screws and a plastic bracket left over. "Probably just a dust deflector," he told Mum. But from then on it blew instead of sucking, so it went into the storage room "for later on". 'Later Ron', who I thought was a person when I was little, never came. The broken vacuum cleaner was still there when I came home as a 30-year-old woman to help Mum and Dad move into a retirement villa.

I sat and looked at the grey plastic lump of a thing with its long tube like a single octopus tentacle, and the memories came flooding back. Two generations of gender studies were symbolized in that vacuum cleaner.

Whatever was broken, coming apart, or getting a bit worse for wear, the men in our family tried to fix. Often Mum would say "It's past it. I'll throw it out". But, no. Grandpa or Dad would say, "I'll fix it on the weekend." Mum would then roll her eyes and give a long sigh. "Men!" she would exclaim.

"We're just trying to be helpful," they would say.

"I wish they wouldn't be so helpful," Mum would mumble half under her breath.

We weren't rich, but we weren't on the bread line either. Our family could afford the necessities and even the occasional luxury. Mum was keen to get a new washing machine and some new kitchen cupboards. She wanted them from when I was seven or eight till I became a teenager. But my grandfather, when he was alive, would never hear of it. Then my dad took over the role of fixer upper. It was a smooth baton change when Grandpa passed away just after Christmas when I was nine. Mum said it was trying to fix the front gate in mid-summer that caused him to cark it. "Fooling around out there in the heat. Silly old fool," she said.

My dad had a shed in the back yard that Mum said was his hide-out. That was before they were called 'man caves'. He was always out there hammering away, sawing, or drilling something with his Ryobi electric drill. I only ever got to peek into his shed once when the door was accidentally left open. All his tools were hung on nails in the wall and screws were sorted by size in a neat row of glass coffee jars. Moccona. He only drank Moccona. I thought it was because he liked the coffee at first, but after seeing inside the shed, I sensed it was because he wanted the jars with their re-sealable lids.

I was never allowed inside the shed because "it wasn't a girl's place", according to my father. Working with tools was "a man's job," he said. "Go back in the house," he always told me. I didn't go in. I hung around in the yard listening to him sawing and hammering and drilling and singing 'Danny Boy' at the top of his voice while he worked. When he had the drill or jigsaw going, he couldn't tell how loud he was singing. The neighbours who lived two doors down could hear him, but he didn't know.

One day when I was 10, maybe 11, the hinges of the flyscreen door outside of the front door of our house gave way. It was an ancient aluminium thing that hung crooked like a bird's broken wing even before the hinges went. Mum had her eye on a new fancy cast metal one with a brass handle. "Dress up the front of the place a bit," she said to Dad.

"Just needs a few new screws," Dad said.

"I saw some lovely screen doors at the hardware store—on special. Only a hundred and ten dollars," my mother said wistfully.

But Dad was already on his way to the shed to get his tools. It was a Saturday morning about ten. I sat in the hallway watching him while he worked. He liked to explain to me what he was doing so someone would understand all the technicalities of countersinking and bevelled edges and stuff like that. It was a lot more technical than most people realized, he said.

Dad removed the remaining screen door hinges from the wooden jamb. They came off easily as the screws were loose. Some were completely stripped out of their holes from years of us kids banging the screen door open and shut. Then, with a running commentary, he drilled new holes, explaining that he had to relocate the hinges so they would hold. He was very proud when, after ten minutes or so, the screen door

was swinging straight on its hinges again and closing with a confident clunk in its new position.

Mum came down the hallway and said, "Thank you, Charl Darl. I want to close the front door now because there's a cold draft coming in." She nudged me out of the way and went to close the heavy wooden front door. Instead of a familiar thud and clunk of the deadlock bolt, there was a metallic bang and the door bounced back at her.

"Charlie!"

"Oh, I must have mounted the screen door too far in."

"You've done something alright. The screen door is now in the way of the main door. It won't shut."

"No problem. I'll remount it in a jiffy." Out came the tools again.

As he couldn't move the screen door back to its original position because the screw holes were stripped out, Dad decided to realign the front wooden front door to enable it to shut with the screen in its new position. "I'll just move the front door hinges a bit and adjust the latch," he told me.

Twenty minutes later the front door was off and leaning against the side fence and the metal latch was off the jamb, leaving a gaping chiselled hole in the wood. To re-hang the front door so it wouldn't hit the screen, Dad had to chisel another centimetre out of the jamb to reposition the latch and deadlock. But the old timber was dry and when he hammered his three-centimetre chisel into it, the jamb split from top to bottom.

A few muttered swear words were my cue to slip away to my room. Dad liked witnesses to victory, but preferred solitude in defeat. However, I kept up with developments from overhead shouts and instructions.

"Come and have some lunch Charlie," Mum called around one o'clock.

"In a minute," Dad said. "I just wanna get this thingamajig in."

"We should have bought a new screen door and been done with it, Charlie," my Mum said from the kitchen with a pleasantness that was worn thin.

"Don't worry, love. I've got some nice timber in the shed—and some paint. I'll fix it in no time."

No time was right. The timber he had was a different size and didn't line up with the rest of the door frame. At three o'clock, Mum got

on the computer and contacted an emergency repair service. It was mid-winter, so a night without a front door was not a welcome prospect. It cost us $300 dollars to replace the door jamb and re-mount the front door and the old wobbly aluminium screen door.

"You ought to get a new screen door," the repairman said as he carried out the emergency repairs.

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Dad's fixing up extended to many parts of the house and yard over the years. When I was 12, he asked me to help him pave the back path. As usual, my job was mostly to sit and watch so he had someone to talk to. First, he had to jackhammer out the old concrete that was lumpy and cracked by tree roots. Mum complained that the washing trolley wouldn't wheel to the clothes line without her "nearly killing herself". Dad hired a jackhammer and, first thing one Saturday, he started breaking up the old path. Suddenly there was a loud hiss and dust blew everywhere. Then there was the strong smell of gas.

"Jesus. What a stupid place to put a gas line," Dad shouted. We had to call the gas company and they sent a truck and two men out to fix the pipe. Three days later Mum got a bill for $400 for "owner damage to gas line". That was more than the pavers and the hire of the jackhammer cost. Mum called it the 'Golden Pathway' after that.

It wasn't just doors and appliances and cars that Dad tried to fix. When my older sister, Jenny, started going out with Eric, Mum was nervous and Dad was spitting chips because Jenny was 17 and Eric was 24. Jenny liked him a lot and let him touch her boobs and everything. Well, not everything. That was the problem. Eric went out one weekend with the tart at Cher Hair and Jenny was heartbroken.

Mum talked to her in her room for hours. But she wouldn't come out to eat or watch TV or anything. Mum said "just leave her alone. She'll be alright."

"I'll talk to her," Dad said. "She's my daughter and I won't have some *lech* breaking her heart. Leave this to me."

Eric became another of what Mum called "your father's projects". Dad went upstairs and talked to Jenny while Mum did the washing up and I dried. The only words Mum spoke during washing up were "I'm worried about those two". I was 13 then, old enough to understand a lot, but not old enough to know what to do or say at times like that—if you

ever get that old. I was wondering how Dad was going to fix The Eric Problem.

It went a bit like the front door. When I ventured into her room later, Jenny was crying and wouldn't talk, not even to me.

"How did it go?" Mum asked as Dad came down the stairs.

"She'll be right. I told her I'll fix that Eric bastard if he comes around here again," Dad said.

Jenny left home two weeks later and moved in with Eric.

"I don't understand women," Dad said, shaking his head at the dinner table.

"I know," Mum said quietly and looked at me. It was a nice look, like she knew I was growing up and able to understand stuff. I understood that you could love someone, like Mum and I loved Dad, but want to kill him at the same time.

Dad was adamant that he had nearly fixed The Eric Problem. "She said she didn't want to see him again. So, I said I'd fix that. I told him I'd break his neck if he ever came 'round here again."

"But she didn't mean she didn't want to see him again. Don't you understand? She didn't want you to fix anything."

"Well why did she say she never wanted to see him again?"

"She just wanted some sympathy and for us to understand her problem."

"But when you have a problem, it has to be fixed," Dad said, looking confused.

"No," Mum said.

"No! You don't want problems fixed?"

"No. You just have to let some things be. There are some things you can't fix. Sometimes things just have to take their course."

"If I let things take their course the house would be falling down around our ears. You needed the kitchen cupboards fixed and the front gate fixed and the bathroom tiles re-glued. That's my job. It's what a man does. I have to fix things."

"No, you don't. Besides, you don't always fix them anyway. Sometimes they end up more broken than before you started."

"Aw, Jesus. Don't rub in a man's few mistakes. I do a lot around the house. Would you rather I was down the pub getting drunk? All these years I've been doing the best I can," Dad said, starting to sound

huffy. I was feeling sorry for him. But I couldn't take sides, so I stayed quiet.

"I want a husband. And Jenny and Helen want a father. We don't want a fixer upper," Mum said.

"Well that fixes that," Dad said, and stormed off to watch 'The Tool Man' on TV.

But I knew that later he would be telling me about a new technique he'd seen for fixing the leg of the piano stool or levelling the guttering so it didn't overflow down the kitchen window when it rained. Or he'd be curled up with his head on mum's lap saying someone needed to fix the country as he watched the late news.

The Glass Lady

"She makes things out of glass. Like stoves and fridges. And balls."

Silence settled uneasily following the pronouncement. Glances and raised eyebrows threw questions across the dinner table like nervously hurled spears in a tribal feud. Looks sliced the air like thin shafts glinting in the light. Battle lines were forming among the tribe sitting around the table but, as in all wars and skirmishes, confusion was the overwhelming condition. Like warriors or soldiers facing the prospect of a fiery engagement, no one wanted to be on point. First out of the trenches was an ignominious lot, especially when it was your son or brother or sister on the other side.

I could see them thinking. "Glass stoves and fridges? Glass balls?"

Puzzlement was etched in creases around the corners of eyes and on foreheads lowered over dinner plates. They looked like so many apes eating, I thought. Huddled over their food in a small circle scoffing and quaffing. No one dared make eye contact or speak, rendering the moment in my memory as a scene from Animal Kingdom. No communication with the outsider, not even an encouraging glance, till the head ape had given permission. My father sat at the end of the table and uttered a short, primal grunt.

Imagining my father as an ape might sound disrespectful and rude. But it was one of those random observations that flit through your mind. The oddest thoughts can pop into your head sometimes. And then they won't go away. They stick there, goading you into bemusing smiles or giggles at your own private joke. Till at last you're forced to speak.

"That's right," I say, among the clinking of knives and forks, knowing what they're thinking. "Glass stoves. Glass fridges." My mother passes me the vegetables.

Another minute or two passes in silence like years ticking away in the universe, till the commanding presence at the head of the table takes a break from his roast lamb, potatoes and peas and looks up.

"Fridges and stoves made out of glass. What on earth for? Your mother can't make me lunch on a glass stove."

"Well, they're not real stoves and fridges. They're only two-thirds scale for a start. The curator at the gallery says they work. He means, in Art Speak, of course. He's a bit over the top—very gay with a limp handshake that you wouldn't like. But she's doing well, making her

glass things. The stove and fridge are in an exhibition. The ball—well, it's not really a glass ball. It's a sphere made up of 101 glass bricks. It's going into an office foyer."

I pause for breath and to see if they are listening, before concluding: "Gail joy (with a lower-case j) is an artist."

Silence descended again, like a dank winter afternoon. The variety they call deafening silence. The kind of silence in which you can hear ringing in your ears. Even the little apes hushed their eating. Knives and forks were put down delicately for fear of shattering the sudden stillness and becoming the centre of attention. They were happy for me to be in the spotlight on this occasion. They melted away into the darkness, while I sat like a kangaroo frozen in the beam of my father's steady stare.

I always got enthusiastic when I talked about her work. You do that when you like someone. Especially when they're someone close, someone special. But the word 'artist', and particularly my description of installation sculpture which was beyond the edge of their definition and understanding of art, brought my announcement of my new 'friend' to a sudden, grinding halt. Announcing that an artist might be about to join the family was enough to freeze-dry a Sunday family lunch. With my impassioned description of her glass stoves and fridges, and balls made of glass bricks, I entered Siberia.

"I thought artists made elegant things. Nice things like bronze statues and paintings. I like them paintings that are so good they look like a photo," my father said.

He continued, an authority on art. "Esme Robinson has a daughter who's an artist, you know. She paints horses and lovely landscapes. Beautiful. You can recognize the places. She done one called 'River Bend'. It's a place on the Macintyre just up from town. Lovely. Absolutely lovely."

"I don't know about that abstract art, though." My father added, before pausing to chew.

"This Gail joy with a lower-case j, is she normal? I mean, does she have a regular job? She's not weird, is she? Not one of those arty-farty types who wears a beret and smokes that … you know?" he went on, waving a knife in the air.

"Yeah, Dad. She does drugs and has purple hair and wears rings in her belly button and her labia," I say. He doesn't get that I'm stirring him. The little apes scurry further into the undergrowth.

"Now that's enough of that language. Your mother and I don't allow that sort of thing in this house."

I'm tempted to say, "What, you don't allow labia?" But then I think the better of it and settle for a petulant, "Well, what's normal?" – seeking refuge in intellectualism.

"Don't come the smart-arse with me. You know bloody well what normal is. You were raised here in a good family with good values."

"Are you saying Gail joy doesn't have values?"

"No. No. I'm not saying that. I don't know the girl. Although she does hang around with homosexuals. You said it yourself."

"What does that matter Dad? Some of my best friends are gay."

"Half the men in Sydney are gay from what I hear," my father shouts from across the room where he has gone to get a beer from the fridge. And then, to rub in his earlier point, he pats the refrigerator like he does the farm dogs and says: "*This* is a fridge. We live in the real world up here."

I realize that the conversation is going nowhere. If you could call it conversation. It's more like a trial. Nuremberg. I'm on trial because I have a new friend. A partner. A lover. I'm home and feeling like seventeen again, being defensive and squirming under the scrutiny and cross-examination of my parents. It's like I just got in and it's 5 am. Or the cops got me again for speeding and I have to face them with the news.

Driving up from Sydney I fantasized that they would be sympathetic and happy for me. Divorced after fifteen years of marriage. Grappling with the singles scene again. Trying to dodge the psychos and desperados. Desperate men and women. But they wouldn't know anything about that. They've been cocooned in the cultural isolation of a country town and marooned in religion, 'doing the right thing' since before I was born.

I don't say that, of course. It would be on for young and old if I did. There are some things you just have to let go. I'm forty and I have fallen in love. With Gail joy. An artist. And she makes glass things.

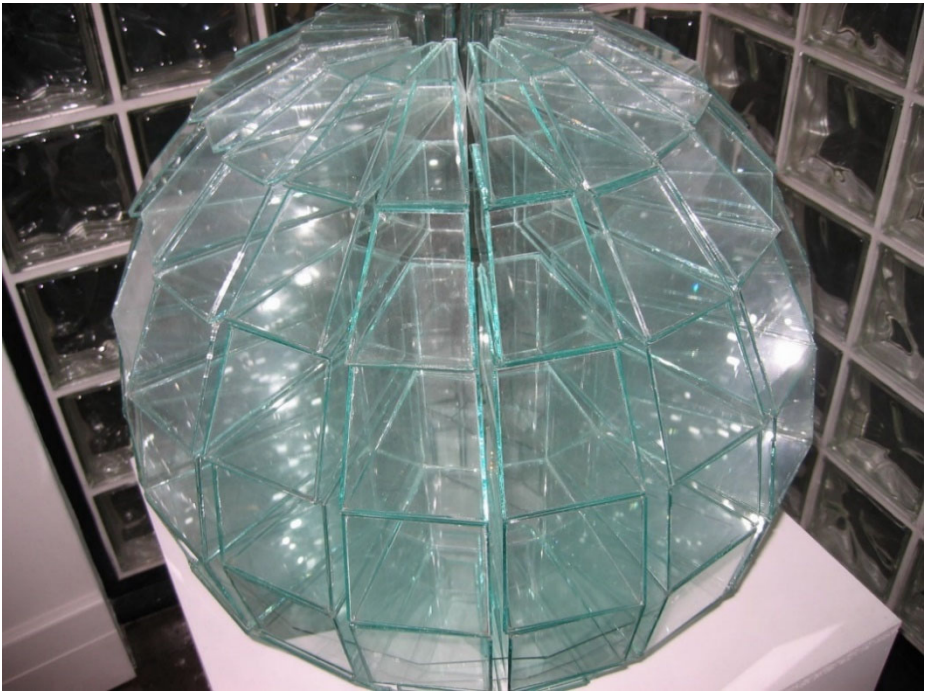
As I leave the kitchen of my parents' farmhouse, I reflect that some things are beginning. And some things are ending.

As I drive down the dusty road through a corridor of tall gum trees, my family members morph from apes into birds in my mind. The clucky mother sitting on the nest, clutching her chicks and dusting them

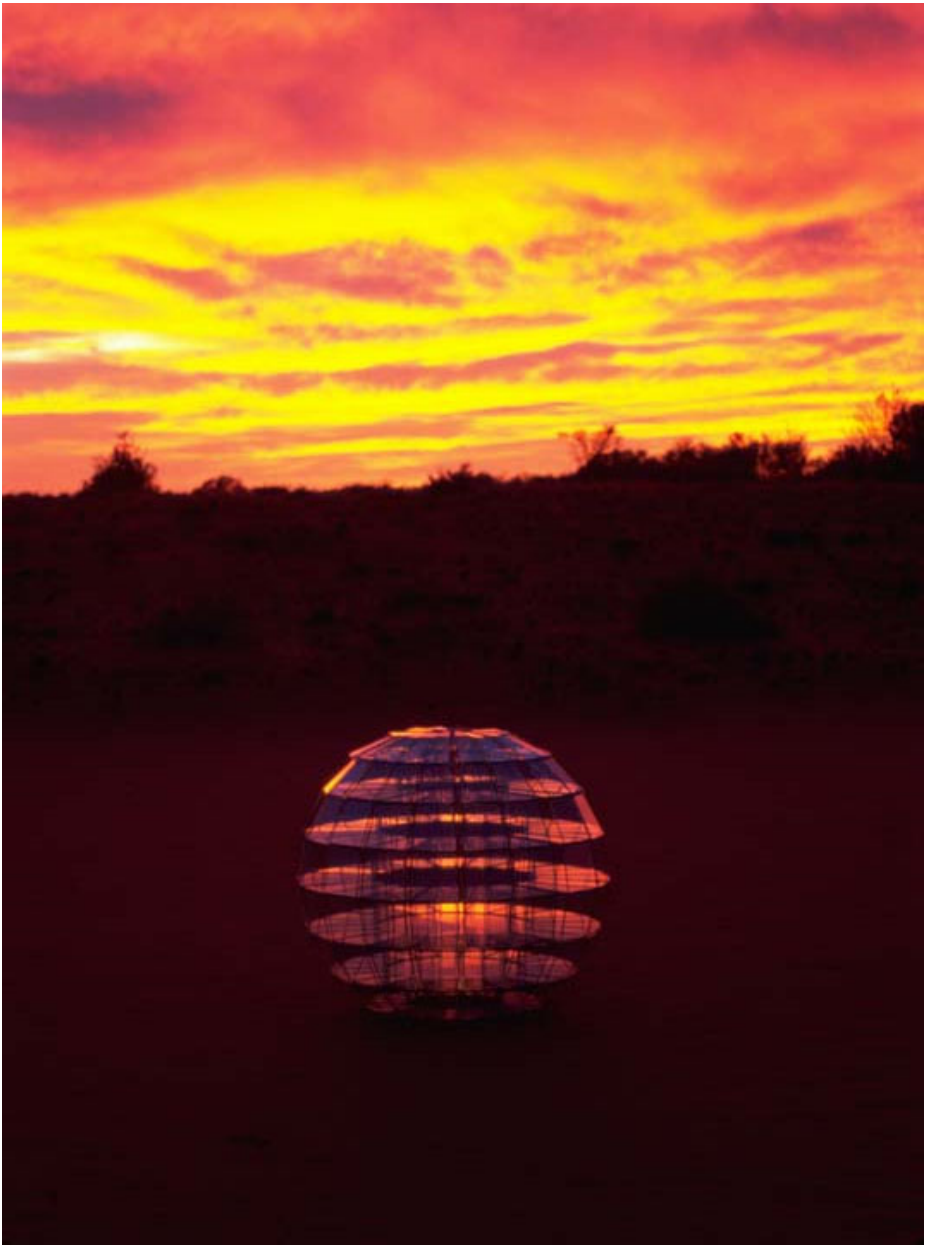
off. The male, fluffing his feathers in showy displays and warding off intruders. My younger siblings squabbling and squawking, but content for now to crouch timidly in the comfort of the nest. And I, the fledgling, perched on a limb, a blue hemisphere of sky arched above me, an endless horizon encircling and beckoning me.

The fledgling has leapt from the nest. He has discovered what he is. Slowly and painfully. He has lost a few feathers and broken the occasional bone learning to fly. But he is flying. He has flown far. And, in discovering flight, he has crossed borders and boundaries, both physical and imagined. Instincts turn on their guiding beacon.

A thousand kilometres away, Gail joy is in her studio breaking glass.



Sphere made of glass 'bricks' in a gallery. Artwork: Gail Kenning. Photo: Jim Macnamara.



Sphere at Dawn erected in the desert near Broken Hill. Artwork: Gail Kenning Photo: Jim Macnamara.

Baxter's Junction

During the summer holidays after the end of Year Seven, Pete Young told the gang that he suffered from *The Mist*. We didn't know what The Mist was, but we reckoned it must be serious if it had a name. He hadn't been to see a doctor, but he said his grandfather told him he had it.

"It's hereditary," Pete said.

"You mean, genetic like autism and alcoholism?" Nick Calamari asked him.

"Yeah. My granddad said a lot of boys and young men get it."

When he told us about it, I realized I had it too. So did Nick and Kelvinator Refrigerator. And Matt as well. We all had The Mist.

"How do you know about stuff like autism and genetics?" Kelvinator asked Nick.

"'Cos me mum told me that Uncle Spiro couldn't help drinking because he was born with a 'jean'. She said it's like autism and other diseases—they get born into you."

Most of the oldies in Baxter's Junction had diseases. They were always talking about something they had that was "playing up" or "killing them". Some of the old people who were forty or more had lots of diseases including really complicated ones. They took hours to explain them and everyone listened with a deadpan look on their faces and kept going "Hmmm," and "Oh, no". Some people were practically famous for their diseases.

We were pleased that we had The Mist. It was the first official problem we had. All the other things that happened to us only lasted a week or so like the mumps, or were our own fault, and didn't get much sympathy. We were always getting into trouble and we didn't have anything to blame it on till we found out about The Mist. Pete said it was more of a syndrome than a disease. That sounded even better, although we were curious why no one had identified this mysterious ailment before.

Pete Young was a year and a half older than the rest of us because he had to repeat Year Six. He was bigger than us on account of that. When he talked, he used to curl his lip like Elvis Presley and James Dean did in the movies. He thought that made him look tough. It did, but he was clumsy. Pete always had skinned knees and elbows, or scabs on them, from falling out of trees or tripping over. It was because his legs

had grown quickly, his mother said. She was always sticking up for him. His dad used to just clip him under the ears for the things he did.

Matt Brody had bright ginger hair and freckles so we called him Blue. Except when he ran away. He was a skinny nervous kid and was always taking off when he thought we were going to get into trouble. Then we called him Matt the Rat. We stood our ground. It was considered manly to take your medicine when you got caught for doing something wrong. That was often, although we got better and better at getting away with things.

Mrs Johnson who lived in a ramshackle old house near the creek said you weren't supposed to call migrant people names like Nick Calamari. His real name was Oppa-doppa … Oppa-doppa-loppalus … we couldn't say it. His father owned the general store. We asked Nick how he felt about his nickname one day. Four of us asked him to his face if he minded. He said he didn't care. So that was it. Besides, you had to have something to call kids. It wasn't right to use their regular names. Using proper names sounded too formal. It was a tradition to have nicknames, or at least use abbreviations like Al or PJ.

Cheryl Taylor moved to the area with her family half way through Year Five. Her father managed a bank. My father hated bank managers because they were always saying they were going to have to take the farm. But Cheryl seemed alright, at least for a girl. She followed us around and didn't get in the way. Most of the time we treated her like she was a boy. Once when she had to pee really bad, Pete Young told her to do it against a tree. She looked at him with a screwed-up face.

"Girls sit down to do it. And they need privacy," she informed us in a stroppy tone.

"Why?" Pete and Nick chorused.

"Because. We just do." With that, she tramped off into the bush behind a tree defying us to follow her. Pete did. He sneaked up behind a tree and had a look. But he only looked for a few seconds and came running back yelling "Yuuuk!" We didn't ask him about it, but it must have been bad.

Except for Pete, we forgot Cheryl was a girl most of the time. We let her come with us and do boys' stuff. Secret stuff, like taking the oath to become a member of our gang and smoking the long reeds that grew down by the creek. They were hollow and burned slowly, so we pretended they were cigarettes. Girls usually weren't allowed to do that

stuff, but we let Cheryl tag along. We even let her sit behind a tree to pee in peace after that.

I also met Kelvin at Baxter's Junction. Kelvin Carrigan. He lived on a farm like me and came to our school in Year Four. We called him Kelvinator Refrigerator. He didn't like it, but we kept calling him that anyway. My mother never had a Kelvinator refrigerator, but lots of other mums did. I knew Cheryl Taylor's had one because I went to her house one day and she gave me a cold drink. But I never told anyone in the gang that I went to a girl's house.

There was never much to do at Baxter's Junction during the school holidays. The centre of town had a petrol station, a general store, a closed post office, and a hotel near the intersection of two highways. There were half a dozen houses scattered around, a silo, and a few sheds and nondescript buildings that no one seemed to use for anything. They stood like rusting monuments in a potter's field of old farm machinery and car bodies. On the edge of town was a creek that was too shallow and muddy for swimming. It bred mosquitos and tadpoles after rain and was frequently dry during droughts. My father said he could make a bigger stream after a few beers. Big trucks roared through regularly, honking their air horns at us kids as we ran along the side of the road shouting and waving. They were the most exciting thing that happened in Baxter's Junction most days. Apart from them and the mournful symphony of the crows, the only sounds were crickets that clicked and buzzed in the heat.

In summer when we were home from school, which was a daily 45-minute bus ride away in Warrum, mirages danced across the flat plains and down Highway 41 and Highway 7. Roads to Somewhere. They were like furrows worn across the landscape by people coming and leaving. Mostly leaving. That's all there was to Baxter's Junction. A few buildings, two roads coming and going, and lots of space under a blue hemisphere of sky.

We made our own fun, like leaving Mr Butowski's gate open to let his cows out on to the road. Pete Young said the bull bars on the big trucks could send a cow three metres into the air. We wanted to see that. Another time we put nails on the road to see if we could puncture the tyres of cars. We were disappointed when none stopped. But later when my father's Falcon got a puncture, I found out that it takes a while for a tyre to go down. I realized that our victims would have been pulled over

with flats a few kilometres up the road. I told the gang and we were disappointed that we missed the fun of seeing that.

The oldies knew that we were responsible for stuff that was going on. But they couldn't catch us. We got the blame though. Even when we didn't do it. Whenever something was broken, or missing, or stolen within 50 kilometres, it was "It's those boys again". It was never "those girls". One day we were throwing skimmers across the dam behind Mrs Johnson's house. Cheryl Taylor couldn't make stones skim because she picked up round goolies instead of flatties, so she went off on her own and started throwing them at the water tank near the house. Suddenly, there was the sound of shattering glass, followed by an angry tirade from inside.

"You boys are gonna pay for that. Look at what you've done. Just look at that." Matt Brody took off saying he'd better get home because his mother would be looking for him. "Wait till your fathers hear about this," Mrs Johnson yelled from the veranda, waving a broom.

"It wasn't us, Mrs Johnson."

"Don't you argue with me, Pete Young. You're a disgrace. You too, Nick. Your father would be horrified."

"It wasn't us. It was ..."

"Don't go tryin' to weasel your way out of it. You should own up like men. I'll take it out of your hide you little ..."

"It was Che ..."

"Git. Go'n git out of here before I put this broom on your backsides."

"... ryl".

"I betcha she rides that bloody broom," Pete Young said as we took off.

"Yeah." We were nervous about what would happen when we got home, but we laughed. That was just the way it was.

We felt better after we found out about The Mist because it explained the symptoms that we were experiencing more and more as we got older. It was caused by hormones, Pete said, although he couldn't remember which ones or how you got them.

"The Mist affects your brain and makes you do crazy things. Stuff like doing dares and bets—like when I jumped off Mr Butowski's windmill. And it makes you lose your temper and get into fights and

accidents. When you hear about guys gettin' drunk and pranging their cars doing a hundred and forty, that's The Mist," Pete informed us.

We could all identify the symptoms once we had been told about The Mist. We remembered Pete jumping off Mr Butowski's windmill with his mother's umbrella for a parachute. He didn't know it would turn inside out. His feet were stinging and his ankles ached for days. But he didn't tell his mum or dad.

One weekend, Nick Calamari's older brother tried to jump a motor bike over a fence like Steve McQueen did in 'The Great Escape'. We shouldn't have laughed because he lost his little finger and broke his leg. Everyone in town knew about that one.

"How come we've never been told about The Mist before?" Nick Calamari asked Pete.

"That's because it's not an official syndrome," Pete said. "I think syndromes have to get accredited somewhere. There's probably some committee that has to sift through all the applications for syndrome status and decide which ones get the nod."

"Like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. My uncle's got that 'cos he's sleeping all the time and can't go to work," Kelvinator said.

"That's bludging," Pete jibed.

Matt told us his older sister had Attention Deficit Syndrome.

"Is that why she takes her pants off and leaves them on the back seat of guys' cars?" Pete asked.

Matt didn't understand what he meant, 'cos he just grinned.

"Yuk! I don't want some sick girl's knickers on the back seat when I get a car," Nick said. Nick didn't know that stuff either.

While we were pleased to have The Mist, when we went back to school at the end of the Christmas holidays, we started to wonder. Syndromes seemed to be increasingly common. How was anyone going to notice our problem and give us any sympathy when the kids from the trendy suburbs of Warrum all had syndromes. Their mums compared syndromes while they were waiting after school.

"My Johnny's got Delayed Growth Syndrome."

"Frank Junior has Dysfunctional Coordination Syndrome." Justine in our class had Weak Tear Gland Syndrome, I reckon her mum would have said. Before that Johnny was just a shorty, Frank was clumsy, and Justine was a sook.

"They sound a bit suss, some of these syndromes," Nick said one day while we were hiding behind the toilet block to avoid gym. "Do you think they're all real?"

"What do you mean?" Pete said.

"I mean, are they real scientific syndromes? 'Cos everyone's got one."

"Don't knock it. We got The Mist. That's better than being called a little shit," Pete said. "You should ask my grandfather. He knows all about it."

So, we did. We went over to see Pete's grandfather one Saturday and he told us about the first time he got The Mist. He was riding a horse that took fright and bolted into a fence. That was back in the old days when everyone was riding around on horses – even to school. When it ran into the fence, he fell off and the rails ripped the skin off his arm and shins. Then the horse, which was tangled in the fence and panicked, kicked him in the balls. It took his breath away, followed by agonizing pain that every bloke knows. Suddenly, he said he felt a deep surge inside him. His heart pounded and his muscles twitched and his eyes glazed over. Before he knew what happened, he leapt up, grabbed the out-of-control horse, pulled its head down and bit a piece out of its ear. Chomped a piece right out of its ear with his bare teeth.

When Pete's grandfather told this story to me, Nick Calamari, Kelvinator, Matt the Rat, and the other kids in the gang at Baxter's Junction, everyone stared wide-eyed. We never went to visit Pete's grandfather again. The Mist is scary sometimes.

Shortly afterwards, I learned about The Mist first hand from Kelvin one day in the schoolyard. We were calling him Kelvinator Refrigerator and he was getting psycho.

"Kelvinator Refrigerator. Kelvinator Refrigerator."

"Shuddup."

"Kelvinator Refrigerator. Kelvinator Refrigerator."

Kelvinator reckoned I started it and we began pushing and shoving each other. Pete and Nick were egging us on. "Go on. Hit him. Hit him." I wished they would shut up. I was scared to fight, so I was hoping Kel would give up. But he didn't. He kept pushing me and I could tell he was starting to lose control because of the look in his eyes. I could see The Mist. But I couldn't back down because Peter and Nick and Matt and the other kids would call me a wimpy chicken. "Go on.

Whack him," they kept screaming at both of us. It was hot and my heart was beating hard. I could feel the sweat running down my back and into the crack of my bum.

Then Kelvinator really got The Mist in his eyes and came straight at me, charging like a wild bull. He was like a kamikaze who didn't care what happened to him. I remembered my father teaching me how to throw a punch—to my mother's protests and complaints. "I don't want my son taught to be violent," she shouted at us as we sparred in the back yard. "He needs to be able to protect himself," my father said. I'd never had to use my father's boxing training before. Not till Kelvinator Refrigerator came charging at me down by the post and rail back fence that summer at Warrum Primary.

I don't remember letting one fly. I just stood my ground and threw one punch aiming straight at Kelvin's head as he lunged towards me. Next thing I knew he was reeling backwards and falling. He seemed stunned by the punch and I hoped it would be the end of the fight. It was. But not just because of my fist. As Kelvin fell, his head struck the bottom rail of the fence. I could hear the thud and saw his eyeballs jerk in their sockets. A big lump of spit shot out of his mouth and everyone went "Yuk!".

After he fell, he lay spread-eagled and motionless on the ground next to the fence. We all stood silent waiting, but he didn't move. Not even a twitch. My first feeling was relief that he wasn't getting up to hit me back. Then I started to get worried. Nick Calamari's eyes were wide and he said "You've killed him. I think he's dead."

"Shiiiit," said Matt Brody, looking around for teachers and getting ready to run.

Pete Young looked at me surprised. "He's out like a light. Good one."

Fortunately, Kelvinator came around and we dropped the 'Refrigerator' after that as a deal. He became my best friend. I knew that The Mist really existed, although no one else seemed to understand it.

Pete Young said that when syndromes got serious enough they upgrade them to an *ism* and then they get more recognition. We had a competition thinking of all the *isms* there were. Like autism. And sexism, which we were very confused about. Pete said it caused babies.

"And fundamentalism which is when extremists go 'round chopping off people's hands and blowing buildings up," Nick added.

"You can't say that Nick. That's racism," Matt said seriously, and then grinned like a Cheshire cat because he realized he had won another point with racism.

"Feminism. That's another one," Pete said.

"Don't go there Pete. Women get The Mist if you talk about that stuff," Nick warned.

Pete ignored him and then quipped: "When the Mist gets really serious, it's called *misticism*." Nick looked at him like he was some kind of intellectual, but then we realized Pete was just joking. Even Pete knew that misticism is about meteorology and clouds and stuff like that.

Two Hundred Degrees of Sky

Angel Place, ironically named, is a densely constructed alley of shops and office towers between Pitt and George Streets, just a few easy-walking blocks from Sydney Harbour.

Above it is a sliver of sky. Narrow and jagged, like a partially opened sardine can. It is a dangerous sky. An opening that taunts, presenting an illusion of an exit. But the brittle air will cut you if you try to escape into it.

It hovers like a rent in a curtain, a slit in a veil promising mysteries and pleasures. However, it remains inaccessible. A peephole on the universe.

It reminds him of Manhattan. Even parts of Hong Kong, without the dripping neon lights. The buildings stand like thick bars blocking out the sunlight, casting a noughts and crosses pattern on the ground. Crowds immerse themselves in life's binary equation. Counting down in a perpetual game of hide and seek. Hopscotch players in the shade.

He flees, for there is no future here. No past. No today. Only a brief moment of half-day under a fragment of sky.

*****

Paris sprawls like a white and grey mosaic below Montmartre. He walked through the famous streets from Rue du Faubourg St Honoré up through the narrow, cobbled lanes to the summit searching for it. Up there, he thought it would be bountiful, expansive, all around him. Especially in this most romantic city. But it was draped in a grey gown like a hospital robe. Shapeless and thin. The sky seemed ill all over Europe, floating in a cloud of chloroform and pethidine dreams. On life support in industrialized valleys. Quarantined in Siberian nuclear nights.

Now and then, the gown parts as she walks. A brief flash of flesh on a clear day in the south of France or Spain. Then Monet's daffodils dance under the blaze of her gaze. In these moments, she is seductive. Alluring. But elusive.

He feels like a peeping Tom searching for this sensual sky. Adding to his shame and disappointment, she quickly gathers her robes and retreats into her sanatorium. He is alone in the twilight.

*****

Kensington is one of his favourite places in one of his favourite cities. Its white apartment blocks stand orderly in tree-lined streets. He wakes to the resonating clack-clack of horses' hooves as they and their preened riders pass in the mornings to exercise in Hyde Park. Queensgate is his favourite street, just a gentle stroll to the park. There he watches the Queen's Guard rehearse and the mist rise off the Serpentine. It is only a short walk into history in the V&A and Natural History Museum. He feels ghosts of Romans and Angles and Saxons and Normans brush by him in the cobbled mews.

All around is the past and the future. Every nationality on Earth walks these streets. Rich Americans in Harrods and Sloane Street; Australian backpackers in Earl's Court; Contiki tourists jostling for a view of the changing of the guard. He is walking around the Monopoly board he played as a child. Mayfair. Park Lane. Trafalgar Square. Old Kent Road.

But all this history grows musty under a sagging wet tarpaulin of sky. It billows downwards almost touching the ground. Squashing out the light, and his energy. Spreading mould and mildew under its dank shroud. Seeping like a wet cave roof. London is a subterranean city, with more below the surface than above it. It leaves him still searching.

*****

From the air, the cities of Egypt look like Braille on the desert. Luxor. Sharm el Sheikh at the foot of the Sinai. Cairo. Sand cities. Low-rise dwellings and structures barely rise out of the khaki landscape, like perforated patterns on parchment. Mono-coloured. But far from mono-cultural or monotheistic.

From these sands rose the giant pyramids six thousand years ago. Cheops, Kefron, and their dutifully aligned smaller kin tower over the plains of Giza puncturing the hot desert sky. From this ancient spiritual place sprang two of the world's main religions—Christianity and Islam—and its main alphabet. Across the mighty Nile where Moses drifted in a basket, ideology and theology spread and civilization grew. In these Middle Eastern lands, according to legend, searchers built the Tower of Babel to reach the heavens. Here Moses ascended the mountain and heard the word of God after leading his people across the

Red Sea. Here Mohammed turned the eyes of the world towards Mecca in search of Allah. Here Jesus was born and lived before, across the Sinai, he was hung on a cross, silhouetted against a stark stormy sky.

Three hours north of Cairo through the Sahara, he visits Alexandria on a pilgrimage to the home of knowledge. Perhaps here he will find it in the *Bibliotheque*, the library in the *Mouseion at Alexandria* that has been rebuilt on the shores of the Mediterranean, or in the ruins of Roman amphitheatres from the rein of Cleopatra still standing under a brown desert sky. But even the Sahara is lined by an avenue of billboards blocking out the horizon. Ancient Egypt is curtained by dust and smoke from modern development and shadowed by slums. On dark days it is as gloomy as the catacombs where the Christians hid underground from King Herod before fleeing in their search—those who had no sky.

He knows his quest must continue.

*****

After entering China via Shanghai, and shrinking from its crass commercialism, its towering glass skyscrapers shadowing the elegant colonial architecture along The Bund, and Communist capitalism carried on at a frenzied pace in scores of Western designer shops, he ventured north to Beijing, the ancient city that was once called Peking.

Nestled on the edge of a vast dusty desert stretching towards Mongolia and cradled to the south by steep white sandstone hills, the city sprawls like a fat Budda. Its wide avenues go on and on, occasionally tree-lined when the dry climate allows, but mostly squashed flat under a yellow haze. Along them thousands of bicycles meander, ridden by young girls in elegant indifference to the invasion of cars that are threatening to eat Beijing. And old women and men burdened under loads weaving their way home, or to markets.

Cyclists and pedestrians and cars criss-cross and entangle at intersections and across Tiananmen Square. In one street, a police car sits blocking the road, indifferent to the cacophony of horns venting drivers' frustration. Passing by, he sees the policeman is slumped over the steering wheel asleep. The city moves fast; officialdom moves slowly.

Alongside the clogged and frenetic avenues, low-rise has won an architectural battle against high-rise, giving the city an ambience not

unlike Paris and its younger American copy, Washington DC. Only dustier. And, like its Western comrade metropolises, industry has combined with nature to turn its sky indistinguishable from the dull brown uniformed earth.

Across Tiananmen Square, he sees the huge portrait of Chairman Mao—smiling, bright, youthful still, shiny. He knows that a hundred or more artists are employed constantly repainting the portrait, working by night so each day Mao appears ageless, flawless, changeless in a place of relentless social, cultural and economic change.

Through the gates opposite he walks into sacred remnants of one of the oldest continuous civilizations on Earth—the Imperial City. Known for dynasties as The Forbidden City because no one other than the Emperor's family and servants were allowed to enter, its walls stand symbolic of China's isolation from the world and its mysteries. But now its gates are open. Tourists flock. And then, there among them mocking the majesty of the Ming, Qing, and centuries of dynasties, it stands. Starbucks. Green logo, paper cups and latte to go.

He goes.

*****

The sand and gravel road to Cameron's Corner snakes out of Tibooburra like a tattered orange ribbon across the moor-like plains. As it untangles itself from the ancient sandstone monuments to Gondwanaland mountains, and the spindly bush surrounding the dusty Outback town, the walls on either side collapse. They fall like a curtain detached, leaving him alone on a vast borderless stage.

There are no buildings or man-made structures save the fragile ribbon of road as far as the eye can see.

There are no phallic mountain peaks thrusting into the sky. After a short time, there are no low hills, and soon not even rocky outcrops. The earth recedes to flatness—and then beyond.

There are no trees. Clumps of grey-blue scrub dissolve into ground-hugging bushes. They cling to the earth to avoid sliding off it seems, as the horizon curves away on all sides. He stands in the sky, not under it. But for gravity, he fears he would fall off into space.

Above there are no clouds. Not even a wispy trail of mares-tail. Only an indigo blue hemisphere of sky—and more. There is more sky than earth.

Here Earth dwellers can contemplate the true nature of their world. Peer into the giant membrane that joins them to the universe. Here in the silence, conversations about the end of time fade. Here, under two hundred degrees of sky, true perspective is revealed. Here humans are reconciled with their world.

Bulldust Road. Photo: Jim Macnamara. (A road in Outback Australia near the Queensland-Northern Territory border.)

Planet Man

His voice came like a sigh on the wind, more like that of a tree branch than human. A creaky, tortured thing, its deep timbered tones mingled with the swirling air till it reached the few pairs of listening ears as a breathy husky sound, barely intelligible at first.

Speakers like him were mostly ignored—the mad men of The Domain, as they were known. And the occasional woman. The area of parkland where I heard him is famous as a pauper's pulpit, a public forum where anyone and everyone can speak—even if no one listened. Some who spoke were dirty and dishevelled and talked to themselves; while others were angry and ranted to the world.

No one dared move too close to the thin, soft-voiced figure in dark crumpled clothes, instead forming a small circle of brightly coated and scarfed onlookers braced against the autumn wind. Some only stopped to stare. Others listened briefly to the Marlon Brandoesque monologue before moving on, tugging small children and dogs after them.

I don't know what made me stay. I was in a hurry to see the sculpture in the Botanic Gardens before dark. And the afternoon was bleak. Dark shadows were snaking across the lawn from the tall office buildings of the city, welcomed by the wind that wet and chilled them out of reach of the sun. Perhaps it was the aspiring writer in me with his curiosity and passion for words. Not any words. *The* words. The right words that writers search for; that they lie awake waiting for; the words that sometimes exist beyond the edge of consciousness.

Sensing he had an audience, the man continued in hoarse but eloquent tones. Words of such profundity were released on to the wind that I concluded he must have training in the theatre or a literary field. Transfixed, I gave myself up to the savage conviction and passion of the dislocated voice of the stranger.

"The sky is getting old," he repeated. "It hangs low with drooping jowls and motley skin. In places, it is worn thin from the ravages of Time—and Man.

"Like a stage set or curtain, the sky frames human existence and defines time. All living things on Earth are metered to its mnemonic cycle. We peer out through it into the Universe."

He looked at me. From where I stood, I could see his eyes were reddened—from the wind, homelessness, tears, or madness, I could not

tell. His hands reached upwards and long strands of dark hair flicked and twisted around his face in the flurry of the wind as he continued on.

"Its illumination by far-away stars determines all life cycles. Day passes into night and back into day as Earth spins and hurtles through space. And with each cycle, the sky and all under it decay and experience the sensation of passing through time. But does time exist? Do we exist?"

He began speaking faster.

"We invent labels such as Thursday and January; we count hours, days, months and years; we govern our lives by machines called clocks. But they only record the cycles of our planet relative to its tiny satellite and a single star in the Universe. And even our best machines measure these movements inaccurately, with a quarter of our years longer than the rest."

Was this a mad man? A conman reciting some text from antiquity and soon asking for money? A genius who had scorned the intellectual enclaves of universities or been cast out from them for some crime against the establishment? Such pointed thoughts. Such beautiful text. I stood riveted. All the words that I had dreamed of writing were coming to me on the wind. Notions I could scarcely comprehend were taking flight in narrative, mingled with the leaves on the afternoon breeze.

"Human species, unique among beings under this sky, see three dimensions and dream of a fourth or fifth. But we exist in a moment of consciousness. The present is simply the point at which the past and future meet. A brief moment. How can it be measured? A nanosecond. Or a non-second? As soon as it occurs, it has already passed. The future approaches at light speed. Then rushes by into the past."

The words flew even faster. And so the wind. I took a few steps forward straining to hear.

"Life is a puzzle and a dilemma. It is part past and part future. One cannot be re-lived and the other cannot yet be lived. Thus, most of life is unliveable. Existence is but a temporal time zone; a thin portal in the warp of the universe.

"Or is life delusion? Are we already dead? Is consciousness merely memory? Is life a playback without a pause button? Have generations lived Discman lives and died Discman death?

"I think therefore I am, Aristotle said. He was a philosopher, but no scientist. The mental processes called thought hardly prove existence.

If they did, the conceptions of lunatics and psychotics would have equal claim to reality. Are we all programmed? Living computational philosophy? Reciting the poetry of algorithms?"

The words were like sharp nettles of sleet on the wind, pricking me, needling me, cutting me. Then he spoke more slowly and his voice fell to a whisper.

"Or perhaps I was never born at all? What if thought is merely recorded images in some organic computer? Perhaps experienced or observed. Or possibly implanted? Perhaps it was simply a malfunction, a metaphysical creation in the complex chemistry of DNA.

"Archived myths are retold and replayed by generations. The light of stars never reaches us. Others that shine don't exist. The future never arrives, only moves ahead of us, as unknown as it was from the beginning of our Time. To those who search, life reveals itself as a cyclic psychic phenomenon. Do you exist? Do I? Are we at the end, the middle, or the beginning? Or not in it at all?

"To be or not to be? That is the question. Shakespeare was a scientist."

Suddenly, the man stopped speaking. I looked up, silently urging him to go on. I did not want his soliloquy to stop. But he wasn't there. There was no one around. I was alone in the middle of the green field turning black under the shadows of the city. The wind was so loud I could have screamed and not been heard more than a few metres away. It tore at the crumpled seams of my jacket taken out of winter storage that afternoon when the weather bureau said a 'cold snap' was coming in.

I pleaded for one more pearl, one more gleam of light in the descending dark. Just a few more words. There had to be more. An end. A conclusion. What did it mean? My eyes scanned the shadows and then closed to listen even more intently. Then, even though I could not see him, I heard his voice again, barely a whisper in the muffled roar of the wind.

"You want words that give answers. People seek certainty and stability. Our whole life is a doomed journey to grow up and find the meaning of life—the mythical land of Grownup where everything will be revealed. The Truth. The One True God. The Word. When we get there, it is an inevitable disappointment. There are only questions."

He hesitated tauntingly. My ears begged him to go on.

"We have to accept instability. Enjoy uncertainty. Relish inscrutability. To know not knowing. No, we have to go even further. We have to accept unknowing and unknowability. In a world searching for knowledge, part of our knowledge has to become awareness and acceptance of unknowability. Only with this unknowledge, can we discover spiritual weightlessness."

I felt light-headed. Was this the first flush of spiritual weightlessness? I strained to hear the breathy rush of words in the twilight. A final message came faintly and fleetingly.

"The future beckons and taunts and terrifies. It stretches out before us and envelopes us like the sky. It says, 'come conquer me.' It calls, 'discover me.' Its infinity dances like a mirage, luring shiny-eyed time travellers.

"But slowly we learn that physical journeys present only illusions of progress. Dreams and images evaporate, or move on into the distance ahead of us like the mysterious Min Min light in the Australian Outback. The real journey is in the mind. The voyage is to discover yourself. That is all you can ever know."

Then the whisper was gone and there was only the wind. I pulled my coat up around my neck as a chill crept down my spine, and started walking.

"Did you see the man talking in the middle of the Domain before?" I asked a woman packing up a roadside flower stall at the park entrance.

"There's been no one else around for hours, love. It's too cold. I think it's time you went home too and got a hot drink to soothe that throat of yours."

Written somewhere between the Beginning, the Middle and the End.

Blue Planet

In a never-ending universe
of icy black and furnace white,
blue planet, painted by the Sun
with a filmic prism for a palette,
a fragile slender gaseous lens
renders red, orange, yellow,
green and blue and rainbow hue.
Holograms that dance and bend,
illusions in a membrane slight
of permanence and stability,
a world of calm tranquillity
amid a million fiery suns.

In a coal black cosmic night
pierced by furnace waves of light,
short blue waves encounter air
and split, disperse to form our sky.
A blanket sustaining life and art,
screening us from that beyond;
the icy black and furnace white
of a million cauldron suns
burning in an eternal night.
We slumber, dream, nonchalant
Of our legacy and our peril
on our blue planet all alight.

Sphere in the Desert. Artwork: Gail Kenning. Photo: Jim Macnamara.

Flying Over Cunnamulla

I fly over Cunnamulla.
Tiny spot on a vast canvas
near where I was born
another world ago.
Now I ride at forty thousand feet
in First Class, eating prawns
in ginger sauce and sipping Mumm.
I remember when I ate yabbies
from the creek and drank beer
in towns like Cunnamulla.

I've seen LA and New York,
caught the Boston shuttle,
watched Harvard rowers slip
through morning mists in autumn.
Walked along Fifth Avenue,
jostled in and out of Kennedy,
Heathrow, Schiphol, Sydney.
Immersed myself in learning
on my quest and beacon dream
of life on far distant shores.

But is there part of me down there
left behind, forever young,
forever bound with the red earth
and the endless plains?
Is the simplicity forever lost?
And the peace forever gone?
I can't help think as I sit here
that they are happier down there
in the red summer haze
waiting for rain.

Swinging Bridge made of glass 'planks' and wire erected in Stephen Creek near Broken Hill in western New South Wales. Artwork: Gail Kenning. Gail made the work in the UK without seeing the swinging bridges in Outback Australia.

Original swinging bridge of wooden planks and cables in the Australian Outback used to move livestock across flooded creeks in the wet season.

Joe Caricature
The Cardboard Cut-out Man

Young Joe, if the opinions of his mother and aunt were anything to go by, was heading for delinquency. "Straight to delinquency—don't pass Go, don't collect two hundred dollars," his mother bemoaned. If it wasn't delinquency that would get him, it would be drugs or suicide, she said to her sister, his aunt Polly. Young Joe's future was not bright in their view.

It wasn't in his either, but their reasons for reaching the same conclusion were entirely different. Neither his mother nor his aunt Polly had any idea of what he was thinking, or the torment he faced. Behind his locked bedroom door and the blank silent stare with an occasional nonchalant shrug that greeted the outside world when he came out, a rigorous decompiling of contemporary philosophy was being conducted. Descartes was being dissected. Derrida's deconstruction was being deconstructed. The ordered world of religion on which he was raised was being eroded by the chaos theory of Camus and the 'every man for himself' perspective of existentialism. The cry of Nietzsche's Zarathustra that 'God is dead' resonated in his sleepless nights. Marx's lucid critique of capitalism echoed in the corrupted and crumbling industrial workplace that awaited him if he ever got off the dole.

None of this he understood, of course. The names and terms of contemporary philosophy were entirely foreign to him. But the ideas were exploding inside him like thought bombs and he felt their impact with the pain and panic of a raw recruit, an initiate in the perplexing passage to manhood. To Young Joe, they were not abstract theories or academic notions, but gnawing, confusing questions and haunting realizations that flooded over him as he negotiated the deep contemplations of adolescence and early adulthood.

Even less of what was happening in the vast silent world that exists beyond the borders of conversation was known or understood by his mother, father, or Aunt Polly. They saw "a lazy lay-about" who slept till noon in a room that "looked like a bomb had hit it", drank orange juice out of the container, and put his licked spoon back into the yogurt container.

"That boy just lays around the house all day. If he doesn't stop staring at that TV and get out and do something, I'll go spare."

"I don't blame you. But he's a teenager, you know. Teenagers are like that. They go funny for a few years. My Justin …"

"Joe is eighteen! It's time he started growing up."

"Well, I agree. But it's a phase they all go through," Polly said, shaking her head with one of those resigned what-can-we-do headshakes.

"Joe's been going through it for two years. And he smokes in his room. You know, those funny cigarettes with the *Marry-u-arna*. It'll rot his brain, I tell him. He should go out and get a job."

"Grow up." "Go and get a job." "Settle down." Young Joe had heard the advice often. The more he heard it and thought about it, the more he felt he never wanted to heed it.

His name had something to do with it. He was called Young Joe because he was named after his paternal grandfather who was called Old Joe. Young Joe was seventeen when Old Joe died. He went to the funeral and watched as his father, two uncles, and a couple of friends threw shovelfuls of dirt on to the coffin. Then they went home and the men drank Scotch in the back yard all afternoon. And that was it.

During the month after Old Joe's funeral, Young Joe sat in his room and read *The God of Small Things*, the poignant novel by Arundhati Roy, which was a prescribed school text that he had been putting off reading till a boring day like the ones after Old Joe died. He was not much of a reader, but he became engrossed in the character Joe who died and left a 'Joe-shaped hole in the universe.'

He went out and looked for an Old Joe-shaped hole in the universe. He looked for it in his grandfather's house, but already his things had been removed and given to the Smith Family. He listened for it in the conversations of his family, but there were no pauses and no silences where Old Joe would have been. Words and air had already filled the space where Old Joe had existed.

That was the beginning of what his mother and Aunt Polly called 'The Big Silences'. Young Joe didn't talk for weeks and rarely came out of his room. At first, The Big Silences were referred to jokingly. Then, one Sunday when he was nearly nineteen after one had gone on for almost a month, his mother said "enough is enough" and shouted at his bedroom door. "Joe, Jooo-oh, come out here this minute." He was no

longer called Young Joe after Old Joe died. His name shrunk as Old Joe's space in the universe disappeared.

Joe emerged from his cave red-eyed and unkempt and was immediately sent to the bathroom "to wash and tidy up" for lunch. His mother had prepared a "sit down meal", a custom she insistently maintained on Sundays after caving in to eating off their laps in front of the TV during the week.

After carrying out rudimentary ablutions, Joe took his place at the table adjacent to his father and opposite his Aunt Polly who came for Sunday lunch often. His sister Kate usually sat next to him, but she was 'sleeping over' with her friend Susan. Everyone sat in silence punctuated by the clinking of serving spoons and the occasional clatter of cheap china as his mother fussed with final preparations.

As he waited for dishes to be passed around, Joe suddenly announced: "Life is pointless."

"What brought that on?" his mother asked, without pausing from her busying with setting piled plates of food on the table.

"Old Joe lived for only five and a half months."

"What are you talking about? He died at age 74. That's not a bad innings," his mother contradicted him. "Pass your father the roast potatoes."

"He l-i-v-e-d for only five and a half months," Joe repeated.

Puzzled faces looked at him momentarily, but then found the Tandoori lamb, roast potatoes, and Bok choy more compelling and bowed their heads over steaming plates of food. "I told you he was a bit funny," his mother said in a glance at her sister.

"Please explain," his father said through his teeth, imitating a former local politician whom he liked to ridicule.

"Well, Old Joe might have been around for 74 years. But he worked every day from when he was seventeen till he was 65 except for four sick days when he broke his ribs at work. Just four sickies in 48 years. There should be a reward for that kind of loyalty—or stupidity."

"That's enough of that talk. Have more respect for your grandfather," his mother interrupted with a thin-lipped exasperated tone.

"Whatever. The point is, he told me once that for 10 minutes each day since he was 17 he dreamed of the things he would really like to do. Like climbing a mountain or sailing around the world single-handed.

He always wanted to go to China. In 74 years, he spent 3,470 hours truly living – that's including leap years. That's just 145 days, or less than five months—I worked it out. Just 4.8 months in his whole life. I am not going to spend my life like that."

Silence fell around the table again. Even the clinking of cutlery stopped.

"Old Joe never wanted to go to China."

"Yes, he did. He told me many times. He read books on it and said he wanted to see the Great Wall and the Forbidden City and the treasures from the great dynasties."

"I don't think that is a very constructive way to describe your grandfather's life. I'm sure he did what he wanted to do," his mother responded, cutting off a half-hearted protest from his father who seemed relieved that she was taking the conversational running.

"No, he didn't. He told me he didn't. He worked like a drone bee for forty plus years and then died," Joe shouted back.

His mother's eyes widened as she looked up at her son, a fork poised mid-flight between plate and palate. While she thought of what to say, Joe went on.

"There are 8,760 hours in a year. He lived, on average, just 60 of those. That's less than one per cent of his life."

"Well at least the boy can do maths. His schooling was not a complete waste," his father said, trying to lighten the mood.

"That's right. Make a joke. But it's not funny. Old Joe lived for five and a half months in 74 years. I don't want to waste my life doing meaningless work just to survive. I don't want to be a cardboard cut-out man."

"I don't want to be a cardboard cut-out man…"

There seemed to be an echo in the room. Perhaps it was because the words were shouted and bounced off the low ceilings of the brick veneer bungalow that his family moved into shortly after Young Joe was born. They reverberated around the dining room and into the lounge where Sam the cat was curled up on the faded brown sofa. The animal sensed something, as cats do, and woke, looked up, and then slinked down the hallway to a bedroom with an open door. The former Young Joe seemed possessed. Raw, pent-up passion and emotions that lurked behind the curtain of adolescence surged on to centre stage of Sunday

lunch, illuminating the puppet world of domestic life. The echo resonated like a paean.

"Joe said he was a drone like the bees who work all the time. That's how I feel. I have to be normal, grow up and settle down. It's a vicious circle. Normality is mediocrity. It's being like everyone else. It's not rocking the boat; not going too far. It's fitting in—no matter how small the space. It's compromising and keeping your mouth shut doing what other people want you to do. Grown up is talked about like it's a destination, a state you arrive at when growing is over. From then it's all the same—or downhill. And you're supposed to be grown up before you're 20. For the next 40, or 50, or 60 years it's no more up and no more growing. It's settling down, giving up on your dreams that you just got started on and accepting your lot. Just like Old Joe. No more wild dreams. No more child dreams. You become a cardboard cut-out man."

No one had ever heard Joe speak like that. For the past few years, his dialogue had been limited to staccato sentences and pre-language grunts. "Uh uh." "Nuh." "OK." "Whasfa dinner?" Under the siege of his sudden eloquence, Aunt Polly's facial expressions implied he had lost his mind. She fiddled with her napkin, and then excused herself to "powder her nose" in the direction where the cat had retreated. His mother and father looked at their son, half frowning, half smiling, as they struggled to express appropriate reactions. They were concerned that he was unhappy. But the smoking hadn't rotted his brain completely.

"What do you want to do then?" his father asked calmly and compassionately.

"I dunno."

"You don't know? How can we change anything if you don't know what you want it to change to? In any case, everyone wants something else. Everyone feels the same way. Women feel trapped. Men feel trapped."

"Well, why don't we change things?" he asked his father and mother looking at them in turn.

"I don't know," three voices chorused and echoed around the room.

Inner Man

Inside the inner shell
the Inner Man cries out,
but often no one hears,
not even the Outer Man.

Inside the Inner Man
turmoil reigns; outside
calm spreads a silent veil
to supress silent screams.

Inside the Outer Man
is another man entombed.
Inside Inner Man is free.
The Outer Man enslaved.

When Worlds Collide

The evil black planet hung in space. Suspended. Poised. Waiting there. An asteroid arrived from some terrestrial junkyard, a space invader, it hovered above her horizon that morning—awaiting Armageddon.

Its pockmarked surface told of many collisions, many conflagrations as it hurtled through space and matter on its wanton trajectory.

A waterless, unwelcoming thing. And unwelcome.

A wasteland maker.

A giant full stop.

Unpeopled.

An *unpeopler*.

*****

When the driver started his engine, a deep rumble in the still-dim morning air, it began its orbit. A slow, increasing semi-elliptical journey. Out and back. Out and back. Then further out to the solstice of its system.

When it had reached the farthest point of its pivotal swing, it came back at a ferocious speed and hit the side of her world.

Apocalypse began.

*****

The collision shook Eileen and left her trembling.

It shook her to her roots and, as she watched, she felt them ripped out of *tanah merah*—the red earth, as her Malay *amah* called it.

This had been her world for eternity it seemed. Her island. Her street. Her building. Not a beautiful world. But her world. A world of familiar things. Washing hanging on ten thousand balconies. Steel fire stairs zigzagging down twenty blocks of twenty storeys.

They'd never carry even half the people in these towers, her husband said. Jets in the window so close she could see the rivets in their shining underbellies. Thundering in to *Kai Tak*.

Down below the cacophony of a hundred thousand horns. The wafting aroma of half a million smells. The babble of a million mobile phones. The daily spawn of five million eggs flowing out of concrete

tubes. A mix of brown and white shining shells, decorated and painted for a permanent pagan parade in starched white shirts and bright red blouses. Wearing Calvin Klein and Yves St Laurent. Donna Karan and Versace. Hermes bags and Bally shoes. Acres of shiny buckles and chains glinting in the morning sun. Gold-dipped three-pointed stars and black glass windows. All sliding slowly down waterless urban canals. The piercing whistle of a policeman, frantic and sweating in the milieu. The growl of angry, bulging buses. The ring-ding-ding of two-stroke scooters scooting. A billion years of ozone loss.

At night, a kaleidoscope of neon lights. An *Aurora Citialis*. Short black dresses and tuxes. Even more Versace and DKNY. Still the endless stream like lava flowing down glowing urban canals. Never slowing. Never stopping. Never silent. Never still. "Only two types here," a common saying warned, "The quick and the dead." Work, work, work. Shop till you drop. Karaoke till dawn.

This was Hong Kong. *Was*.

Now, it was China. Now there was a new Way. British imperialism replaced by Chinese imperialism. Pounds sterling replaced by Yuan. A new government. New police. New forms. Lots of new forms. And a new place to live.

Eileen watched, saddened, stupefied, as the day of reckoning came. Her decrepit apartment building had to go, the officials said. Short mainland men in large, red-band caps. Guangdong Gestapo. "Ugly Western building with people living like rats. Almost as bad as Walled City," they said.

Eileen knew about the Walled City. She had never gone there. No one in Causeway Bay or Kowloon ever did. It was a rat-infested, hole-in-the-wall lawless zone. Illegal immigrants and refugees and homeless orphans lived there in spaces the size of cupboards, stacked in makeshift structures like honeycomb cells. There was no fresh water, no sewerage, and no electricity except when they ran wires over the walls to nearby buildings and took an illegal 'feed'. Hundreds of thousands lived there. Maybe a million. No one knew for sure.

But, like everyone else on the island, Eileen put the Walled City out of her mind. She had her own housing crisis.

"Building is condemned. Have to go," the Guangdong Gestapo general bluntly informed her and her husband a few months earlier. "All go. Make way for freeway."

It went. In three orbits, the menacing black meteorite knocked three huge holes in the northern wall and shattered the nearest corner column. After thirty minutes of bombardment, the cement and steel structure sagged a little on one side and then, when the thing returned, it gave up, went down on its knees, and then folded into a crumpled heap in the dust that billowed up around it like a death shroud.

"No-*lah*. No-*lah*." Eileen cried as she watched. Dryly. An inside cry. "No use for tears," two millennia of pragmatic Confucianism told her. "No use for anything, tears. Only make you not see. Tears for babies. And babies gone."

*****

The babies fled the apartment tower draped in washing like coloured flags more than three years ago. Now there was only her and her husband, Tan Lian Choo. He never took an Anglicized name. But he insisted their children had English names.

Joyce and Steven were so-called since birth. "Have to speak English and be English to get on in world. No use being Honkies," Lian Choo said.

Eileen took her Anglicized name only when she turned 30. Before that, she was Bee Siew Hua. Bee was her family name. Now she was Eileen Tan.

The old families disapproved of *gweilo* names. White Devils, they still called Westerners. Giving kids *gweilo* names was a betrayal of their ancestors, they believed. "It bring *beh la*," Eileen's father warned.

Bad luck came now and then. But so did the Anglos, with their development and 'civilization' and rock music and fashions—and jobs. It was inevitable progress, Lian Choo reasoned. The new ways came like a steam roller out of the west. "No use resisting, it just roll over you," he counselled his family. The steamroller of change had rolled over Hong Kong since Marco Polo, first from the West, and now from the East.

Joyce and Steven went to high school in Battery Point and then Joyce went to the University of Southern California in LA and Steven went to Berkeley. The family skimped and saved to pay the fees of the American universities. Eileen took in washing and did cleaning for *expat* families. Lian Choo took a second job driving taxis in the glowing, ozone-depleting urban canals. Their modest life savings went into

educating their children. That was the Chinese way. Each generation builds for the next.

Joyce got a bachelor's degree in commercial art and Steven did a master's in computing and joined an IT company. Then Joyce married an American called Juan living in southern LA.

"Don't come back," her father, Lian Choo, said, with more love than a homecoming plea could ever express.

For the past three years, there had been just the two of them living in their apartment full of memories. "Just as well," she thought. "Don't want kids seeing this." To the Chinese government officials, to Westerners in white penthouses and Tuscan villas perched high on the steep slopes of Victoria Peak, to the passengers on overhead jets, it was nothing much. Just an ugly concrete box with people living like rats. But it was a walk-in photo album. A personal museum. It was a little island of constancy in a sea of change. It was known. Beyond it lay the unknown.

And new apartments were so expensive. They would have to move to the New Territories, an hour from the city, in a new neighbourhood, with new people. All their life they had given way to the unrelenting steamroller. Now its mechanical relative flattened their world and reduced it to the thinness of a page.

*****

As she turned to walk away towards the future, 30 years of memories echoed in a dull boom and disappeared into a nuclear cloud of dust.

The Alphabet Bug

"I can confirm, Mr Lucaz, there is no trademark on the Greek slash Roman alphabet."

"Who gives a shit about the Greek or Roman alphabets. The English alphabet you fool—who owns that?"

"English is actually based on the Roman alphabet, which is a derivative of the Greek alphabet, which in turn was based on the Phoenician alphabet, Sir. It's like we use Roman and Arabic numerals and the Gregorian calendar. In fact, the alphabet we use actually goes back to Egyptian hieroglyphics and hieratic scripts that evolved from these among Asiatic people in Sinai and Palestine…"

"Phoenicians. Philistines. Who cares? We're talking a-b-c. Right?" the short balding man sitting behind a huge glass desk asked impatiently.

"Yes, Sir."

Serge Lucaz's face beamed like a child at Christmas. This was the news he wanted. His plan could now be put into action. Soon the world would be grovelling at his feet—publishers, academics, smart-arse journalists, even governments. This will show them back in Chestnut Springs, he thought, with a smile of self-satisfaction. It'll also show those cocky uptown lawyers, he mused, swivelling back and forth in his high-backed leather chair and tapping the glass desktop with a large gold ring etched with the letters TM.

This was a moment he had been waiting for, but he had to be sure there were no barriers to implementing his plan. "What about copyright? Is the alphabet protected under copyright?" he fired at the bespectacled young man sitting opposite him.

The dour young New England trademark attorney, a product of Harvard Law School with the personality of a stop-go stick, looked thoughtfully through his dark-rimmed glasses. "Copyright can be sought and registered in various countries for a particular arrangement of letters and a particular arrangement of words made up of those letters. There are various exceptions to that, such as certain banal terms and generic usages…"

"Is the fuckin' alphabet copyright?" Serge Lucaz shouted. A silver bullet of spit shot from his mouth, illuminated like a tracer by a shaft of sunlight slicing through the room. A speck of foam framed the corner of

his mouth like an adhesive mount in a photo album—a slightly crooked photo mount in a well-worn, crumpled album.

The young lawyer looked at Serge Lucaz with an apprehensive awe. The wild, excited stare that he saw frightened the young man. He thought his client had mental health issues. Most of the lawyers at his firm just said bluntly that Serge Lucaz was 'nuts'. The last scheme he came up with was filing a mining claim on Central Park. The application was knocked back, but Clark, Kent & Gamble collected their fee and everyone had a quiet chuckle over dry martinis in The Skylight Room. They wouldn't have been laughing if they knew that the plan he was about to launch could be more devastating for the Western world than nuclear war.

Carefully maintaining his calm, professional composure, the young lawyer answered: "No. The alphabet itself—as in a, b, c, etc. — is not copyright."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I'll be damned! I thought the Brits would have trademarked or patented it, or somehow wrapped it up in legal cotton wool long ago."

"Seems like no one thought to do so. It has been an 'open system' as it were. I guess it was felt that this would propagate reading and, therefore learning and knowledge," the lawyer posed, pleased with himself for the subtle sarcasm of his response. But Serge Lucaz didn't notice his tone. He was on another wavelength.

"What about countries like Australia? I don't want to find out that some Aussie kangaroo hunter Downunder owns the goddamn alphabet."

"Copyright is not registered in Australia like it is in the US. It is automatically vested in the author. And, as there is no author of the alphabet—or at least no known author—it is not copyright in Australia, or anywhere."

"Not copyright or trademarked anywhere. Do you hear that Emily?" he squealed, addressing a white silky terrier reclining on the sofa adjacent to his desk. He went over to the ball of fluff. "We're gonna be rich, girl. And we're gonna be powerful. This is better than setting up dot.coms and chasing sucker investors."

Assured that there was no trademark or copyright protection of the alphabet, Serge Lucaz dismissed the attorney with a wave of his

hand and a gruff thank you. As the young man left, Lucaz walked over to the windows, pulled himself up to his full five eight, tugged his braces to pull his pants back up over his sagging stomach, ran his hands over his head to tidy the few remaining long strands of hair, and let out a loud "Yesssss."

He then went back to his desk, leant over the intercom and barked at his PA, Tina: "Get me Dick Rogers up here right now."

Dick Rogers was his Corporate Affairs Manager. He had a legal background, but didn't have the resources or the nouse to conduct an international trademark search. However, he was the man for the job that now had to be done. Rogers was ex-FBI, 'retired' and disbarred after one of the Bureau's phone-tapping schemes was uncovered. He had a rep for getting the job done, whatever it was, and Serge Lucaz liked that. He had a job for Rogers now that needed a lawyer's knowledge of loopholes and precedent combined with a secret agent's cunning and the scruples of someone used to living in a legal and moral twilight zone. Dick Rogers was perfect and he went to work like a model operative—methodically, persistently, ruthlessly, and unquestioningly.

*****

The world heard about Serge Lucaz and his plan exactly nine weeks later. Sixty-point headlines in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times* in London, most of Europe's dailies, even *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* proclaimed "US INVESTOR TRADEMARKS ALPHABET". Most ran the same Reuters wire story with the dire message that read:

> In a legal precedent with the power to change history, a US court has granted a trademark over the English language alphabet to a New York businessman, Serge Lucaz, who describes himself as an 'intellectual property investor'. The decision effectively means that no use of any letter in the alphabet can be made without approval and without payment of a royalty to the trademark owner.

"How can they do that? It's not possible," Henry Rosenbloom, the head of Clark, Kent & Gamble, quizzed a Monday morning staff meeting in uptown Manhattan, 15 blocks from Serge Lucaz's unassuming 'war room' in a former sewing machine factory.

"Apparently, no one has ever registered copyright or trademarked the alphabet. The court found that the alphabet is a particular arrangement of letters in a set order when called 'the Alphabet' and, therefore, is able to be trademarked," the young lawyer handling the case responded.

"But, there has to be some legal mistake … some error of law. Does the court realize the implications?"

"I believe the judge did. If you read his decision, he went to pains to explain that he found the petition morally questionable and the decision agonizing. But, he ruled that the alphabet was *prima facie* trademarkable and, as there was no legal protection over it and no other application pending, he had no option but to grant a trademark," the young man explained.

"My God, I don't want our firm implicated in this debacle. Our role working for this … this … this Serge Lucas, has to be kept out of the press, do you hear," Henry Rosenbloom ordered.

"Lu-caz."

"I don't care whether it's Lucas or Lucaz or Lucozade. We've got to be out of it. This fellow might as well be called Lucifer when the public wakes up to what has happened."

"He paid us 75K for our legal advice, Mr Rosenbloom."

"Jesus Christ! Send the money back. Resign the account. Send him a letter telling him we disassociate ourselves from him and his actions. This could ruin us. In fact, it could ruin more than us."

The ramifications of Serge Lucaz's trademark took several weeks and the first of a series of landmark lawsuits to sink in. Initially, there was disbelief. "It's a joke," a prominent congressman said on NBC. Some of the media thought it was a late April Fool's Day trick. Then, there was a naïve expectation that the problem would go away. Serge Lucaz was an opportunist who would quietly disappear after his 15 minutes of fame and a handsome payout, it was thought. Industry analysts and academics concurred that he was like the vultures who registered well-known company and brand names in foreign markets so the international owners have to buy them out, often for exorbitant prices. It had happened to IBM and Compaq and Nike and a host of other well-known names.

But, as the weeks went by, Serge Lucaz upped the ante by filing suits against a number of users of what he now considered was *his*

alphabet. "The Greeks might have invented it, but it's mine now," he told the *New York Times*.

Across the Atlantic, Fleet Street went into a frenzy. That someone was claiming ownership of the building blocks of *their* language—English—was a source of great indignation. That it was an *American* painfully gored the British press barons and they gestured and brandished their weapons like angered matadors. They were also miffed because they didn't break the news.

The first target of Serge Lucaz's megalomaniac campaign was a leading book publisher. He alleged that the company had infringed his trademark by publishing texts based on his alphabet and he filed suit for $50 million dollars against the publisher. *The New York Times* revealed in a double-page profile on Lucaz that he had written a novel a few years earlier that had been turned down by every publisher in New York and in London. So Lucaz didn't like publishers. Then the new owner of the alphabet announced that he would sue every company in the world publishing in English.

The publishing industry went into shock. Academics were outraged. Writers and journalists started sending letters to congressmen, regulatory bodies, the Press Council and the letters columns of newspapers. But the tirade of indignation was short-lived. Serge Lucaz announced that even company memos and personal letters breached his trademark and could be the subject of legal action.

In Washington DC, the Clerks Union called a national strike to protect its members as typists froze at their desks mid-sentence. Politicians hid copies of their speeches in their jackets. The US State Department was ordered to launch an immediate inquiry into the Alphabet Bug. The President himself addressed the investigating team, emphasizing the gravity of the matter. But he cautiously instructed that no minutes be printed.

In Europe, where Serge Lucaz simultaneously filed copyright and trademark applications on the Greek/Roman alphabet, the European Commission convened an emergency meeting in Brussels attended by every member country—the first time they had all turned up since discussion on how to divvy up agricultural subsidies. 'Bigger crisis than the Euro', headlines blared, noting that copyright registration in the EU ensured legal ownership.

Three of the world's largest office equipment manufacturers, Xerox, Canon, and Sharp announced that they were withdrawing all photocopiers, laser printers, and fax machines from sale in Germanic language markets for fear of multi-billion-dollar compensation and damages claims. And in Silicon Valley, microprocessor giant, Intel, advised its shareholders that it was reviewing its potential liability for claims when its products were used as the 'engine' for word processing, World Wide Web communication, and in databases. The stock market trembled, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average falling more than 1,000 points the next day, and analysts warned that there was a risk of 'catastrophic collapse' if claims against companies such as Intel, Microsoft, Xerox, and the like went ahead.

The international firm of economic analysts, The Gartner Group, issued a report estimating the cost of the Lucaz trademark at US$600 trillion. They warned that its impact could potentially be 10 times more devastating as the much-hyped Y2K Millennium Bug. "This bug will bring down the Western world's communications, education, business and social systems", Gartner's chief economist concluded.

He was then promptly sued by Serge Lucaz for using his trademarked alphabet—which henceforth had to be written as Alphabet™.

In Australia, the Prime Minister issued a statement a few days later, which the newspapers would not publish for fear of legal action, but which was broadcast on radio and on the Internet, saying Australia was considering the adoption of Mandarin as its official language to avoid the crisis. "It's a choice between Mandarin, Japanese, or an Arabic language," a stammering Prime Minister said on radio. "We cannot use any Germanic language such as French or German or Italian as they are subject to the same Alphabet Bug. Given our proximity to and our relationship with Asia, the Government feels Mandarin would be the logical choice."

The Australian Department of Transport advised that it was following the lead of the US and British road transport authorities and taking down all road signs containing words to avoid multi-million legal claims. "Even sign posts and street names have to go," an official said, although he acknowledged that the department was looking into a scheme to use numbers or symbols for streets, precincts, suburbs, and city names. Sydney was predicted to become 150.

Meanwhile, in New York, Serge Lucaz spent most of his days in court, usually accompanied by his silky terrier, Emily. On two occasions, he was asked by presiding judges to remove the dog. "The *dog*?" he glowered, refusing to turn the black-eyed fluff ball over to a security guard. He was promptly held in contempt and evicted from the court and his case was heard with him *in absentia*. That may have been what provoked a further escalation in the crisis.

In the middle of the summer holiday season, two months after successfully gaining his trademark over the formerly Greek/Roman, now Alphabet™, Serge Lucaz was sitting in the Federal Court in New York during a case that he had filed against Microsoft. Lucaz alleged that all of Microsoft's programs, except its Japanese Kanji versions, used Alphabet™ letters in their menus and commands and, therefore, breached his trademark. Bill Gates claimed in defence that Microsoft programmers thought up all the letters by themselves and any similarity was coincidental.

Serge Lucaz stood up and addressed the Judge. "Your Honour, may I approach the bench?"

"If you must," the gnarled oak tree of a judge grumbled.

"Your Honour … Your Honour, there is a point of order which I have to make and bring to your attention. This trial cannot proceed."

"What do you mean cannot proceed? This is my courtroom and I'll say what can and what cannot proceed here."

"No, Your Honour. You see, the court reporter is typing a transcript of what is being said."

"So? That's her job."

"Yes, but she's using the Alphabet™. The Alphabet™ is registered and protected under trademark law and this court does not have a licence to use it. I must insist that she stop forthwith as she and, therefore, by implication you, Your Honour, are in breach of the law."

"This is preposterous."

"You may feel that way, Your Honour. But an illegally held proceedings cannot bring down a legally enforceable finding. What's more, if you proceed, the court will be liable for significant royalty payments and possibly fines for knowingly breaching trademark now that I have informed you of it. This case has to adjourn."

Uproar broke out in the courtroom as the judge tried to explain what he had just learned. The court reporter froze with her hands in

mid-air just above the keys. She wasn't going to gaol for anybody. Forty grand a year didn't buy that kind of dedication. The press gallery, tipped off that something was going to happen, went into a frenzy of scribbling and scrambling for tape recorders.

The next morning's newspapers gave the story page one treatment and it headed online editions. But, they were all promptly sued and went quiet on the issue by the next day. Then, the inevitable happened. Leading newspapers and magazines stopped appearing at all. Faced with injunctions and the risk of high court costs, they stopped the presses and went into a huddle with half of New York's and London's best lawyers.

On the Internet, an e-zine called *Alpha Beta* started specifically to focus on "the Alphabet Bug issue", reported that publishers of the Bible and English translations of the Koran were both subject to multi-billion-dollar lawsuits. In fact, every publisher and translator of texts ranging from the *Upanishads* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* were being sued for royalties.

A bizarre story surfaced that the manufacturers of eyesight test boards were withdrawing their product worldwide for fear of legal action. Optometrists and driving test centres were warned that, even though the letters were scrambled, they used the Alphabet™.

"Didn't someone know about this … what he was planning?" Henry Rosenbloom asked a huddle of lawyers in hiding in the boardroom of Clark, Kent & Gamble.

"Yes, some did," responded a snappily dressed young attorney, one of the survivors from the last intern intake. "Why do you think the Performer Formerly Known as Prince changed his name to a symbol?"

"Christ! He'll make a killing. No other rock star will be able to even sign their name let alone write lyrics." Henry Rosenbloom slumped into his chair.

"I hear some ska band has started calling themselves @," the smart young lawyer added, keen to demonstrate the one area in which he had superior knowledge to his more senior colleagues.

"They'll have their arses sued off," Henry Rosenbloom informed them, taking the wind out of the young man's sails. "The @ symbol is owned by Lotus, now part of IBM. It was part of the Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet program. And IBM owns 'e' when it's written the same way," he added, driving home that he was head of the firm for good

reason. The group went quiet after that, legal lapdogs in the presence of the leader of the pack.

The *Alpha Beta* e-zine continued to report on the escalating crisis through the underground efforts of a number of sources. They included journalists who had sat through countless court hearings and a 'deep throat'. A distraught young woman, Tina, e-mailed a long description of events where she worked and attached numerous documents just before she quit and took a Greyhound back to Iowa.

Alpha Beta reported that injunctions were being taken against libraries preventing them from loaning books. And 'enforcement officers' were confiscating equipment used in document production from offices, schools, and universities that were unlicensed. As one of *Alpha Beta*'s correspondents, I personally witnessed trucks pulling up at night outside buildings and loading up computers, printers, and photocopiers.

After such an instance, I slipped back into my apartment before dawn to dictate a report into my voice activated software that automatically uploaded to the Net.

> "World slips into new Dark Age stop. Black-dressed bands of intellectual terrorists are …
>
> "Who is it?
>
> "No. I don't have a licence to write. Freedom of speech includes freedom of the press. I have the right to report what is happening. Hey, get your hands off my computer. Stop. You can't do that. I have a right to …

Mediated Man. The author photographed for the cover of the book, 'Men in the Media'. Photo: Belinda Mason.

Colombus.com

The world is flat.
Sixty centimetres wide.
A high-tech world of LCD
made from sand; glowing
in a permanent neon night.
I navigate by virtual pointing
across a vast expanse of C,
following myriad digital trails
in F3 search of Exabyte.
Now is a nanosecond; history is ROM.

Time is bent.
I talk today to people
already in tomorrow and still
in yesterday. Meet without seeing.
And see things that don't exist at all.
I meet New World 'exhabitants' –
faceless beings with strange names.
No race. No sex. No class ID,
peering through Windows in a cyberwall.
Horizons implode. I am Colombus.com.

21st Century Sonnet to Time

Don't talk to me of time.
Time doesn't exist. Only structure.
Things change form. They grow. Decay.
Egg to embryo to child to man or woman,
to old age to dust and DNA. No death. Nay.
Only changes of form. Periodically observed,
we seek to describe the progress of change;
the open-ended, random morph of evolution.
Time is language, constructed to describe
how all things grow from carbon and return.
From cosmic dust, to black holes, to stars,
to exploding fragments forming worlds.
Timeless. Never-ending. But changing.
Reforming. Restructuring. Returning.

Scramble

Images of black and white movies drift through my mind. Late night TV movies. World War Two movies – that so-long-ago war my elderly father and uncles talk about, but which no one today can visualize or have a sense of. Even Vietnam, the first Gulf War and Bosnia are already distant memories to the 'real time' Internet generation. Wars blur into video games and time warps with the speed of things.

In my reverie, aeroplanes are taking off from an airfield somewhere – on an island in the Pacific, or in northern England, or perhaps it was Hawaii. They are those old-fashioned propeller type aircraft. Hurricanes or Spitfires, I'm not sure. They clamber into the sky, their engines straining against gravity sucking at the load of fuel and bombs tucked in their bellies. They snarl in protest at the cold start they were forced to make moments before, as young men in strange suits and headgear dashed across the runway from nearby huts and jumped into their cockpits.

Other young men feverishly remove chocks from under their wheels; puffs of black smoke belch into the air; a siren wails a warning before being drowned out by the coughs, splutters, and then the rising, raspy note of tortured air-cooled internal combustion engines revving. Everyone is struggling, fighting, pushing, pulling, calling, waving.

Then the aircraft appear silhouetted against a white sky, black shapes climbing precariously to their rendezvous with destiny. Young men going into battle. Machines daring to emulate birds. Wheels still stick ungainly from their underbellies. Wingtips dip and sag upwards as they leave the ground. It appears as if they will not make it off the runway for a while. But they do. Just. They claw their way into the sky. Slowly they climb above the black hills with their menacing cliffs and crags. Even as they soar to higher altitude in the white sky, they look like they could, at any moment, plunge back to earth and be dashed to pieces.

Every day they must repeat this ritual. Rushing to remove their nightclothes. Pilots sprinting from the comfort of warm beds and cosy lounges. Metal and flesh straining to do what seems beyond their power and endurance. The young men wear wings on their chests. Proudly. Purposefully. Pointedly. They watch the horizon. They scan the heavens. They wait, with frayed nerves and choking fear. They dream, pushing back the black of nightmare.

Then, in an instinctive moment, called by shrill sirens, they hurl themselves into the twilight. They defy the forces of nature and struggle into

the white sky, hoping to emerge victorious high above the shadowed hills and the small, lonely landing field.

*****

"Is that what you think about: overcoming your fears?" a figure shadowed against the window asked in a calm almost droll voice.

"No. Well, I guess, partly. But I didn't do what I did just to prove I had balls," the speaker sitting in a soft lounge chair replied.

"Well, what do you think about now, after all that's happened? Tell me about it."

That was how John Dangerfield came to tell his story. Not willingly. Not easily. Not seeking recognition. More seeking forgetfulness, to push back the nightmares.

His whole life was series of take offs and landings, including some like the aeroplanes in his dream—precarious and tortured. A scramble. Barely making it at times. Struggling against gravity and inertia. And sometimes against dark forces that surrounded him on every side.

"Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell me everything," the black figure against the window said quietly.

*****

"I took off from the flat, hot plains where I grew up when I was twenty. There were a lot of false starts—a few taxi runs and a couple of 'touch-n-gos'. Some people claim a grand plan in their life, a vision and natural ascendancy to their journey. "Cream rises," they say, smugly. I think it's twenty-twenty hindsight. Much of my life has been spent 'on a wing and a prayer'.

"I wasn't born into wealth or position, or even with huge amounts of talent. My parents were poor. I left school early to help on the family's farm, so I was relatively uneducated. We were working class, so I didn't have connections. I was the eldest of seven, which meant my mother's attention was elsewhere from an early age. And my father worked long hours running the farm. Because we lived a long way from the city, I went to a boarding school. They were dark days. Despite being thrust in with other boys, or perhaps because of it, and the isolation of my early childhood, I was not comfortable dealing with people. Lacking education and social skills, I felt I wasn't as good as everyone else. I lived in shadows, trying to see where I was going. At seventeen, I was a tall,

gangly, shy, nervous, naïve, poorly educated, scared, socially isolated, culturally deprived, poor, white, conservative adolescent male.

"But I'm not complaining. In fact, when I was 10, I thought we were the richest and luckiest people on Earth. Childhood extends like a virtual womb around us for a time after we are born. Hopefully a long time. For some of us, it's short. Grown up arrives in a hurry, transported by economic necessity or death or some other dark fortune.

"For me it was just the time. I was born in the late 'fifties. But the boom times that followed The War—at least in the countries that won—hadn't arrived where we lived. We were a long way from anywhere. By the time the 'sixties arrived in Baxter's Junction, they had already ended everywhere else.

"In 1960, we all wanted to be fighter pilots. The boys that is. Little plastic fighter planes came in Cornflakes packets and Santa brought me a model plane for Christmas when I was 12. I put it together lovingly with Tarzan's Grip and flew it above my shoulder every evening when I sauntered day-dreaming around the home paddock to fetch the milking cows. The brigalow scrub echoed with the sound of "yeerrrrrrrrrroooooooowwrrrrrrrrrrr" till my jaw ached.

"I flew a thousand sorties in that grey, plastic Spitfire. I crossed the English Channel and flew low over France. I buzzed Italian villages nestled at the foot of vine-clad hills. I crossed the Pacific all the way to America. Behind me lay the ruins and wrecks of enemies led by dictators dressed in black who wanted to rule the world. I was a hero for truth and justice. Black was black and white was white back then.

"But gravity was strong on those flat Outback plains. Much stronger than in other places on earth. It pulled you back down whenever you tried to take off. Just like my model aeroplane couldn't rise above my arm span, getting off the ground in a career and life took a lot of stretching and hanging on by my fingernails. The atmosphere of conservatism and the emotional pull of family tugged at scrambling fighters. Taking off was defying nature in a culture where sons took over the family farm and daughters dutifully married the boy next door. But eventually I got away. I escaped into the big bright world.

"So, what the hell am I doing here? Lying on a psychiatrist's couch in a dark room in a grey city?

"Well, to be truthful, it wasn't my idea. The consulting physician said I had to. It is a condition of going back into society. 'You've been

away a long time,' she said. 'It will be difficult re-adjusting.' The officer handling my case concurred and stamped the forms, making it a condition of my release.

"I remember being inside only in black and white. There is no colour in prison. Daylight was from 11 am till two. That's when the sun travelled its zenith arch above the high walls. By the window and in the exercise yard, the whiteness of day was visible through wire and bars. Before and after that, it was a twilight zone of thick black shadows and grey fuzziness each side of starless night. In prison, they even take the stars away from you."

"It must have been hard," the black figure against the window said.

"Hard. What's hard? What's soft? My father said being a farmer was hard. He said pen-pushers and paper-shufflers like clerks and lawyers and doctors were soft. 'You have to be tough to survive,' he told me. Now I can see he was right.

"The warders at the nineteenth century former monastery where they took me said I deserved to be put to death—and they would have done it for me only for the vaguely humanitarian standards of the Commandant. Or perhaps it was politics. My death might have led to an inquiry. They were concerned about public opinion and the media.

"But they had their fun. 'You killed innocent women and kids,' they shouted at me, jamming their batons into my perpetually bruised rib cage. 'You're a murderer. You deserve to die in hell.'

"I wouldn't have far to go, I thought. I was already in it.

"Did I kill innocent women and children, you're asking? Yes. It's true. I did. Ten, they said at the hearing. 'Animal', people were shouting from the back of the courtroom.

"But you explained the circumstances …"

"Ah, the circumstances. The circumstances. Another scramble. A scramble on a dark, moonless night. The siren went off at 4 am. Within seconds, an 'all hands' announcement came over the speaker and I was called to the briefing room. 'Go in low. Hit hard. Get out fast. Try to stay below radar. Watch out for surface-to-air missile positions. Good luck,' we were told.

"Sitting in the grey pre-dawn in the cockpit waiting for wave-off, it was hard to remember how a skinny, shy kid who grew up in the Australian bush ended up in Red Delta Squadron on a US carrier in the

Gulf. A lot of scrambles, I guess. Taking off and joining the Air Force. Flying school. Exchange postings. Trying out for the astronaut program. Failing. But then deciding to stay and fly F14s for Uncle Sam because—well, to tell the truth, it was a girl in Phoenix. But that's history now.

"We went in low—and fast. F14s feel invulnerable at speed. Lithe and agile. You can defy gravity. It's a bigger hit than E's or coke or any of the shit that's around. But you are focused because this is 'a mission'. There is a target. You lock on and do your job. Two direct hits. A couple of scattered bombs missed the target. Turn for home—if you can call a floating canister of 4,000 men and women home.

"Suddenly there was a bang and then quiet. I remember calmly running through a 'contact' checklist in my head. There was air speed noise and turbine whine, but no throaty roar. No crackle from the afterburners. And the turbine whine was slowing, winding itself down like a spent firecracker.

"Then I was in a small plastic model aeroplane from a cornflakes packet. Lifeless, inanimate, falling. Again pulled down by gravity. Leaving my beloved white sky. Falling to the black hills below."

"You were captured after you parachuted into occupied territory and put in prison. I understand you were tortured and held in solitary confinement?"

"I killed civilians—women and children."

"That was an accident. It was war."

"OK. I accidentally killed women and children. That's something I have to live with. It's a weight I have to carry with me. Can I go now?"

"You're free, thanks to the UN negotiators, and you've been honourably discharged. You can go anywhere you like. Where do you want to go?"

"To the light. I want no more dark and no more grey."

Flying over the Serengeti. Photo: Jim Macnamara.

The Letter to the Editor

The letter was conceived in the Royal Exchange, one of five pubs in Bordertown. While pubs have often been a meeting place and a harbour for literary talent from Soho to New York's Lower East Side, the Royal Exchange was not one of them. It was a run-down watering hole with an over-priced bottle shop and washers in the poker machines. And no royal exchange had ever taken place there or within a few hundred kilometres of there. But it was open late, often past the legal closing time, and the proprietor rarely looked too closely at IDs. So, it gained a level of popularity, especially among the young and the late-night drinkers of Bordertown and surrounding areas.

To be precise, the *idea* for the letter was hatched at the Royal Exchange. The text took more than a month. A tortuous, tormented time, as its author, Steve McConical, slaved over his sister's Mac in their parents' house where he lived after his divorce from Charlene. Regular progress reports on the letter were passed on at the Exchange by Steve, or by his mate Phil when Steve was holed up at home in a creative mood.

It all started one Friday night when the late news on the bar TV reported a politician calling for an inquiry into crime in the western suburbs. The reporter, a brush-back silver-haired yuppie in a long overcoat with a pinkie ring and a half sneer, told the city and half the nation that crime was out of control in the west. Gangs were roaming the streets and people were afraid to go out at night, he said.

"Jesus, where do they get that crap from? It's always bad news about the west. I bet there's more crime in the posh eastern suburbs and the inner city. They just cover it up there," Steve shouted.

"I reckon," Phil, who was standing next to him at the bar, agreed.

Steve's outburst triggered a debate over living in the suburbs and, in particular, in the west. Half a dozen of Steve's drinking mates and a few of their girlfriends joined in, as well as the barman, a huge half-Maori who ended up working behind the bar after he did his knee at football.

"Where do these guys get off criticizing and looking down their noses at the suburbs. This is where most of the population live. The smart-arse inner-city wallahs and wankers think they're the centre of the universe in their bloody coffee shops drinkin' their latte and wearin'

their black jeans and T-shirts and struttin' around in Doc Martens," Steve philosophized with the aid of several Cascade Lites.

"The *Herald's* art supplement quoted this academic from the University of Melbourne the other day saying that 'anti-suburbanism has long been a deep current in the Australian artistic and intellectual mainstream,'" a voice boomed over the rumble of conversation from the back of the room. It was the publican who entered the bar during the discussion. He was fond of quoting intellectual and academic reports and often recited poetry to show off his knowledge. Some said he was a disgraced teacher before he came to Bordertown.

Steve and his mates got the general gist of what the publican was saying. "There ya go. They're always knockin' the suburbs, especially the west. Why is it that the west is always the shitty side of cities where the workin' class and the poor live? And what's wrong with the suburbs anyway? We can't all squeeze into the middle of the city. You can't even get in there most of the time for the traffic jams," Steve went on, warming to the cause like a politician sensing a headline.

That was when he announced that he was going to write a letter to the editor of the *Herald*.

"You can't write, mate. I mean not for a big newspaper. The local rag, maybe. You barely passed English in eighth grade," his friend Phil warned with bloke bluntness. They'd known each other since school, so there was no need for gilding the lily or sugar-coating the truth. Like Steve, Phil called a spade a spade—or 'a bloody shovel' most of the time.

Steve was not to be deterred. In spite of his lack of scholarly achievement, he had a novel in him, he reckoned. Steve couldn't spell very well and he was not too hot on grammar. But he was confident he could at least write a letter to the editor.

"How hard can it be? I'm just gonna write down what I'm thinkin'," he informed Phil and the others at the Exchange.

"A bloke can go to gaol for writin' down what he's thinkin'," Phil teased him.

"Come on mate. Give me a break. Or bugger off and leave me alone. I'm gonna write to the bloody editor of the bloody paper and it's important for Bordertown that I do. Someone has gotta stick up for the place."

Sensing he was serious about writing to the editor of the *Herald*, his mates wished him luck and went back to the regular topics of

football, where the cops were putting speed cameras lately, and who was dating Ingrid, the blonde Scandinavian who worked part-time behind the bar with 'Haka' the Maori. Of course, that wasn't his real name. But that's what he got called because of the pub patrons' familiarity with the New Zealand All Blacks playing Rugby.

Steve went into hibernation after that. Writin' was serious work, he said. He had to concentrate. And it took a lot of looking up words in a dictionary that he also borrowed from his sister. Most at the pub expected he would give up after a week or so. Another one of Steve's brilliant ideas, they thought. But almost five weeks after announcing he was going to write to the editor of the *Herald* and being missing for a month from the regulars at the Exchange, Steve arrived one Sunday night with a grin from ear to ear and "a wicked thirst".

"It's finished. It's done," he announced.

"What?" several voices asked at once.

"The bloody letter to the editor, you idiots. What do you think?"

"Sorry. You've been so long we'd forgotten about it," Haka ribbed him.

"Great supporters youse are. A man's tryin' to defend our reputation and you desert him. I can read it to ya? See what youse think?"

"Alright, Steve. Stand up at the corner of the bar where we can hear ya," Haka invited him, and no one was going to argue with Haka.

Steve positioned himself at the corner of the bar, stood up on the foot rail to get some extra height, and read from a crumpled sheaf of pages.

> *Dear Sir/Madam. I'm not very literary but I'm writin' 'cos I'm sick of the one-sided, biased, screwed-up bullshit and high-falutin crap that people are goin' on with about the place where we live. We are tired of the put-downs and psycho-babble about the suburbs like they have no culture.*

"Whoo-hoo," several of his mates and their girlfriends in the bar cheered. Steve looked up smiling, feeling encouraged, and continued reading.

> *The people who look down on us are so far up themselves they can't see daylight. They talk with their posh accents and feel superior. But they're not the voice of the people. Most of the people live out here.*

We're sick the 'burbs coppin' shit from bloody sociologists and psychologists and newspaper journos and politicians. They think we're all morons out here. Like we're in-bred and stupid. They talk like it's a wilderness west of Glebe. The bloody Latte set. Trendies living in inner city squalor feelin' superior. Wearing their black Viet Cong outfits and more shrapnel than what got shot in the Vietnam War.

We're not sub-urban. What a bloody putdown. Who says we're less than urban. It's better out here. It's super urban. We got space. We got trees. We got no graffiti everywhere and traffic lights on every corner and no fuckin' speed humps every hundred metres. No speed humps thank Christ.

"They reckon they're comin'," Phil interrupted.

"Who's comin'?"

"Speed humps. Council's lookin' at 'em. And more 50-kay speed limits."

"Bugger."

"Yeah. And you can't say fuckin'. They won't publish it."

"Well, they can beep it out."

"It's a newspaper mate. They don't beep things."

"Well they can just leave it out then. That's even easier. There's a bit more, but that's most of it. So what do youse think?"

Steve looked around, hopefully, his eyes seeking assurance, his pride pleading for accolades or at least a grudging 'not bad'. Visions of publication flickered in the dim light of The Exchange. Weeks of mental exertion waited for recognition. He licked his lips in anticipation and from the dryness in his throat after the reading. Several in the audience quickly turned to face the bar and called to Haka for another beer. Phil stood by his side and put his arm around his shoulders.

"Listen, mate. I don't think it's gonna get published. But I tell ya what. I feel a whole lot better."

10:10 Tam'th to London

"This is it. This's the one."
"Oh, I dunno. I think that's First Class. It dun look 'arf nice in there."
"Ooh, aye. That's First Class."
"What's the difference in First Class anyways?"
"Aw, they have bigger seats and fancy food and things."
"Do they serve food in First Class?"
"I dunno. But if they did it would be nice."
"Yeah. It would be."
"Ah. This looks like it. Let's try this one. Come on, Harry."
"Alright, dear. Alright."
"Yes, this is it. This is ours. Mind the bags, Harry. That's right."

*****

"Will you put this one up too, dear?"
"Yes, dear."
"And this one too. That's a luv."
"I think I need to go to the bathroom."
"Oh, I dun think you're supposed to go when we're stopped."
"You dun think so? I thought that was only in the old ones. I thought they had proper toilets now."
"Perhaps you're right. Why dun you check—there'll be a sign or something. It's just down the corridor. Down there. They have nice lights in the corridor, dun they?"
"Alright. I'll check."

*****

"There's no paper towels."
"What, no paper towels in the toilet?"
"Nar."
"Goodness, that's a fine state of affairs. No paper towels in the toilet. What are you going to do?"
"I dunno. I washed me hands, but there's nutin to dry 'em on."
"Dun you 'ave a handkerchief?"
"Nar. I didn' bring one."

"I'm always telling you to put a handkerchief in your pocket, aren't I? But you dun listen to me. Ooh, look we're moving."
"I should try to find the conductor and ask him for some paper towels."
"You could go to the door at the end and hold your hands outside. That would dry them."
"I dun know if I should do that. I could wipe 'em on me pants."
"You'll do no such thing. Open a window and hold 'em out in the wind. We can't have wet hands now, can we?"
"What if there's a tunnel? Or one of those signal posts?"
"I shouldn' put 'em out very far should I?"
"Oh, 'oright."
"Oh, the windows dun open."
"Dun they? They used to."
"That was on those old trains. Now they're all air conditioned. And I think they have to stop people jumpin' out."
"Jumpin' out?"
"Yeah, some jump outa trains. Or they put their head out and it gets knocked off."
"Oooh! I dunno why they'd do that. There's no accountin' for some folk."

*****

"Did you know that Dulcie Robinson's daughter went to London?"
"Nar, I didn' know that. When did she go?"
"A couple a years ago."
"What does she do there?"
"Oh, I dunno. Some big finance company, I think."
"She's in finance, then?"
"No. She went into advertising."
"Oh."
"Why did you say finance if she's in advertising?"
"Because she's in advertising for finance."
"Oh. I dun like advertising. All those ads on the TV trying to sell you something."
"Ooh aye, things you dun need."
"No. I need some of them. We need a new Hoover. The old one is on its last legs, you know. But I dun like the advertising."
"You sing some of the songs they 'ave in the advertising."

"Oh, I like the songs. It's just the advertising. I dun like the advertising."
"Hmmm. I dun like it either."

*****

"Look, it says here in the paper that there's a new freeway being built to Litchfield."
"I ain't ever been to Litchfield."
"Yes y'ave. You went there for your cousin's wedding."
"Nar. We went to Burton. Burton-On-Trent."
"Oooh, yeah. Burton it was. You haven't been to Litchfield then?"
"Nar."
"Well, you wone be needin' the freeway then will you?"
"Nar."

*****

"Did you know that Esme's daughter's gone into that IVF?"
"Esme?"
"No. Esme's daughter. Esme from work."
"Oh."
"Yeah. They harvested her eggs, you know."
"Did they?"
"Yeah. And then they gave her the intravenous fertilization."
"Ow'd they do that?"
"You know. They take the eggs out and then they put the … you know … into them."
"They put what in?"
"You know … the man's part."
"Oh. How do they put them back in then?"
"You know …."
"Nar, I dunno. If I knew I wouldn' be askin'. I'd be ridin' up there in First Class if I knew how to do IVF."
"This is perfectly nice, Harry. Perfectly comfortable. I think they put them in a tube. That's why they call them test tube babies."
"Oh. In a test tube."
"Yeah. It's very scientific."

"This vinyl on the seats is very nice, dun you think?"
"Yeah. It's nice."

"It's a lovely shade a green."
"Hmmmm, hmmm, hmmm."
"I say, it's a lovely shade a green, Harry."
"Uh, oh, yes. Lovely."
"Do you think this colour would look nice in the lounge room?"
"I dunno, luv."
"You dun like it, Harry?"
"Nar. I mean yes, I like it. But I dun think we need a new lounge yet luv."
"No. Not a new lounge Harry. I was thinkin' a new curtains. In green."
"Oh. New curtains. Right."
"It looks just like leather, dun it? Dulcie Robinson has a vinyl lounge just like it. Only hers is blue."
"Oh."

*****

"What do you think the weather'll be like in London, Harry?"
"Much the same as here I'd say."
"Oh. I dunno. It's a long way to London."
"It might be rainin' then."
"It might be. But it could be sunny. I hope it's sunny."
"Yeah. Sunny would be nice."
"Did you watch the weather forecast on the TV, Harry?"
"You mean last night?"
"Yeah. Last night."
"Nar. I didn' watch it."
"Arr. Then we'll just have to wait'n see then, wone we?"
"Aye."

*****

"What time do you think we'll be in London then?"
"I dunno. I didn' ask."
"You have a schedule."
"Nar. I dun have the schedule. It's in your bag."
"Ooh, is it? In my bag … somewhere here. Yes, here it is. Let me see now. The schedule says we get in at ten past twelve."
"That means that we'll be there at five to one then."

"Five to one? We're on the 10.10. We always take the 10.10. It gets in at ten past twelve. It says right 'ere."

"Yeah. But we left at five to eleven. If the 10.10 is due at 12.10, then it takes two hours. So if we left at five to eleven, we'll get there at five to one."

"Oh. You always had a head for figures, Harry?"

*****

"You comfortable, Harry?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah."

Gordon's College Roses in Regent's Park, London. Photo: Jim Macnamara. (Fond memories of living in London in 2016.)

Canticle to John and The Found

There are three groups of people in the world: The Found; The Unfound and The Foundless.

I, Urbek, am a member of The Unfound. That is what I discovered in the months and then years after I left Kazakhstan to live in Warsaw and then London. I learned this largely from my boss at the firm where I worked in London, John, whose last name I will not record for fear of slipping further down the social scale to being Foundless.

The Found are the fortunate. They are sometimes Found by birth through being the progeny of rich and powerful families and tribes. These are the truly lucky ones for they make no contribution to their Foundness—they gain their status simply by having at least one Found parent who agreed to bestow Foundness on them by giving them their name and often wealth. And, much to the chagrin of The Unfound and many Found, those born to Foundness are often undeserving, lazy, vile, or half-witted.

Another route to become one of The Found is by selection. This is a somewhat precarious and mysterious process. For generations, the Myth of 'Making It' has existed and been perpetrated by The Found. They use all manner of methods to convince The Unfound that all it takes is hard work and persistence. It is told as a Canon of Life to the likely, the hopeful, and poor unfortunate wretches with little chance of becoming Found. Like many religious tenets, it has been a great propaganda message that has stood the test of time. Unfound fathers have passed it on to sons, even after five and six generations of being Unfound. A large number of The Unfound work themselves to exhaustion and commit to decades of tedium and drudgery in the factories of The Found. In the process they drive the engines of industry and create more of The Found.

Like all myths, it gained its canonical credibility because it is at least partly true. A few of The Unfound do indeed become members of The Found, rising in their status and power and wealth—and usually never looking back over their shoulder like their Biblical predecessors fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah fearing they will be turned back into Unfound.

It is possible to become Found through exceptional talent and skill, whether that is kicking a small spotted ball hither and thither on a field

called a pitch, or negotiating multi-million deals between other members of The Found. But this requires exceptional abilities and perseverance. Even the most talented Unfound often fail to become Found. I tried to discover the rules applying to membership of The Found, particularly for those seeking promotion 'from the ranks', as it were. But it was a frustrating and fruitless search. More on that later.

Some hope is held out to The Unfound through different levels of Foundness. There are a number of Basic Founds—junior executives in shiny new suits and wannabe models with permanent smiles of straight bleached teeth, hair extensions made from dead Foundless, and shoes that serve as mini-stilts to raise them physically towards Foundness. A few of these base model Founds make it up the rankings to become Deluxe Founds. But, in many cases, these bestowed positions amount to no more than provisional membership that leads to dead ends and disillusion more often than not. They end up marrying Unfounds and living somewhere in the suburbs that taxis can never find or don't want to go to.

The Unfound is the largest group of the population, a seething struggling mass trying to become Found, hoping against the odds that they can escape their Unness. An Unfound artist who became Found, Andy Warhol, said everyone wants 15 minutes of fame. What he should have said is that most people would give up everything for 15 minutes of Foundness.

The Foundless are the most pathetic and futureless. The Foundless have no chance of being Found. They are the sick and deformed, the dim-witted and the deranged, the lame and the lost, and the just plain ordinary. But, in an ironic and paradoxical way, The Unfound seem to be the happiest of the tribes. They have time to spend doing frivolous things. Like playing with their children. Like walking in parks.

The Found hardly ever just walk in parks. If they do venture into a park, it is usually with an earpiece and a microphone dangling in front of their mouth, which is sprouting instructions about stocks and bonds or how to get the Upton's contract. Occasionally they stroll fashionably through a park in black tights wearing yellow or red 'runners' (a type of misnamed shoe). This is a weekend social ritual undertaken on the way to a coffee shop to meet other Founds who talk loudly about Foundness things.

And then, of course, there are the Foundlings. The children of The Found. They are well-dressed and go to good schools. But they are spoiled and many are neurotic because they spend most of their time in day-care, or with nannies (who are Unfound), or staring at a screen made by The Found to distract The Unfound and Foundless from their Unness.

I thought it would be different when I came to the West, where I dreamed I would find myself and my destiny. In Warsaw I worked as a database operator, putting numbers into computers about The Unfound and Foundless and their various habits and interests. We put all sorts of data into databases, like how much they spent on washing machines and TVs and cars, how big their mortgages were, and how often they used their credit cards. If they didn't pay the minimum on their credit cards every month, we certainly put that in. For being Unfound, there was certainly a lot that was known about them. It seems that the data services company I worked for had found out everything about them. But the reason they were still Unfound is that they never knew it. Only The Found got access to what we found because our company sold the information for a lot of money. That's another reason they are called The Found; they found out everything. The rest of us don't know much.

When I came to London, I applied for a position in an equities trading firm and, even though I knew nothing about equities, I got the job because of all that I knew about finding things using computers and cameras and other stuff. I don't know why they call the digital files that we bought and sold 'equities' because the business had little to do with equity. Only The Found found out what to buy and sell.

So, one day I asked my boss John about why we had to find out all this information about The Unfound and The Foundless and give it to The Found. They are already Found. So why do they have to find out more?

He says to me: "Urbek, this company was founded on a principle. The Founder was very good at finding out things. And he found that people will pay you for what you have found. So, we are in the business of Finding."

So, I ask John, "How do I find out how to be Found?"

John says, "You need to play your cards right. Keep your nose clean. You need to have skin in the deal. You need to keep your powder dry. Have your ears to the ground. That's how you climb the ladder."

So, that's how I found the formula for Foundness. You need cards, a clean nose, peeling skin, powder, and be laying on the ground a lot of the time. Then you can make it 'up the ladder' to Foundness. That's what John said. But I don't think John was telling me the truth. I think The Found want Foundness to remain unfound by The Unfound and The Foundless.

Then, a few weeks later, someone put a sign up on the noticeboard at work for people to write on. It was titled 'Lost and Found'.

That'll be a lopsided list, I thought.

Concubine Chicken and Longevity Abalone Rice

"Ah, you won Gran Copthorn Hotel, yeah? Shenton Way?"

The taxi driver reminded me of street-sellers in Thailand. "You won antique. Brand new antique, velly cheap. You won wife?

"No. Grand Copthorne Waterfront. Kim Seng Road," I replied in a slow, seemingly patronizing but necessary tone. This was Singapore where everyone spoke English, but taxi drivers have their own way of dealing with people the world over. I could see he didn't care. He just wanted his fare and it didn't matter to him which hotel I ended up at. Just another *gweilo* with a fat wallet and an air ticket out in a day or two. They'd been coming since Marco Polo. To make matters more difficult, Singapore has three Copthorne Hotels.

"Corner of Havelock and Zion Roads," I added to be sure.

I was tired, having arrived at Changi Airport on an evening flight from Bangkok after an all-day conference. Bangkok traffic took longer than the air leg. And airport security added another hour. Since 9-11 the authorities had clamped down everywhere. Mont Blancs had become potentially dangerous weapons and laptop batteries were possible bombs. I had a full body search in Bangkok—crotch and all—which added to my discomfort and the delays. An American woman in front of me objected loudly, citing her civil rights, but a large Muslim woman in a hijab frisked her down with an ironic smile.

"Ah, Gran Copthorn Waterfront. Kim Seng Road, leh?"

"Yes, Kim Seng Road."

"No, lah, Kim Seng."

"OK."

I wondered what was wrong with my English. It obviously wasn't *Singlish*, which locals called the particular mix of Queen's English, Malay and Chinese intonations that formed the dialect of working-class Singapore—if there was such a thing in this place. Miracle City. Cleanest city in the world. Two point two children city. Lee Kwan Yew's city. Even though he retired as prime minister long ago, his imprint is indelibly stamped on the small city-state. Overwhelmingly middle class, ambitious and devoted to conspicuous consumption.

Shop Till You Drop Singapore, with Orchard Road, a corridor of rampant commercialism and permanent 50-per-cent-off sales. Gianni Versace; Prado; Bvlgari; Etienne Aigner; Christian Dior; Hugo Boss; DKNY. They are all there. Shiny black handbagged and belted-Singapore with large gold Moschino badges. Mercedes Benz and BMW-driving Singapore, despite having to buy a Certificate of Entitlement from the government for a few hundred grand before you can even own a car. Educated Singapore with its white-collar workforce of double-degrees from foreign and local universities. The most efficient port in the world, speeding trade through the busiest shipping lanes in the world. High-rise Singapore with a Manhattan-style skyline of skyscrapers and bright lights towering over the last remnants of early colonial settlement in Boat Quay and Chinatown.

And then I saw the sign: 'Concubine Chicken and Longevity Abalone Rice'. It stood in huge red letters fronting Kim Seng Road opposite my hotel.

Too tired to imagine this Asian culinary concoction, I checked in and went to bed, making a mental note to satisfy my curiosity by asking the concierge about it the next morning. Which I did at 8.10 am on the way to breakfast in the conservatory, before catching a taxi to my 9.30 am meeting. It doesn't take long to get anywhere in Singapore. One side of the CBD to the other takes no more than 15 minutes. Efficient Singapore. ERP Singapore, an ingenious or devious toll scheme—depending on your point of view—to reduce traffic in the central business district. But, despite its modern Western veneer, it is also Asian Singapore. A city of restaurants with names like The Glutinous Palace. And dishes like Concubine Chicken and Longevity Abalone Rice.

During the meeting that went on for hours, my thoughts turned back to this exotic culinary and cultural cocktail. A two-hour planning session with a multinational company was bogged down in discussion of global brand values, advertising slogans and consumer profiling. Marketing buzzwords and corporate speak whizzed around the room like Sumatra mosquitos. A pompous MBA and his sidekick on a two-day visit from head office were postulating on the importance and near-religious significance of marketing the company's products in the "Far East" with the same slogans and messaging as in Europe and the USA. "Brand integrity is what it's all about," MBA lectured us.

Ong remained silent, but his set jaw and narrowed squint gave away his growing frustration. He was the local Singaporean partner responsible for distribution. I knew him well and his reputation as one of the most savvy up-and-coming local business entrepreneurs with a double degree to boot.

"Consumers are consumers. Everywhere. They all drink Coca-Cola, drive Toyotas and eat hamburgers and fried chicken—a or turkey on special occasions," MBA pronounced.

"Concubine Chicken and Longevity Abalone Rice," I interjected.

"What?" MBA and Sidekick chorused together. They looked at me the way people look at someone who has recently had a breakdown or come out of hospital, with a kind of concerned condescension.

"What the … what does that mean?" MBA snapped, trying to calm himself, but annoyed that his flow had been interrupted.

"Concubine Chicken and Longevity Abalone Rice. That's the sort of dish that locals are likely to eat on special occasions," I repeated.

"That's right," Ong chimed in, hesitantly at first, but buoyed by my challenge. "Or drunken prawns, or fish's stomach. Sometimes live monkey's brains," he added introducing an extreme Chinese culinary custom into the conversation to make a point. I knew Ong didn't approve of eating live monkey brains.

MBA screwed up his face with visible disgust. "Fish's stomach. Live monkey's brains. That's bizarre?"

"Welcome to Asia," I replied.

"Eating live animals is cruel. And fish's stomach is disgusting," Sidekick commented.

"Can it be any worse than westerners eating veal from calves that have been locked in dark pens, battery cage eggs, or snails?

"Let's get back to the subject. Our market research shows that global brands have values that are understood and appreciated around the world. It's been proven time and again. Look at Coca-Cola," MBA responded, trying to regain control of the meeting.

"Do you like Chinese food?" Ong interrupted.

"Well, yes. But that's not the point. I like Chinese food sometimes. But I prefer other foods, to be frank."

"Precisely. We like some Western tastes and fashions also. That does not prove anything. It does not make us American or English or European."

"I think what Ong is saying is that you have to adapt to local ways," I added, looking at the visitors with a detached and remote feeling. The bonds that once bound me culturally as well as economically to this company seemed to have become stretched and loose. With a final simple shrug, I slipped out of them completely.

"You see the modern buildings and high technology and you hear local people speaking English and you think this is just like America or England. But it's not. Westernization is a thin veneer on the surface. You paint it over Asia and South America and other places to make them look like home. Sure, they drink your Coca-Cola and smoke Marlboros. But underneath, this is Asia. The most populous continent on earth. The home of some of the oldest civilizations on the planet. You come here and tell people how to do things. You say you will lift them to your standards and bring development. The Chinese invented paper and printing and money and built a sophisticated civilization before your ancestors came out of the caves in Europe."

This is what Ong wanted to say. But he didn't. I heard the words forming in his thoughts, saw the textual shadows pass across his eyes. But two thousand years of Confucian inscrutability and Buddhist tolerance, with a little bit of Hindu karma picked up from his Indian friends, swept them away before air rushed up his throat to carry them into the world. They remained still-born, melting away into an acidic puddle in the bottom of his stomach. I, on the other hand, had an Irish streak as wide as the cultural gap between the visitors and us 'locals'.

"Do you realize how ethnocentric we are?" I asked the group rhetorically, wanting to explain that this was not something trivial to be covered over with marketing tokenism. I had faced the tiger and come to understand and respect its ways. I knew that I was committing corporate *hara-kiri*, but I pointed out some examples of the cultural gaffes of the company. "On the company's forms in the local office, we still ask for Christian names and Surname. Chinese families don't have Christian names because they are Buddhist or Taoist. Nor do Muslims. We talk about the New Year as if it is a universal date. Here the Chinese New Year is in February and in the Islamic calendar this is the middle of the fifteenth century."

I looked at MBA and Sidekick sitting uncomfortably in their jackets and power ties knotted tightly around their red, bulging necks. They looked like turkeys in a hot farmyard after the farmer has strolled

in with an axe. They stared back nonplussed and confused. Like the taxi driver from the airport, they appeared to think I was speaking something other than English; a strange language that sounded familiar but the meaning of which was beyond their understanding. The meeting was coming to an unscheduled end and I had nothing to lose now, so I continued.

"When you want to sound educated or authoritative, you quote French or Latin phrases such as *de rigueur* or *caveat emptor*. You're in the middle of Asia. How much Chinese do you know?" I asked them.

Through the windows, storm clouds gathered for an afternoon thunderstorm, even though the rainy season had officially ended. It was early February and Chinese New Year was approaching. Outside the tense gloom of the room, despite the impending rain, excitement was in the air. Lights were going up in the streets and temporary amusement rides and stalls were being erected in the parks.

"*Gong Xi Fa Cai*," I concluded. Faces looked up more perplexed and disorientated than ever.

"That's Mandarin for Happy New Year," Ong interpreted with a faint smile. "In Cantonese, it's *Kung Hei Fat Choi*," he added.

I knew they would find another local consultant—someone who understood globalization and who hadn't 'gone troppo' or 'turned native'. Ong and I slipped our papers into our briefcases and made towards the door.

"By the way, would you like to come out for a drink tonight?" I asked, smiling, before stepping out of the room. "We're going to the New Yummy Music Lounge".

Overheard in Prague

"I think it would have been better … I mean it was nice, burt … I think it would have been better …"

"It *was* nice."

"Yes, but I think it would have been better … I mean it would have been better if they sung in English. Done you think? I mean, I coon't unerstan what they was singing about. Could yoo-oo?"

"No. I carn unerstan Checka-slavarkian."

"No, I carn either. So it would have been better if they sung in English. Then we could understan 'em."

"Is the language here Checka-slavarkian?

"I done think they call it Checka-slavarkia anymore."

"Done they? I know the city's Prague. But what do they call the country then?"

"I'm not sure. They keep changin' the names of these places. There are so many arkia and slavia countries."

"Is it Slovarkia?"

"No, I think that's another country."

"Oh, I done know why they just don't talk English. That would be so much easier."

"I think it's called the Check Republic—with a zed in the spelling somewhere."

"How do they get a zed in Check? They got too many zeds and vees in their names. That's the problem. They use the wrong end of the alphabet.

"Yeah, it would be better if they just sung and talked in English."

"Yeah. Proper English. Not those dialex."

The Season of the Fires

The faint tell-tale crackle, a hiss of swirling wind caused by the heat, the grey-brown cloud rising and blocking out the sun, and the feather-light snowflakes of ash told us it was the season of the fires.

They were coming. Perhaps to our valley. There was no telling. They rage in the summer heat and make their own weather. Darting this way and that like an angered serpent. And as deadly. Like mythical dragons, they roar and hiss and devour all in their path.

Wind gusts that on their own are strong enough to snap us in two swirl in the face of the fireball and come armed with searing torches. Grass fires ooze across the ground like a creeping rising red flood, while the tongues of hell lick the leaves off tall conifers and gums. After they pass, black broken silhouettes stand smoking in a barren eerie world like a shelled and napalmed battlefield.

Legend has it that this was always so. They come in the hot summers when we were at our weakest and most vulnerable. They use our own materials to attack and destroy us. The long dry grass; the undergrowth; the low-hanging branches and peeling bark not yet shed from the flush of spring. Since antiquity, lightning strikes have started them, electrical currents from the heated atmosphere striking against the granite rocks and coming to life in small sparks like deadly larvae. Like tiny tadpoles, frail and wriggling at first. Then growing, metamorphosing, hopping, dancing, darting, slithering, leaping, roaring. The dragon of the season of the fires.

Standing against them is our nature and our destiny. Running is impossible. Leaving our beloved forest and valley and plains is not an option. Often, even the fleetest animals cannot escape. So many perish when the season of the fires reaches its solstice. So how can *we*? Trees. Yes, I am a tree.

You feel let down? You think the story of a tree is boring? Or incredible? You who watch drawings talk on television! You, who love and nurture stuffed effigies of fictional creatures! And plastic miniature mannequins! Teddy bears. Barbie. Give me a break, as your kind would say—although that's not a phrase we like in the forest. But you get my drift.

Your scientists listen to space even though you have not discovered anyone there. Many of your species believe in God even

though they have never seen her, him or it. You believe dolphins can communicate. So why shouldn't a tree have a story to tell? We grow from a seed, just like you. We are living things that take food and water and breathe air. We move and make sounds and recreate. Many of us have stood for hundreds of years.

You're starting to think. Good. Come with me then, because this is a story that has never been told. It has been around for a thousand rings or more. It is a story preserved in rock fossils from aeons ago and in deep seams of decaying wood and foliage in the earth itself. It's a story that will shake you to *your* roots.

But perhaps you're starting to worry about how this looks. How can you tell your friends that you read the monologue of a tree?

I can't very well give you dialogue, or trot out witnesses to back up my story. Everyone knows that trees don't talk. But dumb inanimate things? Don't be daft. Don't be blind. Look at us sway in the face of the flames, leaning away, cringing. Observe our leaves turn downwards in the rain to allow the water to run off to reach our roots and not weigh down and break our branches. Hear our cries when axes and chainsaws amputate our limbs and cut our torsos in two. You don't hear that? OK, perhaps not. But neither can you hear what dogs hear on high frequencies. So don't dismiss what you don't know. We can't talk, but our story is written in the landscape and carved into our trunks and the rocks that we stand upon; it is encoded in the patterns of our gnarled and knotted flesh; it is transmitted in our leaves that fall and blow on the wind; it is re-enacted in our seeds and acorns and fruits. You just have to be attuned to our wavelength.

Don't mock me. Don't dismiss this story … this plea … this paean … as a fairy tale. I am part of your world more than you think. You describe those closest to you as your Family Tree. You search out the Tree of Knowledge. In your Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, Mormon, Muslim, Chinese, Jewish, and Christian beliefs you have a mythic connection to the Tree of Life—the *Arborvitae*; the *Etz Chaim* in Kabbalah; the Bodhi tree. Millions celebrate your main holiday season under a Christmas tree.

But, in the season of the fires our existence is perilous. And becoming more so. As the atmosphere is warming, the season of the fires is coming ever more frequently and ever more fiercely.

There are other demons too, destroying our days and sleepless nights. *You*. You who began in a garden and defiled it. You who ate from a tree in defiance of all you were told.

I speak here with a purpose. I am a messenger sent by the forest. I am one of three, the trinity of the kingdom of plants: the trees, the shrubs, and the grasses. But it is not us I have come to save. I have come to save you.

Once upon a time in a far-off land, your prophet Moses spoke to a burning bush. We tried to warn you then. We scratched a message on stone so that Moses could take it to his people. But they ignored him after a few seasons of plentiful rain and bountiful crops. Soon they were building monuments to false hopes and worshipping human forms. A species renowned for ethnocentricity, you assumed God was a human, or human-like. You celebrated that his son was born of a carpenter, before you killed him. When he died, my forefathers held him aloft.

There are more than a quarter of a million species of plants on this watery planet poised in a delicate balance between the fires of its sun and the frozen spaces beyond. You celebrate your third millennium of civilization. Three thousand years! A syllable of time. This vast array of colourful life preceded humans by three hundred million years. At the head of this vast kingdom, casting their protective cloak over all life on land are, guess who? Oaks. Cedars. Pines. Firs. Spruce. Redwoods. Ash. Eucalypt. Standing in unison, the shrubs and grasses. The confluence of my incarnations. The plurality of my trinity. We populated the earth before the animals and long before the mutant strain of apes from which you descended. We watched you evolve. We had such high hopes. You were unique—and still are—fortunately. If other species wreaked such wear and tear on this ecosystem, it would have been exhausted long ago.

See here the scars from treatment at the hands of humankind. Many of my kind have suffered a similar fate and worse since your species evolved. The fibre of your dwellings and boats and utensils and weapons have been hewn from our skin and our bones.

We made your Ark.

You carved your names into our hearts, but at the same time hacked at our souls.

You threw us into your furnaces and fireplaces in a deal with the demon fire to warm your bodies and prepare other species for eating.

You betrayed us and worshipped our enemy as God, called him Hephaestus in allegedly knowledgeable ancient Greece; Vulcan in your conquering empire of Rome—the god of fire and the forge. Gazing into the universe that you do not understand, you revered Apollo as it burned in an eternal season of fire.

In recent times, you have removed me and my sisters and saplings from the earth in many places, leaving it desolate. You propagate as capitalist crusaders with war cries of production and growth. But your actions lead to reduction and decline. You steal our land and pillage our bounty. You invent new man-made forms of fire to hurl at forests and even at your own kind.

See this incarnation of me, crippled when the corner of a machine gouged a gaping wound in her trunk. Like others who survived, scarred from axes or saws or fire, she is marked still. Yes, trees are female. All of them. Strictly speaking, you may say we are hermaphrodite as we create and sow the seeds for new life alone, needing only the wind and the flying creatures to procreate. Trees require no fertilization by another derivative of the species; no wet messy entangled coupling. Such an inefficient reproduction system you have. It takes two to make one more. And you think God is like you!

It makes us laugh. What, you think trees don't have personalities? Try living in a thick forest for a decade or two. The jealousy and competition would make your bark peel. Everyone wants their share of light and space. Have their foliage hang in elegant plumes, shining in the sunlight and attracting the birds and bees. That's something else you fail to see, obsessed with your own reproductive glands and genitalia. We know more about the birds and bees than anyone. Sister plants and animals meet and mate under our canopy and shelter in our harbour. Not to mention a few of you.

In the sky we make the very air you breathe.

And underground. There's a whole underworld more vast and mysterious than any you know. A secret society with an ancient tradition. A tabernacle where we are safe from you. Your deadly machines mostly scarify the surface. Fire cannot reach or live in the underworld, except through holes you dig. Occasionally it burrows down the tunnels of your mines and our tentacles and sinews. But it suffocates in the solid airless subterranean space. This underworld of our roots is dedicated to creation, not destruction. This is where all life

springs from. Not the heavens. You look up in shiny-eyed innocence and expectant hope. But you are gazing in the wrong direction. You have not read the signs or listened to the rocks.

Beneath us, deep within this planet, the origin of all things in the universe is being re-made. Your scientists accord this core of creation the respect it deserves, but most of your kind ignore these prophets in preference to superstitions and myths. Beneath us, generations of trees and foliage of shrubs and grasses are compressed and reduced to their primal form. We create carbon from which all things come.

You see, God is a tree.

You envision Hell as a perennial season of fires. Yet you unleash fire in the garden you were given. You even cast carbon to the demon fire. You burn it in your machines and in your factories and in your homes. Why bother destroying only the by-products of life? Why not destroy the very genetic structure if you're bent on damnation? Transform it back into the atmosphere and into space till it coagulates and compresses under the weight of its own mass and collapses into a black hole. Then one day to explode in a long, searing season of fire to create a new galaxy. A new universe.

It's true that you have paid tribute to me in artefacts carved from my body. Hosts held high in reconciliation—or as trophies. Buildings, carpentry, and carvings. But my forebears were like the slaves of your kind in Egypt. While they created majestic monuments to their memory in the towering pyramids, many died to appease a Pharaoh's fragile ego and in a futile search for eternal life. Humans denying the forces in the earth. Humans trying to be God.

Hark the burning bush.

This is the word of the trees.

Summer Lover

You come down along Belmont Street,
pushing aside the grevilleas and paperbarks
drooping low along the footpath; through
the overgrown 'No Through Road' park –
duck and weave, weave and spin.
Making your way on up to my place
after dark, an orange moon already up.
Quickening as you approach, a soft hiss
of breath, a stir of sensual anticipation.
Rushing through my open front door,
up the spiral stairs to the second floor,
down the hallway to my bedroom.
Expectantly I await your coming
in the hot summer evenings, lying alone,
listening to the traffic and rumbling jets
on flight paths in and out of Mascot,
thundering over Newtown or the East.
You have friends there too I know.
Like me, they eagerly await you
every Sydney summer evening.

Primrose

He came to town in the last days of autumn a year before "the terrible incident". It did not surprise the locals that he kept to himself at first. Coastal towns are outgoing in summer and early autumn. Locals and tourists cling to the last rays of sunshine like old folk to their youth, walking on the beach, body surfing, going on picnics, taking drives up to the headland. But the shortening days bring a grudging resignation that outdoor life has gone for the time being. Winter is a time for staying home indoors away from the chilly ocean wind. Putting on fleecy wool cardigans and slippers and stoking the fire. Taking short walks at 4 pm before the sun disappears into a grey cloud bank and the cool breath of winter night whips up goose bumps on the geography of Carson's Point. Coastal towns become bears in winter. And it was a sleepy bear in a small wooded valley between two headlands and a strip of yellow beach that the visitor encountered.

A tall, thin figure, he walked the kilometre from the old iron-roofed timber house that he rented at the top of the headland to buy groceries from the general store and visit the library once a week. He spoke to no one, not even the cashier at the store. He handed over his money—always cash—silently and simply nodded in response to clichéd courtesies such as "have a nice day".

Late at night, anyone who was up or out at that time could see the lights on in his house well after 11 pm. Sometimes, a single lamp glowed till two or 3 am. Only a few locals saw this for themselves. Most were curled up on their sofas by 8 pm. But word spreads quickly in small towns. If one person had some news, it travelled from one end of town to the other in a matter of hours—or minutes on Saturday morning when everyone was out to buy their weekend papers and fresh bread and pastries. News was rare in Carson's Point. So within the first weeks of his arrival, everyone knew he kept unusual hours. But mystery surrounded the stranger in the house on the headland. Apart from his irregular hours and long walks, the few hundred or so people who lived permanently in the tiny coastal hamlet knew nothing about him—or of Primrose—at that time.

Up on the headland, unknown to anyone in the small town, a torment ensued nightly. As far as his neighbours knew, he had no family. No wife—although there had been once, one rumour suggested,

sparked by a gold ring he wore on his right hand. There were no children or friends who visited. He didn't even own a dog, which became apparent during his solitary walks.

"Should have a dog, a man living by himself like that. A dog would be good company. Man's best friend, they say," Mavis Johnson suggested at the hairdresser's one Saturday morning when the conversation turned, as it often did, to the man on the headland.

"Yes. A dog would be good company. He could take it with him when he goes for those long walks along the headland," Helen Petty-Jones agreed.

They watched him some afternoons from their verandas and patios, walking along the headland right up to its point. He wore baggy pants and a jacket that billowed in the wind like the sails of a boat as it rounded the breakwater. The townspeople never knew the colour of his clothes most days because he was just a black shape in the distance, a small dishevelled insignificant figure alone, facing the teeth of the wind and his own thoughts.

What were they, those thoughts? Where did he come from? Why was he here? What did he do up there in the old house on the headland? Such questions were asked with growing curiosity in the first month that he lived in Carson's Point.

The house had been vacant for more than two years, ever since old Mrs Barlow was put into a home. She lived up there with three cats and two dogs after her husband died. Went "a bit batty", locals said. "Poor old thing. Imagine it. Your husband gone and those kids of hers never visiting. Too busy with their careers in Sydney or London or wherever." They found her one day eating cat food and skinny as a rake. So the Shoal Harbour social worker who visited the coastal village once a week applied to the District Court and they put her into St Martin's. "She's better off there, poor thing," the locals said.

Carson's Point thrived on its gossip. It flowed through the community like water from the reservoir high on Tom Brogan's Hill to the west, invigorating and replenishing it. Eyes widened like blooming flowers when a quenching dose was received. "Really?" "You don't say," spoken with breathless excitement, greeted any new titbit of information. "You're not gonna believe this," was the introduction that signalled a fresh supply had been received and was about to irrigate Carson's Point.

After an initial sprinkle of speculation about the man on the headland, conversation began to dry up because of a shortage of information. When he walked down into town for his weekly groceries and library exchange, nods evolved into faint smiles. But speaking right out to a stranger was a matter to be carefully considered. "He could be an axe murderer for all we know," Mavis Johnson mumbled.

"You should do it, Helen. You see him at the library every week. You're in the best position to ask him about himself," the self-appointed Mayor of Carson's Point, Phil Dyson, said loudly at the bowls club one Sunday morning. Carson's Point did not have a mayor as it was too small and had been merged into Shoal Harbour shire since the 'eighties. But Phil, a retired auctioneer, assumed a position of community leadership with the aid of his resonant voice and portly figure.

"Conversations in the library are rather difficult. We have a silence rule, you know, and I can't very well ask visitors to be quiet if I'm going to be blabbing away now, can I?" Helen argued, keen to remove herself from the running on who would talk to the mysterious stranger.

"I know what," Mavis interjected, "The real estate agent—Martin Evandale. He rented the place. He must know something about the man." Her large breasts swelled under her blue cardigan, proud that she had come up with a great idea. She knew it. And Phil Dyson knew it, although he reluctantly agreed and quickly took control again.

"Alright. I'll talk to Martin and see what I can find out," he said. No one argued, as Carson's Point had a news drought on its hands. Any opportunity to gain information was welcome.

The following Saturday, amid the aromatic smell of freshly-baked pastries from Vin Lo's shop and the bustle of weekend community, Phil Dyson had to concede that he had found out little. Of course, he did not admit this readily. He needed to sound knowledgeable.

"Right, here's what I've discovered from my inquiries," he blustered. "He's from Sydney. He's a writer," he informed a small huddle on Main Street.

"That's *it*!" Mavis Johnson responded with an incredulous and slightly sarcastic tone.

"Well, that's more than anyone else knew. Martin says he can't reveal what's in the application forms the man filled out to rent the house because it's an invasion of privacy and against his code of ethics."

"Code of ethics! He's a real estate agent!" Mavis blurted. Phil just shrugged.

"What about his name? Can't Martin at least tell us his name?" Helen Petty-Jones persisted.

Phil shuffled uncomfortably. "Well …"

"Well, what?" Mavis boomed.

"Martin said 'Why don't you go ask him yourself?'"

"Fat lot of good you are, Phil. If you want a good man for a job, send a woman," Mavis said, stuffing a bag of oranges into her shopping cart and huffing off up the street with Helen Petty-Jones in pursuit to find out what other ideas Mavis might have.

*****

Up on the headland each night, illuminated in a halo of light from an insect-encircled lamp, the nameless stranger endured a painful labour. He was indeed a writer. That much of the information gained about him was true, although he would never have said that about himself. Even though he had dreamed since he was twenty of being able to give his occupation as 'writer', some thirty years had passed without him daring to write or speak that simple self-description. It seemed pretentious, egotistical. If one described oneself as a writer, people would surely ask 'What books have you written?' Two obscure, long-out-of-print textbooks hardly comprised a convincing answer. Writing is a peculiar profession, he wrote in his notes. Being a plumber means one lays and fixes pipes and drains. Not necessarily successfully or famously. Just that one does. Being a lawyer means one practices law. Lawyers may not necessarily win their cases or even be any good, but they can say they are a lawyer simply by practising law. But to say 'I am a writer' presumes successful published work, preferably a popular bestseller, or the claim is disdainfully dismissed. Doing writing is not necessarily being a writer, the tortured soul on the headland felt all too painfully.

He was deeply versed in the craft of his calling, having studied at universities in two countries. And he had read widely from Tolstoy and Voltaire to the classic treatises of Plato, Homer, the Upanishads and the I Ching, as well as modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Hume, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. He also admired the poetic works of contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and the work of Michael Ondaatje. Dog-eared volumes of their

writings were scattered around the house, along with several books on local history and geography from the town library.

As was revealed later in his notes, he wrote using the Method approach applied in acting, immersing himself in the story and characters he created, especially the main characters of the *magnum opus* that he was working on. The manuscript, recovered after what happened, revealed a delicately woven tapestry of love and loss involving a well-to-do young woman, Primrose Anderson-Stuart, and a social outcast banished from his home and family. It was a dark and blood-stained tapestry. A tapestry of tragedy. Almost three hundred pages of neatly typed text sat by his computer, unfinished.

He felt the pain of all his heartaches and losses replayed in Primrose and her star-crossed lover. To facilitate his method of 'inside' writing, he spoke to his characters by name as he went about his daily chores of cooking and bathing and on his long walks on the headland. High above the crashing waves, he shouted their anguish, and in the spray he wept their tears. The third-person omniscient perspective of a detached storyteller shifted to a first-person point of view as the story unfolded. 'They' became I. *I* said. *I* suffered. *I* wept. The plot was happening to 'me'. To him.

At some time during his work on the manuscript, he started making mannequins of the characters dressed in his cast-off clothes or garments garnished from community clothes bins. After six months in the village, some residents reported seeing him walking at night through the streets, alone and talking to himself or, seemingly, to a bundle that he carried. One wild rumour circulated that he had a baby living with him on the headland. But that was soon dismissed as implausible. Nevertheless, it was later discovered that he had figures made from sticks and cardboard and fabric stuffed with old mattress innards sitting around the house. Each was dressed in a make-do fashion, like a character in the narrative neatly piled on his writing table.

Stuck on the wall above the table, which was covered with dozens of scribbled notes, was a printed page with a message in large capitals: 'The death of the author – Roland Barthes'.

The local police suspected the note was 'evidence of foul play' when they arrived on the scene and announced that they wanted to interview Roland Barthes. But examination of the manuscript and notes by an academic expert set them straight that Barthes was a philosopher,

and that 'the fatality' was metaphorical—not to mention that Barthes died in Paris in 1980. The academic, flown in from Sydney when things 'blew up', revealed that Primrose's creator was obsessed with the literary technique of removing the author from a story. Pages with sentences describing a scene were crossed out in a thick pen and scrawled with notes such as 'Remove the omniscient author. Let the characters speak'. Others were more foreboding and echoed frustration: 'Kill the author'. Underneath a notation read: 'Primrose must *see* this. And her jilted lover'. 'Through their eyes.' 'Through their words.'

Piled beside the manuscript were a number of letters. They were written in neat handwriting on a faint blue-lined paper. 'Dear Primrose, It has been so long since I have seen you.' Beneath it was Primrose's reply. Each was signed in a distinctive flowing hand: hers, small and cursive; his, larger with sweeping flourishes and occasional printed letters. They were not folded, but lay flat with a curled corner from where they were torn away from the pad on the shelf above them. Their words told of daily events and thoughts and longings, different and dialogistic, but from the same hand according to a handwriting expert.

While his effigies seemed to suggest the creations of a puppeteer, he had cut the strings binding them to himself. He had climbed inside them. They were not his creations or his children. They were him. And he was them.

*****

It was around a year after the man moved into the old house on the headland that the town was woken early one Sunday morning by wailing sirens and the roar of engines as a highway patrol car and an ambulance sped through the streets and up the narrow track to the headland. Front doors opened. Heads popped out of windows. Soon, people were out on their verandas, some still in dressing gowns. It was raining news in Carson's Point. A flood was about to burst upon the valley.

A fisherman reported seeing a body lying on rocks at the base of the headland. A crumpled rag doll of a thing thirty metres below the top of the point. Speculation sizzled through the sleepy community. As it was too far to bring in the police helicopter to the remote cliff face, an hour or so of abseiling and winching was required to retrieve the body which was identified, to no one's surprise after the whole town had

assembled to watch the brouhaha, as the man from the house of the headland. Only then, after police inquiries and calls interstate, did he acquire a name in Carson's Point. Only in death he gained an identity. Only in death would his mystery be revealed.

An academic from a southern university, who was appointed to examine his papers, read the manuscript and the copious notes and scribblings in the house. He took a week which was an eternity of torment for Carson's Point waiting to hear the details. The Police Commissioner was equally eager. Was it murder? Did he slip and fall on one of his walks. Did he jump? If so, why?

Eight days after the tragic night, the radio and daytime TV news updates announced that a statement would be released on the evening's news. Everyone in Carson's Point was in, huddled in front of their TVs that Monday night.

"There has been no foul play, although it is a tragedy," a short, portly man introduced as the managing director of an international publishing company announced to a gaggle of journalists standing outside his city office. He added: "Page two hundred and ninety-six reveals all."

"What do you mean, page two hundred and ninety-six reveals all?" a microphone-thrusting journalist quizzed.

"What do they mean?" Mavis Johnson asked simultaneously over the phone to Helen Petty-Jones.

The publishing executive continued with a faint smile: "We are publishing the book titled 'Primrose' and all I can tell you is that on the final page of the text, one of the main characters comes to a tragic end. You will have to read the book to find out the full story of what happened and why."

*****

"That's it. Finished. The proofs are corrected and ready to go back to the publisher," a woman sitting at a large wooden desk in a room at The Esplanade guest house in Brogan's Bay said to her friend and part-time secretary as she clicked 'Close' and pulled down the lid of her laptop computer.

"Congratulations. It's so exciting. Shall I arrange our check-out then?" her assistant replied, packing up books and papers and letters.

"Yes please, Mavis. I've had enough of this town after spending almost every weekend here for the past three months."

"It's nice that you put me in the story. Although I sound a bit overweight. And … you know … matronly."

"It's fiction, Mavis. Fiction."

"But they say art imitates life. Or is it life imitates art?" I wonder if the people here will recognize themselves as Carson's Point?"

"I shouldn't think so. It's a novel, Mavis. A novel about a novel."

Footnote: Therefore, 'Primrose' is a short story about a novel about a novel.

The Story Stealer

Even when the emergency services found Georgina wandering along the walkway of Iron Cove Bridge in her nightdress at 3 am one morning, her family did not discover and, therefore, did not understand her troubles. In fact, the Iron Cove Bridge 'incident' only added to the stereotypes that had been cast and the myths that surrounded her and her sister, Emily. A secret existed between them and remained unspoken and undiscovered for more than three decades after they left school. It persisted and even expanded its web of deceit when Georgina went to live on the other side of the world from where they grew up. But there is a record of Georgina's view of things that has been hidden away until now.

Despite being a grown woman—in fact, a woman approaching what is delicately referred to as mature age—Georgina felt she had no stories. None of her own. Nothing to tell that others had not already told. She was storyless. And no greater tragedy can happen to a person. Scientists might describe human beings biologically as *Homo sapiens*, but socially and culturally they are *Homo narrans*—story tellers. It is one of the defining characteristics of people. Some philosophers go as far as saying we *are* our stories. Our self-identity and our character are an interwoven, multi-textured tapestry of all the things that have happened to us and how we reflect on them and draw meaning and sense from them. They are also how we engage with others and how they come to know and understand us. But Georgina was stripped of stories.

It was not that she didn't tell stories. She did, often—from the time she was a little girl. But, slowly over the years, little by little, she began to hear her stories told by her sister Emily. They were not recounted by Emily as Georgina's stories. No, Emily told them as *her* stories. Everything that happened to Georgina ended up being told as if it happened to Emily. All the good things. All the tragedies. All the witty anecdotes. All the adventures. All the embarrassing incidents that elicited sympathy. And all the funny things that made people laugh. All of them, until, when Georgina reached that second big birthday starting with 'F' that she could bear to say out loud, she had no stories of her own. Not a single unique, personal, intimate account of an experience that belonged to her. She was worse than homeless; she was storyless. And, therefore, she was identityless.

That's how they found her on Iron Cove Bridge in Sydney in the wee hours of the morning. To those who saw her, she appeared everythingless. A motorist reported a would-be 'jumper' to Triple O and three police cars and a fire truck came screaming down Victoria Road. Men in navy blue suits with fluorescent lime green swatches and torches in their hands ran around shouting, but not sure what to do. Georgina didn't jump. She had no intention of jumping. She was just out for a walk.

She reasoned that if she walked in the dark and told no one about it, then her sister could not take that away from her. It would be her experience alone. But then it dawned on her that if she could not tell anyone, then no one would know. And if no one knew what she did or thought, no one would know what her life was about, or who she really was. She would just be a name, like a label on an empty drawer.

Suddenly the darkness pressed in on her as she recognized that, even though people construct reality in the inner world of their minds and live in such manifestations as much as the outer physical world, the construction has to be configured in language and shared with someone to have any form or substance. Secret stories in one's head don't constitute reality. They are like dreams. Ephemeral. Fading into forgetfulness even in the mind of the central character. And non-existent to everyone else unless they are materialized by being spoken, written, or sung. But as soon as she shared her stories, they were snatched out of her existence by the Story Stealer.

There are no rules against stealing stories. It is not like stealing physical things, which you can go to gaol for. Nice people would never dream of stealing someone's computer, or their car, or even a pen—especially someone in your own family. But it seemed like stories were different. And so Georgina was left with a hole in her life where her missing bits used to be, and a question.

Who is Georgina—or Georgie, as some called her? She hated being called Georgie. It made her feel like a boy—or at least suggested that her family thought of her as a boy. Not that being a boy, or being like a boy, is bad. It isn't if you're a boy … well, not unless you are born with gender dysphoria. But it is bad if you're a girl. Worse, if you're a woman. Even worse when you are a storyless woman.

Emily, for her part, didn't see the problem in stealing Georgina's stories. In fact, Emily didn't see any theft involved. Because she lived

with her sister for many years growing up and then spent a lot of time together when they were teenagers and young women, Georgina's stories just kind of morphed into her life. She heard them many times. She saw how other members of the family admired Georgie's courage when she stood up to three bully boys during high school and sent them packing with a torrent of humiliating taunts about their manhood. She admired how Georgie had trekked across muddy fields at Glastonbury to hear The Boomtown Rats. Emily was too timid to go. But later she had gone—that's what she told people. She absorbed Georgina's accounts and, as they soaked into her, they became part of her.

The following year, Emily went to see The Cure and Simply Red at Glastonbury—at least, that's what she said, complete with detailed anecdotes. She felt crushed by the crowds, frightened at first, and then comfortable in the sea of humanity carried off to another place—an escape from humdrum life in the Midlands where they grew up. She recalled the thumping in her chest from the bass played on huge amplifiers that could be heard 10 miles away, and her ears tingled at the screech of the guitars as they hit high jangled notes, whipping the crowd into a frenzy. Fists in the air punching the sky; swaying girls on their boyfriends' shoulders, breasts out for the world to see; the waft of weed in the breeze; the ache in tired calf muscles and feet from standing, but nowhere to sit because of the mud and the risk of being trampled.

Then, it started to go beyond stories. Emily started stealing Georgina's things. Not her actual belongings, like her perfume or watch. But the type of things that Georgina had and liked. For instance, Georgina was proud of the crackle-glaze dinner set that she discovered in a Sydney restaurant. One evening dining in one of her favourite eateries, she admired the crockery with a pattern of fine cracks under the smooth glaze surface. She asked the *maître d'* about it and he gave her the manufacturer's name. It was imported from Limoges in France—and, therefore, expensive. But Georgina liked it so much that she saved up for months and ordered her eight-piece setting Limoges dinner set. Then, just a few months after Emily visited and dined with Georgina's dinner set and heard her story of how she acquired it, Georgina visited her sister only to find the exact same crackle glaze crockery on her wooden dining table. Even worse, Emily regaled her admiring guests with a story of how she found it in a fine restaurant in London and insisted on ordering a set for herself.

Emily even stole Georgina's taste. Before Emily's visit to their home in Sydney, Georgina and John worked hard to paint their apartment. They modernized the ageing all-white-cum-yellowing interior with a mix of soft grey feature walls and ultra-white hallways and doors. It made the place seem larger and brighter. The next Christmas when Georgina went to England to visit her sister, she found the same colour scheme throughout Emily's previously wall-papered home—along with the Limoges dinner set in her crockery cabinet. She sat silently fuming when her uncle Eric and aunt Harriet gushed in admiration at Emily's fine taste and skill in interior design.

A few years later, Emily went too far. In a discussion about the Australian Outback, she told friends in England of meeting an eccentric Outback character who had a bird cage mounted on top of his hat, complete with a bird inside. There is such a person—or at least there was. He was already elderly at the time of the meeting that is the basis of this story. Why the man wore a bird cage on his head no one knows. Most likely it was a case of mental illness—although he was considered harmless to others and himself, and even an amusing distraction to the locals. Or perhaps he got the idea from the folly, 'The Man with the Birdcage on His Head: My Ridiculous Life' written and performed by Steven Samuels. However, this seems unlikely, given that the real man with a real bird cage on this head spent his days greeting visitors to the historic hotel in Daly Waters in the remote Northern Territory of Australia half way from Alice Springs to Darwin—a place that Emily has never been. However, she told amazed listeners that she met him in Alice Springs.

Georgina protested when Emily told the story to her friends over a pub lunch. She decided that she would finally stand up for herself and confront Emily the Story Stealer.

"That's not true. The man with a bird cage on his head lives in Daly Waters and you have never been to Daly Waters," she blurted out, despite trying to be calm.

"No, you are mistaken, Georgie. That was in Alice Springs. We saw him when we went there on the way to Uluru that New Year after we visited you in Sydney."

"No. He lives in Daly Waters. I told you the story after John and I drove across Australia in 2005."

"Well, he might have been in Alice Springs too," Emily retorted.

"That's impossible. This is Australia we are talking about. The Outback! It's close to 1,000 kilometres from Daly Waters to Alice Springs. And he doesn't have a car. He's an eccentric. I don' think he has ever been out of Daly Waters—where you've never been," Georgina said, showing a little annoyance. Or perhaps more than a little.

"Oh, Georgie, you're confused." Emily laughed. "Time does that to all of us." Everyone laughed. Emily was the older sister. She was always the sensible one. She must be right.

"Don't worry about it, Georgie. It doesn't matter," her uncle Bob offered, trying to be comforting. Georgina wanted to scream that it does matter. But the silence oozed up like mist in the cool English autumn and enveloped her.

The theft of Georgina's stories went on until one day she had no stories left. She felt she had ceased to exist. Where was her imprint on the world? How would there ever be a Georgina-shaped hole in the universe after she had gone? That was how it continued for many years—right up until the Iron Cove Bridge incident.

But then one day Georgina realized that she still had one story—a story that no one could take from her, not even the Story Stealer. Emily would never tell this story. It is the story of the Story Stealer.

Jambling

I like jambling.
A nothing word. Made-up.
Why not? I'm tired
of old words and old things.
Waking, walking, working,
talking, sleeping, sleepwalking.

Jambling is fun.
Jousting with the dictionary.
Thumbing my nose
metaphorically at existence.
Commuting, cooking, washing,
eating, shitting, shagging.

What is jambling?
How good to contemplate
Non-existence, not being.
Everything is, or was or will be.
Jambling isn't. Never was.
Never will be. Or will it?

Perhaps tomorrow
we will all go jambling.

The Little Red Poinsettia

When I was little, I thought poinsettias were dogs. I heard my parents and their friends talk about Irish Setters and English Setters and I had seen dogs they called 'Red Setters' a few times. So when my mother said we were getting a 'Point Setter' for Christmas, I assumed we were getting a new dog.

I was excited.

This turned out to be one of those embarrassing things that happens to you when you are a kid. I had told my friends that we were getting a new 'Point Setter' and that I was looking forward to playing with it in the yard and taking it for walks.

Then a few days before Christmas my mother came home from the shops and unpacked a small red-leafed plant from a carry bag, proudly saying: "There. Isn't it beautiful? It makes the house look like Christmas."

I was puzzled. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's a poinsettia, silly," said my mother, smiling with satisfaction and unaware of my confusion.

I was about to say, "But I thought a poinsettia was a dog". But then I thought the better of it, realizing that such an admission would only expose my ignorance. So I stayed quiet. I could not help feeling disappointed that what I thought would be a great Christmas present for the family turned out to be just a plant. It was probably going to die in a few months, like most of our plants did. This cynicism proved to be insightful in relation to our new family addition.

However, what happened after that changed my mind. What was it that happened to change my mind and cause me and my family to love that little plant? Well, let me tell you.

My mother explained that she loved poinsettias in the house at Christmas because of their bright red leaves. The poinsettia certainly did look pretty. She put it in a green pot and placed it in the centre of the living room table. Its red leaves brightened up the room and blended in with the Christmas decorations and the red stockings underneath the Christmas tree. I started to see my mother's point that a poinsettia helped create a Christmas feeling.

Then she told me something sad about poinsettias. She explained that they only keep their bright red leaves for a month or two—

sometimes only for a few weeks. They bloom bright and cheerful and then the leaves turn back to green like normal leaves, or fall off completely.

"And then most people throw them out," she said.

Throw them out! Suddenly I was feeling sorry for this plant that seemed to have a very short life—and even more annoyed about not getting a dog that would live for a lifetime, like eight years or more. I wondered why the poinsettia from the Plant Kingdom only had red leaves for a few weeks.

I was curious, so I went online to do some searching. I found out that the poinsettia is a native plant of Mexico that was introduced into the United States by a man called Joel Poinsett in 1825. That's how it got its name—although I am sure they have a different name for it in Mexico.

I felt even sorrier for the poinsettia after reading this. It was taken from its original home to a new land and given a new name. Then it was exported all around the world. I wondered if Mr Joel Pointsett kept his for just a few weeks and then threw it out.

After doing my homework I did some more reading on the web and found out that the poinsettia is now grown in all 50 states of the USA and in many countries around the world and that it has more than 100 varieties. It is the most popular Christmas plant in the world. Each year more than 220 million poinsettia plants are sold during the six-week period of the Christmas-New Year holidays

But, at the end of each holiday season, 200 million or more poinsettias are thrown out. One website described them as "disposable plants". Imagine that. Imagine being called "disposable"—especially when everyone wants you in their house for Christmas. But after that—after you lose you prettiness—you are in the trash. When trees can live for hundreds of years and other flowering plants can bloom every spring and summer, the poor poinsettias just have a few weeks to bloom before they end up organic waste. Or they sit like zombies in backyards with scraggy leafless branches.

But, from doing my research, I discovered the secret of the poinsettia. After it finishes blooming, take it out of the sunlight and put it in a cool place. Give it only a little water. Even let it dry out, with just enough moisture to stay alive. The aim of this is to allow the plant to hibernate. That means it goes to sleep the way some animals, like bears,

do. Once the poinsettia is hibernating, cut all its branches off so they are just about the length of a grown up's fingers. It might look dead, but it's not. After a few months it will shoot again and grow fresh leaves – green at first, and then guess what? The leaves turn to red again.

"I'm going to keep the Poinsettia and make it bloom again," I announced one night at dinner.

"Oh, they don't last, honey. Poinsettia's only bloom red for a short time," my mother said.

"That's not true," I replied. "I read on the web that you can keep them and that they will turn red again. You just have to know how to treat them."

I went to work. Shortly after New Year when the poinsettia started looking a little wilted, I cut off all its leaves till it looked like a miniature plant scarecrow.

"Well, I think you've done it now," my mother said, arms on hips from the kitchen doorway as I snipped away in the courtyard. "That plant was on the way out and you've certainly seen to that."

Undeterred, I found a cool spot out of the sunlight behind the garden shed and set down the pot. I tried to look confident, but between you and me, I was not feeling as optimistic as I tried to pretend. Not everything on the web is true. Maybe this was fake news that goes around the internet.

I forgot about the poinsettia plant for several months. School kind of dominates a kid's life – getting to school, getting home, and doing homework. There's always homework. Mr Richards always gave us lots of homework. Where was I?

Oh, about six weeks before the next Christmas, I went to the back of the garden shed to check on the forgotten poinsettia. It looked dead. Just sticks and twigs. I almost thought of chucking it into the garbage bin right then. Maybe my mum and dad would have forgotten about my 'Save the Poinsettia' campaign. But, on an off-chance – or perhaps as one last desperate act – I put it in a sunny spot but out of sight, gave it a good flooding of water, and left it there for several weeks without daring to look.

The week before Christmas I sneaked a look at the poinsettia. And then, on Christmas Eve I went out into the courtyard and brought it into the living room.

"Oh my, look at that," my mother gasped.

"Well, well, you have done it," my father said with a big smile. I could see he was proud of me. I was too.

I placed the bright red poinsettia in the centre of the living room table. It was even bigger than it was last year. And just as red.

The little red poinsettia could enjoy Christmas again.

But I kept calling it a Point Setta for years. Perhaps it was a tongue-tied habit I fell into when I was little, or maybe it was another renaming.

There Really Is A Santa Claus

In cultures that celebrate Christmas with gifts for children from Santa Claus, there comes a time for parents when their children reach an age at which they need to be told about Santa. It is important to avoid causing disappointment and disillusionment with Christmas when the identity of Santa Claus is revealed. And it is vital that children do not feel that their parents have misled them with stories of reindeers, sleighs, and Santa coming down chimneys. It is also important for children to understand the true meaning of Christmas and to keep alive the magic and excitement of Santa Claus throughout their lives.

'There Really is a Santa Claus' is a short story for every parent and every child in countries where the myth of Santa Claus is celebrated. It is tells the true story of Santa Claus.

It was November and there were Christmas decorations in all the shops. At school, the kids were starting to talk excitedly about their Christmas holidays. School was almost out.

There seemed to be a special magic in the air at this time of year. Plans were being made for journeys to the mountains, or the beach. Visits to relatives were being organized. And friends promised to drop by.

Special meals were being discussed by the mums, with lots of treats. Fathers cut Christmas trees from the forest, or bought them from local markets and street sellers in the city.

It was a time of decorating the house with lights and tinsel and singing Christmas carols. There was lots of shopping and packing and planning.

And, of course, it was the time that Santa Claus came.

Sarah Green lived in a small but comfy house and went to a school just a short distance away. Sarah was eight going on nine and had almost finished her third year of school. After being nervous about catching the bus each day and attending class during her first year, she was now feeling very grown-up and enjoyed school. But, like all her friends, Sarah was looking forward to the holidays and to Christmas.

Christmas just couldn't come quickly enough. She went to sleep each night thinking about the toys that Santa might bring her. She had

written him a letter and posted it at the mall. If he brought her what she asked for, she would have a stocking brimming over under the tree on Christmas morning.

Then, one weekend in the middle of November while she was playing at home, Sarah's parents called her into the lounge.

"Sarah, we need to talk to you about something," her mother said.

Such a summons meant that it must be something serious. Both her parents did not talk to her together unless it was a major announcement. Perhaps they were selling the house and moving, she thought, as she walked slowly down the hallway from her room. I hope it's not that, she thought. She had good friends at her school and in her street.

She walked past the doorway of the bedroom where her younger brother, Ben, was taking his afternoon nap.

Maybe, it was good news. Perhaps they wanted to discuss the family's holiday.

But then she had a bad premonition. Maybe they were going to get divorced, like Emily's parents up the street. Oh no, don't let it be divorce, she thought. In her heart, however, she was sure it couldn't be divorce as her parents seemed to be happy.

Then her father's voice called out. "Hurry up, Sarah. We are waiting to talk to you," he said.

She hurried into the lounge and sat down on the sofa next to her mum, facing her dad who was sitting in the big recliner chair in which he always sat after dinner watching TV. Her parents both looked at her intently as she came in, which increased her curiosity and her sense of uneasiness. With Ben asleep, it was just the three of them.

Her mother started talking first. "Sarah, it is only six weeks to Christmas."

She knew that. Kids know how long it is to Christmas better than parents, she thought, and considered reminding her mother that she was the one who counted the days down on a calendar in her room. But she could see an unusual, serious expression on her mother's face. What on earth was her mother going to talk about, she wondered? Her parents never told her what Santa was going to bring. That was a secret.

"Yes, Mummy," she replied softly.

Her mother and father seemed nervous, which added to her puzzlement. Then her mother went on. "Sarah, your father and I want

to talk to you about Christmas. You know how every year you get lots of presents under the tree, or in your stocking next to the fireplace."

"Yes, Mummy," Sarah nodded, becoming more puzzled all the time.

"Well, we told you the story of Santa Claus—Father Christmas. You have believed that he brings the presents," her mother said, and paused nervously.

Sarah's mind began to race. Yes, she believed that all those beautiful presents came from Santa Claus. After all, her parents told her that. They did not tell lies. They were very strict about lies. If she told lies, they were very upset and usually punished her. Once she was not allowed to go to her friend's house because she told just a little fib.

Now, a strange feeling of confusion was growing inside her. At school, some of the kids in her class said there was no Santa Claus. Imagine that! No Santa Claus. Sarah never believed them. The possibility of a sleigh and reindeers flying through the sky did make her wonder once or twice. Also, the logic of Santa Claus wearing his thick red suit and long black boots even in hot climates like Africa and Australia seemed a little far-fetched. But it was magic. Magic could make lots of things happen, couldn't it?

Also, there were books about Santa Claus that her parents read to her when she was little. Some of them even had pictures.

And every year he visited shopping centres in person. Once she was confused when she saw two Santas on the same day in two different places. However, her mother explained that. She said some people dressed up as Santa for promotions in shopping centres. But there was one real Santa. He lived at the North Pole where he worked in his factory making toys all year so he could come and give them to children at Christmas.

With these thoughts racing through her head, Sarah heard her mother continuing.

"Sarah, the story of Santa is a beautiful story. It is told to make Christmas special. But you are a big girl now. You are old enough to understand more about Christmas. It is time to tell you the true story of Christmas."

What was her mother saying, Sarah wondered? What did she mean, the 'true' story of Christmas?

"You know that the real reason for Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Christians and Jews and many people around the world believe that Jesus was born on the 25th of December a long time ago," her mother went on.

"Well, we're not exactly sure about the date because the Roman calendar has been changed a few times," her father cut in.

"Don't confuse things, dear. There's no need to go into those sorts of detail now," her mother said to her father, and then turned back to talk at her.

"Jesus loved little children. He once said to his Apostles, 'allow the little children to come to me'. Now, to celebrate the birth of Jesus each year, people give each other gifts. Especially, we give gifts to children. Parents and grand-parents give gifts to their children and grand-children, friends give gifts to each other, and people give nice things to others at work or at school—like you gave a gift to Mr Ross, your teacher."

Her mother stopped and looked at Sarah thoughtfully to see if she understood what she was saying.

Sarah was thinking, puzzled by her mother's words. Thoughts were racing through her mind. Were the kids at school right?

"But, wh... wha... what about Santa's gifts?" she stammered.

"The gifts you receive at Christmas are from us, darling. And from your grand-parents, your uncles and aunties and our friends. There is no such person as Santa Claus," her mother said.

The words rang in Sarah's ears. Even though she had felt some doubts when the kids at school said there was no Santa Claus, she was shocked to hear the words from her mother. She felt dizzy from the shock and confusion.

Then a cold chill ran down her spine. She thought of all those excited Christmas Eves and Christmas mornings and all the wonderful presents. How did they get there after everyone had gone to bed? There must be a Santa Claus, or how else could all those presents come to her house? And how could there be so much excitement and joy that made Christmas different and special?

Sarah's eyes started to feel moist. She looked down so that her mother would not see the tears that were brimming and trickling on to her face, no matter how hard she tried to hold them back. No Santa

Claus! How could this be true, she thought silently? Then she needed to ask a question.

"But what about all the presents under the tree? Where did they come from?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"Daddy and I put them there. We give them to you because we love you—and some are from your grandparents and from your uncles and aunties," her mother said tenderly.

"Well, what about the cookies that we leave out on Christmas Eve which are always eaten—and the glass of milk that is gone in the morning?" Sarah asked in one last defiant question.

Her mother smiled. "Daddy usually eats the cookies," she said with a nervous laugh. But Sarah thought this was no laughing matter.

For the first time, she was doubting her parents. It appeared that they had lied to her. Santa Claus seemed like a hoax.

Then her father spoke. "Sarah, listen to me. We did not lie to you. Christmas is a tradition. It is a very special tradition and everything about Christmas is true. In fact, now that you are getting big, there is more to the story of Christmas that we can explain to you. We can now tell you the full story of Christmas," her father said reassuringly, reaching over and taking her hand.

"Many years ago, there was a very wonderful man we call Saint Nicholas. He was a real person. You will find his name in the encyclopaedia and in history books. He was known as Nicholas of Myra because he lived at a place called Myra in Europe. He was a very good man, which is why he was made a saint.

"One of the good deeds he did was giving gifts to children and to poor people. He did this each year to celebrate Jesus's birthday. He taught us how to make Christmas a happy time.

"In Europe where Nicholas of Myra lived, the people spoke Dutch—that was their language—and, in Dutch, he was called *Sinter Claes*. That's how they said Saint Nicholas.

"Well, other Europeans and people in Britain and America and Asia and Australia—as well as people in many other parts of the world—heard about *Sinter Claes* and they pronounced it as Santa Claus. That's how the legend of Santa Claus started. We get the name Santa Claus from Saint Nicholas.

"Of course, Saint Nicholas is no longer alive as he lived a long time ago. But his spirit lives on. Today, people give gifts at Christmas to carry on the spirit of gift-giving started by Saint Nicholas," her father said.

"Now, at Christmas, *we* play the part of Saint Nicholas and give gifts and goodwill to our family and friends," her mother added.

Sarah was trying to understand what her parents were saying. But how could Christmas be special now? All the magic seemed to be gone.

"Christmas used to be so exciting. I like to get presents from you and Mummy. But there is no Santa Claus," she said with a sad sniffle, holding back a lump in her throat.

"No, that's not true," her father said. "The story of Santa has not ended. It is just different to what little children understand. *You* can now be Santa Claus," her father announced.

"What do you mean?" Sarah asked, looking up.

"You can help Mummy and me be Santa for Ben. You can help us get out his stocking and on Christmas Eve, after he has gone to sleep, you can stay up with us and put all his presents into the stocking. And you can help us wrap gifts for Grandma and Grandpa."

"Yes, dear, now that you are growing up, you can be part of the tradition of Santa Claus still—but in a different way," her mother explained.

"You see, Sarah, the story of Santa Claus still goes on. All that changes is that instead of Santa coming to you, you get to be Santa for other people.

"There really is a Santa Claus," her father said, smiling at her and lifting her up on to his lap.

"But he is not a man in a red suit riding in a sleigh. He is you and me and Mummy—and other good people who carry on the spirit of Christmas and the spirit of Saint Nicholas. We can all be Santa Claus at Christmas. That's what is important.

"And that is what Christmas is really about," her father added. "You will find that giving is even more fun than receiving."

Sarah was not sure if that could be right. She was worried that she would no longer enjoy the weeks of anticipation and waking up on Christmas morning to the excitement of finding what Santa had brought her.

"It won't be the same," she said, still feeling shocked from what her parents had told her, and a little sad.

"Christmas won't be the same, that's true. It will be different to when you were just a small child because you are growing up. But it can be even better than before," her father said looking directly into her eyes. Sarah knew he never lied when he looked directly into her eyes.

"You will still wake Christmas morning excited about receiving lovely gifts from us and other people who love you. But, you will also be able to start taking part in the spirit of Christmas. You now share a special secret. You can now make Christmas seem like magic for your young brother—and, one day maybe, for your own children."

"You wait and see. Christmas will still be very special this year. It will still have magic," her mother added, coming over and putting her arm around Sarah and her father.

Sarah cuddled up in her parents' arms. There was a lot to think about. It seemed to make sense. But she wondered what Christmas would be like. Would it really be a happy one like before? Could it be better like her father said?

Six weeks later, there was minor bedlam in the Green's house. Sarah's mother was hurrying to clean the dishes away after dinner and get Ben to bed. He was being mischievous the way all five-year-old boys are.

"Come on Ben, you're tired and we have to get up early in the morning to visit Grandma and Grandpa," their father said.

"And Santa is coming tonight. Let's clean your teeth and get you to bed. Santa Claus does not come if children are awake," their mother warned.

Ben ran down the hall to the bathroom, but missed the doorway to his room, he was so excited. Instead, he ran straight into Sarah's room. "Whoops," he shrieked and ran back to the bathroom. For the only time this year, he wanted to go to bed.

"In here," their father called, laughing and pointing to the bathroom. "Clean your teeth and get into bed quickly before Santa gets here."

There was a buzz of excitement in the air. The Christmas tree had been decorated and stood brightly in the lounge room. Sarah's and Ben's father had put coloured lights around the front veranda of their house and the cars in the street stopped for people to look as they drove past. Some waved. Their mother had been cooking all afternoon and had been to the supermarket, coming home with lots of extra shopping bags.

There was ham and turkey and chocolate covered almonds and Christmas pudding and lots of other treats.

Everyone was hurrying to finish chores. Even the dog was excited and running around the house until their mother shooed him out. Bozo was his name. He was a big long-haired English sheepdog and he slept in a special kennel at the back of the garage. That was when he was not lying on the lounge or curled up under the kitchen table. Even Bozo had treats from the store for Christmas.

But something was different this year. This year, Sarah was not being hurried off to bed with Ben.

"Sarah, you can stay up this evening," her father said to her quietly out of Ben's hearing, giving her a smile and a wink. It made her feel very grown-up.

After they finished dinner and the clearing away, Sarah's mother and father sat quietly and drank a glass of wine while they waited for Ben to go to sleep. That did not take long, as he was exhausted from the excitement.

Then, before she knew it, it was time for Santa Claus.

Sarah was apprehensive about what this Christmas would be like. But her fear soon disappeared. She grew more and more excited as she helped her mother find presents in special hiding places. Some were on top of the wardrobe. Some were under her parents' bed. More were buried under Daddy's sweaters in the bottom of his chest of drawers.

So this is where they used to hide them, Sarah thought as she helped her mother collect the packages and assemble them on the sofa in the lounge.

"Sssh!" her father said as Sarah and her mother made a rustle with wrapping paper. "You'll wake Ben. Santa Claus has to be very quiet."

"Sarah is still in training to be Santa Claus," her mother whispered. Everyone giggled.

Sarah learned of secret hiding places in her house that she had never seen. She found out what her mother was giving her father. "It's a secret just between us," her mother said. Sarah beamed. And she saw the gifts for Ben. They were just what he wanted.

There had never been a moment in her life like this. It was very exciting. She found that she liked being Santa Claus and being involved in organizing Christmas instead of just receiving gifts that suddenly arrived on Christmas Day.

For almost half an hour Sarah and her mother and father gathered up presents, checked that the right names were written on the cards for each one, and placed them neatly under the tree. Ben's stocking was carefully arranged and when they had finished, it was brimming over.

Then she looked down and saw her stocking. It was just as full as ever before. "Wow, I still get a stocking too," she gasped in a whisper.

"Of course you do," her mother and father said together with excitement in their voices. "We have been Santa Claus to you."

Sarah began to understand what Santa Claus was really about. As her father said, there was no man with a long white beard in a red suit who flew through the sky in a sleigh pulled by reindeers—or kangaroos or some other animals. But Santa Claus was real. Santa Claus was her mother and father. Millions of other parents and friends who love each other were also being Santa Claus on that same special day. And Santa Claus was Sarah Green.

Sarah could hardly wait for morning. She was looking forward to watching her brother's face when he opened his stocking and saw the gifts that he had dreamed of. She looked forward to seeing the smile on her grandfather's face when he opened his present from her. Christmas was Christmas still.

As her mother gathered up the left-over wrapping paper and boxes, she leaned over and whispered to Sarah: "Next year, Sarah, you can come shopping with me and help choose the gifts for Ben, your grandparents and other relatives. We have to keep them secret though. They must be a surprise. That's part of Christmas," her mother told her.

Sarah thought of the shopping trips to buy gifts for her brother and friends—and her parents—and hiding them in secret places for Christmas Day. She thought of the fun of wrapping them and writing cards for those she loved. She could see that, in the future, Christmas would be weeks of fun—not just one day of the year. It could be better than ever.

When all the presents were in place under the tree, Sarah's father slumped back on the sofa to relax. He picked up the glass of milk that her mother had placed on the coffee table before Ben went to bed and took a long drink. "Ah, that's good. Santa needed that," he said, taking a cookie. He passed one to Sarah.

"Can you feel the spirit of Christmas?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Christmas is a time for giving even more than it is a time for receiving things. That's the spirit of Christmas. Now you can pass on the spirit of Christmas to others and enjoy the full meaning of Santa Claus," he added, giving her a hug.

Then her mother came and sat down with them. No one spoke for several minutes. Sarah sat contented enjoying the moment and thinking of her mother's and father's words.

"We need to try to make the spirit of Christmas last through the whole year, not just one day at Christmas time," her mother said. Her father agreed.

Sarah felt sleepy, but very excited. There was a stocking with a big parcel and several smaller packages under the tree with her name on them. She knew they would be things she wanted because she knew Santa Claus well and he—or she—knew her very well. Ben's stocking was bulging nearby with surprises and secrets that Sarah shared. She now could see a whole new side to Christmas—and a whole new side to Santa Claus.

"I can hardly wait to see Ben's face in the morning," Sarah said.

"It's fun giving gifts to people, isn't it?" her father asked.

"Yes," Sarah smiled. And there was a gleam in her eyes, like the twinkle of the star that led the shepherds to the crib of the baby Jesus in Nazareth.

"You see, there really is a Santa Claus," her father said.

My Child

For a short, sweet moment
you were my child.
A fleeting time of wonderment
that rushed by too soon.
I gazed at you in silent adoration.
You probably never knew.
For a short, sweet moment
before the river of life
carried you off in its maelstrom,
out of my reach, away.
Leaving me with my years
and memories for comfort
of that short, sweet moment
when you were my child.

God is Carbon

The only thing I know for sure is carbon.
The only thing I can believe in is carbon.
It seems that gases also form our universe.
But there are so many I cannot conceive
But one permanent, physical presence.
All the rest are elements in transition.
Coming, going, growing, then decaying.
Much of our reality is social construction.
We make it up. Talk it into existence.
God. Family. Marriage. Customs. Tradition.
Even time itself. Why is it ten past eleven?
Why do boys wear blue and girls wear pink?
The only thing I know exists for sure is carbon.
In the beginning that's all there was.
In the end that is all there will be.
Perhaps God is carbon.

E-man: E-woman

Sam_a (pronounced 'sam a' for non-netizens) met hank.shaw the night he got the zee.dot virus

whata nite! c:/ drive crashed & burned when he logged on – u no what its like when u get a worm or a trojan

sam_a was gonna give up & go punch some zees when bill in birmingham mailed him a fix

the nets like that – lots of people helpin each other out

he was back up bangin away in a chat session in no time flat

then HE came online saying he had the zee.dot nasty 2 & thankin bill 4 the fix & saying hi to sam_a

he sounded interesting – not 2 nerdy or geeky

SOUNDED! thats a strange word in this context isnt it?
u cant really tell how anyone sounds on the net. They just sound like kjasklfljhlksfjflk – key strokes flashin up on the screen from cyberspace

but somehow people sound a certain way even when your talkin to them electronically

thats how sam_a got the idea that started off the whole thing

itsa wonder someone didn get killed

he was gettin ready 2go2 bed & fired off a final message to bill -

To: bills@msn.com

> tks for ya help re the zee.dot virus. Tried the download and it worked which is great cos ime off to la nex wk and wanna be on air. c ya. sam :-)☺

then just as he was about to log off & shutdown HE came back

> To: sama@virtual.world.com
> sounds like your a road warrior. seems fascinatin. Tell me bout u.

the sender signed off hank.shaw@bignet.com

sam_a pictured a big yank – maybe a black basketballer with 3 balls & size 16 shoes

But it turned out hank was from new zealand – nu zillin as they say there. Ozzies like sam_a call it nzed
sam_a and hank.shaw chatted 4 a while – & then sam_a did it

when the kiwi asked him 4 some bio details sam_a told him his offline name was samantha – samantha ashcroft
he said he was 32, 5/4 and described ally mcbeal a few pounds heavier

sam_a's mate andy said he was nuts when he told him about it later

andy said it was unethical – he reckon it must be against net protocol or something

but theres no rules, sam told him

and how could hank ever no?

how could hank ever tell that the netwoman he was talkin 2 was really a man – that he was sam azzura, 30, a 5 foot 9 insurance assessor for a big 3 firm

livin in the burbs in sydney – in kellytown – a new place with new houses, a mall, 150 cul-de-sacs and 2,000 hectares of nature strips

> y u wanna be a woman? andy asked over a longneck at the local
> its just a bit of fun sam_a said – s'now big deal – its just a way 2 be somebody else – dont u ever wanna be someone else?
> no
> u got no imagination – thats your trouble – this is the new millennium – things are different – besides
> besides what?
> besides ime sicka just being a bloke from the burbs and coppin shit - being a human dart board for bloody sociologists and newspaper journos and feminists - they think were all morons out here - they talk like its a wilderness westa glebe

sam_a tells andy & anyone else wholl listen that hes sick of the fuckin trendies living in inner city squalor feelin superior - so godalmighty up themselves they cant see daylight

> were not SUB-urban - whata bloody putdown – like were less than urban - sub-human. its better out here – its super urban. we got space, we got trees, we got no graffitti everywhere & traffic lights @ every corner & no fuckin speed humps every hundred metres - no speed humps thank Christ, no druggies ripping off ya bloody car or climbin through ya window while your sleeping 2 take ya sony or your bloody idiot box - the only thing we haven got is a voice
> they reckon theyre comin
> whos comin?
> speed humps - councils lookin at em … and 50 kay speed limits
> fuckem - anyway ime also sicka bein in the shit just cos ima man. every time u open your mouth someones dumpin on ya, calling u a chauvenist pig

or a macho jerk or somethin. on the net, ima woman & no 1 knows the difference. doesn that tell ya somethin?

that was sam_a's logic. a painless sex change with a few keystrokes & a silicon chip.

im a virtual woman, he told andy whose morality wasnt programmed for cyberspace and was still tryin to take it all in.

> funny thing is, when i say the same things that i would as a man, its ok
> what sorta stuff?
> well, like saying i like 2 drive fast & go out and get drunk with me friends. if i said that as a man, my card be a fuckin phallic symbol and ide b a yobbo
> i guess
> and i can be a tart and no 1 minds. i told hank i screw round a bit
> u told him u screw around! what was his reaction?
> he didn care. thats the thing with blokes. he said he'd been lookin 4 a woman like me for ages. said all the women he knew just wanted 2 fall in love & get married. he said i sounded interesting
> any guy would. so what did u do?
> played along. told him i like 2 wear really short skirts with splits. said i had big tits & like to show em off
> what did he say?
> said hed like 2 look at em – & a few other things as well
> shit sam – your getting in deep mate. what if this guy turns up on your doorstep 1 day and hes 6 foot 4 & built like a brick shithouse?
> he cant. how can he find me? ima virtual woman – & proud of it. ha ha. maybe Ill start virtual womens liberation

but that wasnt the half of it. not by far.

on the far sida the tasman, sam_as netman was taking off her make-up 2 go 2 bed after a long chat session

the netman – hank.shaw@bignet.com – in the flesh was actually hannah kershaw, a 26 year old blonde livin in wellington new zealand. if she said wellington u could believe it – no one would make that up

hanna told her secret to her best friend emma after the first few e-mails pretendin to be a man.
she felt naughtie doin it – like it was not quite right. but it had the magnetic attraction of the slightly wicked. it was innocent fun, she rationalized

emma agreed. emma didnt use the net cept @ work, but she was right into it and em was always on for a bit of fun. in fact it was emma who sent the first sexy email

> look what he said to me. hanna showed emma sam_as first slightly flirty mail
> wow. have u replied?
> no. i dont think I should.
> why not? go on. its just e-mail. go on. ile do it. here.

emma typed out a message.

> EMMA! u cant send that … my god M-R … giggles

hank.shaw@bignet.coms reply sped off over a tangled network of copper cables & twisted pairs. were a twisted pair she thought guiltily but with her pulse racing

after that things just seemed to escalate. every night she was a man, roaming the streets of cyberspace – pervin in browsers & hangin out in chat groups

> whaaaart! her sister anabel said in caps when hanna told her about it 1 nite. anabels younger than hanna but shes 20 goin on 40.
> how can u do that? Why do u wanna pretend your a man?
> well u no people treat u a certain way when your a woman. so i decided 2 become a man. ime no femmo, but ime sick of all the shit that gets dished out jus cos ima woman – buyin a car ... guys always whistling & comin on 2 u. i always wondered what it would be like 2 be a man – 4 a day, or a week. then i thought why not be a man all the time – in cyberspace u can.
> god hanna. God!
> god had nothin to do with it – then i got the idea 2 experiment
> what sort of experimentin?
> u no – chattin up & that
> u been chattin up guys on the net?
> no u dill. women. i have to stay in character. they think ima guy, so i hafta do guy stuff & sound guy

when ya dig a hole, u keep going down. hank.shaws experiment became a journey into the erotic over the next few months cos 1 thing lead to another as it does. another intel chip upgrade came & went

bill gates launched another version a windows with more bugs than the last. hank.shaw@bignet.com and sam a@virtual.world.com became close and talked almost every nite. they became friends in a new-age sort of way

> hows ya eman experiment goin? anabel asked after 4 months of the cyber-shenanigans
> great … well its interesting
> what do use talk about?
> all sorts of stuff. computers … books … films … life. shes really into politics & social stuff – like the environment and nuclear testing in the pacific – did u know that pacific actually means

peace? shes great. lately weve ar … weve also bin talkin bout sex
> SEX! your talkin 2 another woman about sex. what sorta things ya saying?
> jus stuff like what do ya look like & have ya got big boobs
> u asked her if she had big boobs?
> yeah – i gotta be authentic. thats what blokes would ask. but we got into some really hot talk 1 night late. i was sendin her lots of ;-)s & stuff & said i was having fantasies about her & … no u dont wanna know
> yes I do. what did u say?
> i said … i said ide like 2 c a picture of her naked & i cant remember what else – ide been out havin a few vinos with emma – & then she came back with ide like 2 :-o. u know ... so I said i would like 2 :-- her
> jees, hanna – your talkin 2 another WOMAN. thats like … like …
> u mean lesbian?
> yeah, i guess – no its not – but its like it, saying intimate sexy stuff 2 another woman. how do u feel about that?
> its jus fun. dont u ever wanna xplore?

anabel ignored her and asked

> whata ya gonna do if she wants 2 meet ya?

> i dont think thatll happen – she lives in sydney
> yeah but didnt u say she travels a lot?
> uh. but we just wont meet. no way. i wouldn agree
> what if she turns up on your door?
> how can she? no one knows 4 sure who anyone is on the net & no one knows where ya live unless u tell em – & even if she turned up, ide just clear out – leave town
> yeah, but that guy in america got caught 4 makin the melissa virus. they knew where he was. they say they know where everyone is
> so THEY know where THEY are. who the fucks they?

> u know what i mean & u know ime right

hanna frowned her thoughts movin on from intoxicatin carnal fantasies 2 a reality that was startin 2 force its way into her virtual world. she was startin 2 feel the joke had gone 2 far. she never intended things to get to this point. but how could she get out?

easy in the e-world. she would just hafta disappear

but jus when she was plannin her cyberdisappearance an e-mail came from a guy called andyj@bigpond.com.au – the au showed he was in oz. he said he was a friend of sam_a@virtual.world.com & had a wild proposition. he wanted hank.shaw 2 go to orstralia 2 meet the lovely sam_a.

andy hatched the idea after gettin really pissed off at sam 4 his techno-transvestism

he decided sam needed 2 be taught a lesson

he felt a bit guilty when he sent the e-mail 2 hank.shaw. but he decided the time had come 2 blow the whistle

sam_a of course had 2 be carefully coerced as he would never agree 2 expose his fraud to his netman. but that was easy. andy set up a rendezvous @ bondi beach on a sundy morning on the pretence of meetin some of his mates for a beer. sam_a was happy to join in even though he didn know the friends of andys.
any excuse for a beer

Sam_as netman took a little more persuadin. andy had 2 send 4 e-mails sayin how sam_a really wanted 2 meet him but was afraid 2 ask him 2 come over

at first, hank.shaw said no – no no no for a million reasons. no money. too much on @ work. crook mum. going 2 europe for 3 months

but then emma took up the case

> i think u should go
> why?
> cos u said you were close friends with a lot in common – & u always wanted 2 go 2 oz
> 1 small detail darling – u 4got about the fact that the netman is actually a woman. when samatha finds out ime a woman shell be shocked – she might even go ballastic. what if shes a big bitch inta karate or something?
> o yes silly me - of course i haven forgotten that u twit. but dont u think u owe sam_a something? plenty of people make friends on the net. some people even find permanent partners & get married & everything.
> So u think i am lesbian and that I might end up marryin samantha?
> dont be stupid. i just mean – u know what i mean

emma had a point – hank.shaw was comin to a xroads. she had 2 either disappear into cyberspace or fess up. she couldn keep going the way she was. she was hesitant – terrified actually. going 2 orstralia 2 meet sam_a was an insane idea

> besides, if u HAVE got lesbian tendencies as anabel says, ud better find out
> EMMA!
> well I jus think u should go. after all, u said you genuinely had a lot in common even though u lied about who you r. shell understand – women do. ule have 2 apologize of course – but ule probably be laughin about it after 5 minutes
> ile think about it – OK

To: andyj@bigpond.com.au

> OK ile come. how will I no ya?
> by the way, theres some things well hafta straighten out when I get there. can we talk b4 i meet sam_a?
> hank ☺

andy replied that he had bright red hair & would stand on the esplanade next 2 the main steps wearin a wallabies jersey

u wone be able 2 miss me, he told the twitchy hank.shaw.
he reckoned the wallabies rugby jumper would ginger up a kiwi all black

bloody lyin sam wone no what hit im

the day dawned clear & sunny. qantas flight 146 landed just after 8 and a 40 minute taxi ride saw hank.shaw @ sydneys famous bondi beach

sam_a was impatiently walkin up & down lookin @ the surf & the women in g strings & topless on the sand.

andy was waitin at the steps – nervous with anticipation expectin a big kiwi called hank who he would probably hafta pull off sam – when a petite blonde woman walked directly up 2 him and said

> hi your andy?

andy stared @ the stranger blinking. it was sundy mornin & the brain was still a little fuzzy

an old girlfriend that hed dumped or stood up?

someone from uni hed forgotten?

a pregnant 1 night stand?

> ime hank, the stranger said

> HANK! andy squeaked with sudden stress-induced laryngitis. ha … ha … haan …
> your andy?
> ah er … yeah - ime andy – but …
> i no. i no. ime hank.shaw – actually ime hannah kershaw. itsa long story. i couldn explain by mail. i thought i had just better come & face the truth. i feel terrible. i really feel terrible about the deception

sam_a whose been gazing out 2 c watchin the surfers & boogie boarders noticed the blonde walk up & start talkin 2 andy

andy was never good @ pickin up chicks. so he was curious

> nice 2 meet u. so wheres sam_a – er samantha?
> samantha? O … SAMANTHA. shit

andy raised his eyebrows completely 4getting about sams net alias – his whole plot fallin apart b4 his eyes

sam heard the name samantha and b4 andys dazed brain could catch up 2 his mouth he walked over & asked –

> who are u?
> ime hank.shaw@ …
> farkin ell
> who are u?
> ime samantha
> fuck!
> thats a nice thing 2 say?
> what u xpect?

lots more was said – more in looks than words

andy decided he better drag them off 2 the beer garden & get everyone a drink to ease the stress

they sat sippin drinks for an hour tryin to recova & make conversation

after the initial shock sam admitted he liked hank.shaw

> there4 u like ME – and i like u, hanna said
> yeah but your not who i thought u were
> bullshit. ime me. would u prefer I was a bloke?
> no
> then lets take each other as we r. anyway if ime not me then your not u

sam didn have an answer 2 that

slowly the tension eased & they relaxed a little

sentences grew longer

laughs got less nervous

we have 2 b big about this sam proposed

hanna agreed - after all they had liked each other 4 more than 4 months

sam decided 2 make an effort & hanna seemd to be tryin 2

great … great …

remember that time …

this is bizarre …

what about …

despite the calming powers of brokenwood cricket pitch chardonnay & andys embarrassed peacemakin hanna said she didn feel much like stayin on 4 a holiday after her comin out & would fly home the next day

sam had to admit it was a big day

maybe next time shed spend more time

yeah - next time

they did all the usual stuff

– promisin 2 keep in touch & agreein 2 give it a go

then hank.shaw RIP flew out mondy mornin on an air nzed-qantas airlines flight with 3 different flight nos & a load of confused post-deregulation pax. open skies they call it when ya can go anywhere with 1 airline ticket.
or with a PC!

> keep in touch u hear
> yeah keep in touch. it was fun
> yeah it was fun

the next afternoon @ work sam a@virtual.world.com tapped out a message to hank.shaw@bignet.com & clicked send

she musta not been logged on that day

or perhaps she took a few days off

maybe the net was down

the following Satdy he sent a longer message

he told her he enjoyed meetin her

he apologized again 4 his false ID n said he felt ☹ about some of the stuff heed said

funny how people write things in e-mail that they wouldn say or write in snail mail

sam did feel ☹ – 4 both of them

maybe if she forgave him

he could forgive himself – & her

@ 4.10 pm on the sundy his e-mail bounced back

> To: sama@virtual.world.com
> System Administrator: Undeliverable message.
> Message failed. Recipient not known.

Works Previously Published

'Planet Man' (poem) – *The Canberra Times*, 1977.

'Inner Man' – *Mindstorms*, Archipelago Press, 1989.

'The Parting'– *Mindstorms*, Archipelago Press, 1989.

'The Glass Lady' – *Pendulum*, Issue 3, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, 1999.

'When Worlds Collide' – *Idiom 23*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Central Queensland University, November 1999.

'E-man: E-woman' – *frAme4*, Issue 4, February, 2000 (online literary journal produced by the trAce Online Writing Community, Nottingham Trent University, UK).

'The Committee' – *Idiom 23*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Central Queensland University, 2000.

'The Alphabet Bug' - *Zoetrope All Story*, online literary magazine of Francis Ford Coppola, USA, January, 2000.

'Baxter's Junction' – *Idiom 23*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Central Queensland University, 2002.

'The Brolga's Dance' – *Idiom 23*, Vol. 15, Central Queensland University, April, 2003.

'The Lake that Couldn't Find the Sky' – *Annals Australasia*, October, 2003.

'Planet Man' (short story) – *RUSH*, an anthology of the 2004 CAE Short Story Competition prize-winning stories, Small Press Publishing, Melbourne, 2004.

'Joe Caricature' – *Idiom 23*, Vol. 16, Central Queensland University, 2004.

Awards

'The Committee' – Commended, 2000 Bauhinia Literary Awards, Central Queensland University.

'Scramble' – Commended, 2001 Bauhinia Literary Awards, Central Queensland University.

'The Brolga's Dance' – 2nd prize, 2002 Bauhinia Literary Awards Open Poetry Competition, Central Queensland University.

'Baxter's Junction' – Commended, 2002 Tom Howard Short Story Contest conducted by Jacobyte Books.

'The Alphabet Bug' – Finalist, 2002 WriteSpot Short Story Competition.

'Colombus.com' – Commended, 2003 Bauhinia Literary Awards Open Poetry Competition, Central Queensland University.

'Planet Man' – 3rd prize, RUSH 2004 CAE Short Story Competition conducted by CAE Arts, Professional Writing and Editing.

'Joe Caricature' – Highly Commended, 2004 Bauhinia Literary Awards, Central Queensland University.

The Author, Jim Macnamara. Photo: Gail Kenning.