

# **Remembering is a form of forgetting: episodic memory as simulacrum**

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## Summary

Episodic memory is often conceived of as a 'storehouse'; a collection of images or stories that reflect a life. This thesis argues that in fact it comprises a simulacrum, that is, a copy more 'real' than the original, because memory images are an unreliable medium between the present and the past. Memory is thus a series of unverifiable signs, referring to an unverifiable past. Remembering is thus a means of reconstructing this past, reflecting a present self rather than a past one.

This thesis comprises a novel titled *I'm You* and a critical exegesis titled *Remembering is a form of forgetting*. It examines episodic memory as a means of constructing identity, which ultimately resembles a simulacrum. It draws on the work of postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, and the work of philosopher Dylan Trigg and psychologists Koriat & Goldsmith. The novel builds on the work of novelists Paul Auster, Haruki Murakami, and Jan Kjaerstad, and embodies the thesis' critical ideas through the use of stories-within-stories, ambiguity and repetition.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

## Acknowledgements

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# I'm You

Lana went down to the breezeblock wall every day for two weeks after Paul disappeared. Every day she expected to see him, but he never came back. Then, one day, she just knew he wouldn't arrive. For most people, this would have been a gradual process of mounting doubt and diminishing hope, but for Lana it happened suddenly.

Instead of applying for universities, as she was expected to do, she spent a day on her computer mocking up a fake acceptance letter from an interstate institution. When the time seemed right, she printed it off and showed it to her parents when they got home. Then, in February, she got on a plane and flew to Broome, where she didn't know anybody. She couldn't be in Melbourne after what had happened. Although, and she had thought this many times since moving, in a lot of ways nothing happened at all. But what, then, evoked her need to move, to go as far away as she possibly could?

Three months later she was back, standing at the mouth of a gravel lane on the street where she grew up.

It was dusk and there was nobody around. This was her first visit home since moving away; she timed it to coincide with the first mid-semester break. Later she would go to her parents' house, but there was something she had to do, first.

'Okay,' she whispered to herself, and stepped into the lane.

Her memory rendered Paul's presence tangible in the space around her.

It would be light for another half an hour. The gravel crunched under her sneakers as she passed behind houses. She came to the shade of the lillypilly tree that grew in the corner of Paul's yard. Strange, how she thought of it as his house although it really wasn't anyone's. But if it was going to be someone's, it'd be his. A lawnmower thrummed a long way away; she could smell

barbecue. Just beyond the shade of the tree sat the breezeblock wall. Back then, she'd slip a foot into that wall and hoist herself up to peer over, to see Paul sitting on the back step, smoking. And he'd see her, flick his cigarette away and stroll over. All the times she stood at that wall and she'd never once taken the extra steps and crossed into the shade of the tree. She stood there a moment, looking up at the curve of its spherical foliage, purple berries dotted amongst the emerald leaves.

The ivy had grown since Lana had left, and now dominated not just the ground around the tree but the breezeblock wall as well, forming a thick fur atop its surface. Careful not to touch the vines, she worked her left foot into one of the gaps and pulled herself up. The garden had grown wild. Mounds of rotten oranges white and shrivelled beneath their trees. The grass, since grown long, caught the sunlight as it undulated in the breeze. The flowers by the driveway were as bright as ever and exactly the same—she finally realised they were artificial. Weeds rampant along the fence, the broken sundial visible only as a stone plate, hovering just above the grass.

Lana hopped from the wall but slipped and landed badly. Trying to steady herself, she reached for the wall and caught a handful of ivy. Her ankle throbbed. She remembered Paul's rash and swore.

Having reached the rear of the house, she looked back the way she'd come but her trail had vanished in the grass. She slid the door open. He always left it unlocked. She knew all along he didn't have a key, but ignored it back then, pretending the home was his. This kind of acknowledgement, she thought as she pushed the door open, was actually a kind of realisation.

The title of a story she once read occurred to her: 'There Are More Things'. It was a title that reminded her of Paul, suggested hidden depths, an unknowable world beneath the one she walked around in each day. Uncomfortably she recalled helping him, unsure exactly why she did, then or now.

The sun had passed over the backyard and was hidden by the house. Inside, the space was hushed and dim. Standing on the threshold felt to Lana like leaning over a great pit. There was a pile of something in a corner near the door. She moved over to it, eventually recognising the objects comprising it.

Paint cans with the edges of their lids pristine, never forced open. Power tools, the seals on their boxes unbroken. A hammer with see-through plastic film still clinging to the handle, barcode visible at the base. Piles of timber, little packs of Otter nails, three or four rolls of linoleum, work gloves, plastic safety glasses, dust masks, a shovel, a pick and a long pole like a crowbar worked straight. What she was looking at, she finally realised, was an elaborate pretence.

Her hand didn't itch where it had touched the ivy. Not even a little bit. She inspected it, wondering how many other pretences had found life in this place.

She had seen these things before, as Paul carried them into the house, one each day. Back then she forgot them the moment they disappeared inside. And there was no bringing them back once he came out, dropped himself onto the back step and lit a cigarette. Seeing them here she understood what they were: a kind of donation, or tribute, and that in a very specific way he had left them for her. But maybe for something else. Maybe both, she thought, and for the first time in her two decades she realised, slabs of light dissipating before they reached the far wall, that nothing happens for only one reason.

She set herself down by the edge of the pile. Even in summer, the tiles were cool under her palms. She took a box of nails, hefted it, felt its weight. Dust had formed a dense fuzz on its surface, but the smiling otter was still visible beneath it. *Bullet Head Galvanised*, she read, *65 x 3.15*. So specific. She remembered him well, had remembered him often the past year, and was surprised to realise that she felt she knew him better than she did anyone, even her own parents. Even so, these nails confounded her, these nails and his intentions behind them. Their specificity:

65 x 3.15. Did he choose them for a reason, or did he pick them at random from the shelf? If she understood why he chose those nails she would understand everything else.

Pushing herself up from the ground she felt her face flush. She winced recalling that she had thought she understood him better than anyone else. Lana wandered the house's enormous open space, its lack of walls, rooms, delineation. A hundred meters behind her, her parents were preparing dinner.

In the half-light, at the very precipice where it made the switch from mostly light to mostly dark, Lana found the typewriter. A sheet in the machine had a paragraph typed on it, but it didn't make any sense to her. She tugged it from the machine.

There was a pile of paper on each side of the typewriter, one blank, the other typed. She picked up the typed pile and slipped the last page against the bottom sheet. The paper seemed brittle, somehow. She hefted it. First the nails, now this. As if she thought she could understand things by testing their weight, itself a kind of secret. She glanced at the typewriter again. Felt nothing. Or what she felt was too new and subtle to identify.

Maybe it was the way the threshold of light inched back towards the glass doors, or the feeling that she needed to get to her parents' house, or something else, but she knew she had to leave then.

After dinner and an hour of conversation, Lana excused herself and climbed the stairs to her old bedroom. She took the manuscript over to the window. The floorboards were still spattered with the paint she'd dripped there, and Paul's house was visible through the window. The chair he smoked in was still in its spot. She sat in it, rested the papers on her lap.

Lana regarded the shabby bundle before her. The months they'd spent together lurked in her memory, something that eluded her attempts to understand it. Even her own actions back

then appeared as if enacted by somebody else. The skin of her knees tingled where the manuscript lay. Not really convinced it would answer any questions, she started reading.

*Paul*

Returning. The word came to me during my last weeks in Argentina, and more often as my flight home drew nearer. It would appear unbidden and alone, as I was handing money to a cashier, toweling down after a shower, holding a café door for somebody. It seemed to render the world around me immaterial, as if the knowledge of my leaving diminished its reality. When I was finally aboard, when the plane picked up speed and eventually lifted, tearing away from Buenos Aires and out over the ocean, the word circled, breaking down: *returning, re-turning, turning*. I had changed while I was away – deliberately – and I longed to discover how the change would manifest once I was home. I watched the green hip of South America recede and thought about how, a year from now, the memory of Argentina would have receded too, as its coastline did, indiscernible amongst the glare and sparkle of the sea.

My parents died when I was twelve years old. I was distraught, as anyone would be, but my mother's brother and his wife had no children of their own and took it upon themselves to care for me. I owe them more than I could repay. I mention all this now because my parents left me two properties and a significant lump of money. My aunt and uncle rented the properties out for me and took care of my money. It built up. When I finished high school I moved to Melbourne, and rented houses until I finished my doctorate. I sold the property and bought a small townhouse. I still had a lot of money left over, and also earned a liveable income as a part-time lecturer in anthropology at Deakin.

The real consequence of all this was that when I decided I wanted to do something other than work at the university I had the means to. Gauchos had intrigued me since first encountering them in Borges' fiction, so Argentina itself was an easy decision. I tendered my resignation, discarding, for the first time, my fear of instability, of an unknown future, and instead embraced it. I went to Argentina with a broad purpose and nobody to answer to. It was, admittedly, an unusual circumstance in which to be conducting research. Because of this, though, I could stay there as long as I liked, following no schedule. And it was during this dislocated time

that I felt I was doing something I'd been meaning to do for years, even decades: to drift, away from Australia and the people and routines I knew. It took some time for this to become apparent; my first weeks there were spent in the shock of loss. Time passed, and eventually (or suddenly) it had been almost eighteen months since I left Australia.

It was dark when I arrived in Melbourne. Dazed, I caught a taxi home. I opened my front door and clicked on the light. Nothing happened. I stood there in the darkness a moment, then remembered I'd had the electricity turned off when I left. Of course.

Eighteen months. A lot longer than expected.

I left my suitcase in the front room and wandered the shadowed house. My bedroom faced the street, so I opened the blinds and a thin light filtered in. My mattress was still there; a wooden chair next to it served as a bedside table. I'd left a book splayed open, face down. I picked it up: Murakami, *Hear the Wind Sing*. I couldn't remember it at all, not a character, an event, even the acts of buying and reading it. The spine was creased from having been left so long. I placed it back down and the book flipped itself open to the page I'd left it on.

The novel seemed to signify a point I could no longer return to. In a state no doubt brought on by my immense tiredness, I considered what lay between myself, now, and the man who'd placed that book down halfway through. At some point I had been engaged enough to read half the novel, but eighteen months later remembered nothing of it. It felt as though we were separated by a great distance that was no distance at all.

I had, as is the cliché, gone overseas partly to reinvent myself. The circumstances of my leaving were too confused for me to realise that when I left, but during my travels I decided that ultimately I was there to change myself. Since whatever change had happened did so overseas, it

was invisible there, just another aspect of the life I lived. But now, looking around my old house, I half expected the change to appear tangibly.

Most of the furniture sat beneath dust covers. I could make out the shapes but no details.

I tried the kitchen tap. It worked. I poured a glass of water from it and drank it down, dehydrated from the flight. I closed my eyes and colours swam before me. For the last two months I'd longed to return, had fought off a near-constant sense of loneliness. Now that I was finally back it seemed sudden. Stranger still was how unfamiliar my own house felt, like the place I'd longed for was no longer my home.

I woke early the next morning. After showering I rummaged through the things in my desk until I found an old electricity bill, then left the house and walked down to the main street to use a payphone. Everything here was so quiet. Using the number on the back of the bill I called the electrical company and they said they'd send someone around later that day.

I was asleep when the electrician arrived, sometime in the afternoon. He reconnected the electricity and left within a few minutes. I went around switching on power points. Some appliances, like my washing machine, chirped happily as they awoke. Others, like my fridge, came to life with a solemn hum. The lights on the answering machine lit up in unison as it switched on, then died, one lone LED flashing. An old urge passed through me, one I hadn't felt since leaving and had forgotten about. I pressed the button to play my messages. A robotic voice announced the date – some time just before I'd left – and my best friend Mark's voice filled the room.

'Hey, Paul, just want to see if you want to come round for drinks before -'

I cut the message off before it finished, felt my heart spasm and my face flush. That day. I cringed, remembering the things I'd said to him, glad Klara, my ex and his partner, hadn't been

home to witness it. I deleted the message then stood there a while, trying not to think about it. I drank a glass of water then picked up the phone and punched in their number. The phone rang out.

I made haphazard attempts to return the house to a livable condition. The furniture covers went back into the closet, I swept and vacuumed the whole house, and finally wrote a shopping list. I felt myself slipping easily into the old routines, ways of moving that had lain dormant. Twisting a stiff doorknob in a precise way; tugging a cupboard door as I closed it so it would sit right; leaving the faucet handle at a certain angle so the tap wouldn't drip. It was as if my old self had been quiet within me the whole time, reemerging now that it was back in its own territory. I wondered what other versions of myself lay dormant inside me, waiting for their cues.

At some point I found myself in my bedroom, staring at the Murakami novel, still open on the chair. The fact that it was even there brought to life the chaotic circumstances of my leaving: the impulse decision to leave, the breakneck flight booking, the taxi to the airport. They were the actions of a man in flight.

I tried Mark and Klara's number again later that night, although again nobody answered. I checked the clock – it was late. My jetlag would keep me at odds with the rhythm of Australian life for a few more days at least.

I woke at a relatively sane time. The morning was bright and clear, so I walked down to the high street to have breakfast at a café. It felt good to be back, as if I were taking a holiday somewhere I knew well. I sat out the front, drinking coffee and watching people pass by. People on their way to work, high school kids in scruffy packs. All these things had continued while I was away, and kept going just the same now I was back. Across the street I could see the trains running out from the tunnel, Pakenham, Belgrave, Lilydale.

I sat at the café a while longer than I needed to. After all, I had nowhere to be. It occurred to me that Mark and Klara may have moved during the time I was away. I wouldn't have known, anyway, had not kept in touch with anyone while I was gone. When I got home I pulled out an old CD Klara had burnt for me years ago, around the time we started dating. I put it on and lay on the carpet in the living room. I felt bad about the way I'd left Australia, knew I had to apologise to Mark. If I couldn't get through to him I'd contact one of our mutual friends.

The CD played through. I never listened to it anymore; the songs breathed life into things I'd struggled to make die. But then, having come back changed, I was new enough to let the music pass over me without dredging anything back up. Because there was nothing to dredge up. I'd left it all in the pampas, the endless grassplains of South America, somewhere I would never return.

I might have fallen asleep, or so deeply into reverie as for it to be the same thing, when I was jolted to alertness by the sound of someone's voice. A familiar voice: Klara's. I looked up before realising it was coming from the speakers. She'd recorded a message for me, tucked away after the album finished. I must have known that. Must have.

We dated when we were younger, but reentered my life as the partner of my best friend, Mark. We chatted independently of Mark every now and then, had managed to reconnect despite our break-up and their relationship. They were the two people I knew and loved best. Her voice brought something back, shapeless and undefined. For the first time, I felt truly joyful for returning, and it came in a fierce blow.

While in Argentina, I deliberately avoided my personal emails. I knew my friends would try to contact me, but I found out soon after leaving that the very sight of their names made me sick with anxiety and embarrassment. I knew that if I was ever going to discard myself I couldn't have contact with them until the whole thing was done. Which it was. The truth is, though, that

the longer you're away the more you slip out of people's lives, the more they adjust to not having you around.

I pulled my laptop out and logged into my email account. Of course it was loaded with unread messages, but there was one from Maria, right at the top of my inbox. I'd sent an email in an airport internet café, somewhere on my way home, letting her know I'd be back soon. She'd organised a small get-together for my return. I could see from the CC'd recipients that it was our close group: Alex, Jacob, the joint addresses for the couples: Tony and Amelia, Mark and Klara. Maria had scheduled it for the weekend, giving me a few days to recover from my jetlag.

I stretched out on the floor of the living room. I felt a grin form on my face as I remembered my friends and slowly, happily, fell asleep.

I woke sneezing, the house dark. My sinuses were clogged with carpet dust. Bleary-eyed, I made my way to the sink and washed my face, blew my nose into my hands, rinsed them. For a while I deleted messages from my inbox, reading the subjects or the first line before deeming them irrelevant. At some point something came over me and I turned the stereo on again, and skipped right to the end, to Klara's message, her voice filling the empty room.

I poured another glass of water and went to sit in the lounge room. I didn't know what time it was but felt alert. This was going to be my life for the next week or so, inhabiting the obscure hours of the night, sleeping through the days. I decided then that I would use the time to organise some of my research notes, start transcribing the interviews. I didn't know exactly, but there would have been at least eighty hours of interviews, maybe more. I tried envisaging what had to be done but kept slipping into thoughts of Mark, and Klara and the others. I was home. Ready to fall back into the fold, to see the people I loved.

I did get some work done that first week back. Irregularly, between the dislocated feeling of being out of sync with time itself, I organised my notes into a rough order and even transcribed a few hours of interviews. The cassettes were labeled both by date and the location where they took place. I started chronologically, but found myself skipping through to particular interviews I longed to hear again. The first one I sought out in this manner took place early in my trip, in the Tapalque district of Buenos Aires. An old man with arresting blue eyes had grown up in the Junin region of Peru. He told a story about a young boy kidnapped by Indians, claiming to have known the boy himself. We spoke in a train station while he was waiting for a train home; the noise of the station sounded wari'm ped and distant beneath our voices.

‘The boy had been missing for years and the parents had accepted the fact of his death. When a travelling farmer mentioned having seen an Indian with bright blue eyes, like mine,’ here he pointed at his own, grinning. ‘They sought him out. Eventually they found him.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘It is not so unlikely—how many Indians have blue eyes? Anyway, the couple led the man back to the house he was stolen from. He regarded it indifferently as they approached. Then, as he approached the threshold, a flash of recognition went through him. The parents said they saw it on his face—in that moment he was their son again. And he darted into the house, returning with a bone-handled pocketknife. His parents recognised it as one given to him as a child. He had hidden it somewhere in the house before he disappeared.’

‘They found their son,’ I said.

‘It would seem so,’ the old man replied. ‘I like that story because it contains a mystery: did the man recognise his home, his parents? What happened in that moment of realisation? Was the

young boy always there, inside him, or had they become two different people, locked in time, linked by this brief, bold flash of memory?’

Trains whistled in the station, their engines whined, people’s garbled voices filtered through the speakers of my stereo. In a mundane way, those whistles and whines were like the young boy possessing the body of the man—they had travelled through time to emerge momentarily, to impotently announce their presence, and disappear.

I pressed pause on the tape. The story seemed more significant than any of the others, even if it was useless for my scholarly purposes. I pressed play again.

‘Is there any chance,’ I heard myself ask, ‘that the young boy was Diego Juarez?’

The man laughed. ‘None whatsoever! Look, it’s my train, I have to go. It was very nice to meet you.’

‘Wait, I’m sorry, why couldn’t it be him?’

‘Because Diego Juarez was a woman!’

None of the tapes I transcribed that week interested me as much as that single story. But perhaps it was my jetlag, or the novelty of having returned home, that kept my interest from building. Even more distracting, though, was the knowledge that I would soon see Mark again. I couldn’t help but imagine the conversations we’d have when we finally got to speak. As I went about my days I spoke the conversations out loud, as if practicing. Eventually Saturday night rolled around. I showered and dressed feeling anxious. Despite the strength of our friendship, Mark and I had not parted on good terms, had left some things unresolved. It was my fault, and part of me was concerned that I had damaged our friendship irreparably.

When Maria opened her apartment door she didn't speak, just wrapped me in a hug and held me. I hugged her back, overcome. Over her shoulder I could see Alex watching us, something like a wistful look on his face. He looked the same: neat fair hair, faint lines around his eyes and mouth announcing the arrival of middle-age. I said something to Maria and she released me. She looked down and rubbed her eye, face framed by the dark tresses of her hair. I moved into the room and shook Alex's hand. He pulled me towards him and hugged me, clapping my back.

'Welcome back,' he said, voice thick. Nobody else had spoken.

'How's it going?' I asked. He nodded in response, took his glass from the bookshelf by his shoulder, had a drink. Jacob, Tony, and Amelia were lined up on the sofa; Tony had his arm around Amelia. Klara and Mark weren't there yet. The three stood up from the couch and I hugged each in turn.

'It's good to see you,' Amelia said, then looked at Tony. Some meaning seemed to pass between them. Maria had closed the door but was still standing by it.

'Where're Mark and Klara?'

'She's just in the bathroom,' someone said. I nodded. 'Want a drink?' Maria disappeared deeper into the apartment. I hadn't been there before. White walls, white carpet, tempered by raw wooden furniture. The foliage of a tree outside the window cast a dappled light across the room. Abstract paintings, sculptures from around the world. One piece, placed in an alcove, appeared to be a funerary urn from Oaxaca in the shape of a bat god, but I couldn't quite tell from where I was. The air-conditioner hummed.

'How was it?' Jacob had sat down again.

‘Yeah, good,’ I said. ‘You know, it was a long time. Glad to be back.’ I grinned. He smiled back. ‘It’s good to see you guys, I missed you.’

‘Here you go, Paul.’ Maria appeared, holding a whiskey glass towards me.

‘Thanks.’ I took a sip.

‘So, how was your trip?’ Maria asked.

‘Ah, I was just telling them. It’s good to be back. Yeah I mean, it was good, I learnt a lot, but I’m happy to be around people I know again. Looking forward to dinner tonight.’

‘Good,’ Maria said. She lit a cigarette, smiled at me. ‘That’s good.’

Somewhere in the apartment a door closed. Tony, Amelia and Jacob looked towards the door, reconfigured their expressions. I turned to see Klara step in from the hall, a shadow in all black, her hair still bleached.

‘Paul,’ she said, and before I could reply she had her arms around me, tight, face buried into my chest. I hugged her back, but again looked up at Alex, who was watching with unmitigated grief. I searched his expression for some explanation but nothing came up. Klara’s back shook beneath my arms. I tried to comfort her, looked to Alex, bewildered.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, finally, out loud. Nobody answered. ‘Seriously,’ I said. ‘What’s going on?’

Klara broke from my arms and went back down the hall and we heard the door close again. I looked back at the others. Maria was sobbing. The three on the couch were looking from me to the floor.

‘Fuck,’ Alex said, quietly. I felt his hand on my shoulder and turned to face him. ‘Paul. While you were gone, just after you left. Mark passed away.’

‘What?’

‘I’m sorry, Paul. He was working, something went wrong with his plane.’ I felt as if the world had suddenly expanded around me, that the room had grown to an unfathomable size and that the people in it were very far away. I dropped into an armchair. I heard them talking.

I don’t know how long I sat there with them. I wanted to find Klara, but couldn’t move from the chair. At one point I realised my glass was empty and set it on the coffee table. There wasn’t anything to say.

‘What happened?’

‘He was flying to Broome,’ someone said. ‘They think a motor gave out. There was another plane flying up there with him, apparently his started smoking and just dived. In the middle of the desert. The other pilot couldn’t find anywhere to land, you know, those enormous dunes. It took a long time for them to get back out there. There was black smoke leading straight up into the sky. That’s how they found him.’

I nodded, gazing out at the branches bobbing against the window. The image of the pillar of smoke gave me some solace, the universe providing a sign of mourning for my friend, visible for kilometres in all directions.

‘When?’ Some time passed before anyone answered. I don’t know how long, I just remember a gap.

‘It’s been over a year now.’

‘What?’ Alex was looking away. Maria was focused on her hands. The three on the couch didn’t speak. ‘How much longer than a year?’

‘He died just after you left.’

## Money Shrine; Leaving

Klara had broken up with me on a damp, overcast day in autumn. The following day was, incidentally, my weekly payday. Normally such a mundane fact would go unnoticed alongside something as definitive as a breakup, but standing there, looking at my balance, I realised that the money would not disappear unless I let it. The symbolism of it was obvious, and probably naïve, but in that mind state the realisation seemed profound. I paid rent that week and spent \$14 (I remember precisely) on groceries. The next week I did the same. And I did that every week for months, drawing solace from the growing balance. Eventually I slackened, but never stopped saving money. On top of what I already had, I was wealthy for someone my age. Of course I would never spend the money; its function was symbolic. Occasionally I would see women, but always cut it off before anything could develop. Watching the numbers grow fulfilled a similar purpose more effectively. It was my security, my assurance, and the one thing in my life I knew I could control.

Much later, of course, Mark and Klara got together. Mark was good about it, and although he didn't need to, sought my approval before even attempting to court her. I don't know if he would have done it anyway had I said no, but my inclination is to say that he'd have respected my wishes, however irrational they may have been. But I said it was fine, and while part of me still clung to the possibility of us getting back together, most of me knew it would never happen. This way, I thought, at least she would always be nearby.

That's how I ended up in their living room one evening, tentatively outlining my thoughts on performing research in Argentina.

'What have you been saving for this whole time, then?' Mark asked. 'If not for something like this?'

‘I don’t know,’ I smiled, feeling sheepish. ‘Something like this I guess.’

‘Then go!’ Klara spread her arms. The movement sent a crumb of ash sailing from her cigarette. Her enthusiasm warmed me, but I felt a blunted sting hearing her tell me to leave, even if that wasn’t what she meant.

I left their house drunk that night, having told them that I’d do it and believing it myself until I was out on the street. It was too late for the tram, so I walked the few steps to my house. As I walked, I could feel something like a magnet pulling me, gentle but firm, towards Melbourne, and to Klara. It sat like a weight in my stomach, and despite the opportunity offered by the research, despite my tens of thousands of dollars assuring me an easy trip, I knew it would only pull more strongly the closer I came to actually leaving. By the time I was fumbling with my keys outside my house I had accepted that I would never go, and giving in brought on a flood of relief.

What I realised in Argentina was that spending my money would force me to acknowledge what that money really was, my private shrine to Klara.

I don’t remember what I was doing the night Klara came around. Around that time I wrote several for and against lists to do with Argentina. They always ended up the same way. I might have been doing that, but my recollection of the evening begins with me opening the door and seeing her there. It looked like she’d been crying; I knew because I’d seen her like that before.

‘I’m sorry to barge in on you.’ She was sitting on the couch, leaning forward, with her feet placed wide apart and her knees together. She had always sat like that; I wondered if she still would when she was old.

‘Don’t apologise,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t doing anything. Is everything okay?’

‘I don’t know.’ She was staring at the floor. ‘Mark said he didn’t know if we have a future. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t burden you with this. It’s nothing.’

It hurts to admit it, but I felt a faint blush of hope when she said that. ‘He said it in those words?’

‘Well, not exactly. But that’s what he meant.’

‘Do you remember what he said, exactly?’

She pushed her chin into her chest, then looked up abruptly. ‘Not exactly, we were both pretty upset, it all kind of blended together.’

‘I’ve known Mark a long time,’ I said. ‘He can get pretty emotional, especially about things he cares about.’ I paused. ‘Sometimes he gets carried away and says things he doesn’t mean.’

‘I know,’ she said. Neither of us spoke. She did know, I realised. She knew him better than I did, knew parts of him I could never imagine existed. And he knew her the same way. We kept on not saying anything for a while. She was undoubtedly thinking about Mark, but I was watching her and trying to work out what it was that had kept her nestled so firmly within me for so long. Then she slumped, and immediately sprang back up again to stretch. The curve caught in the rim of her eyelid, in the dip of her inner elbow as she stretched her arms to their limits, in her arched back. Her eyes were closed, and it was there, it was all there: what was then unfathomable was how I’d ever stop feeling like that.

Something must have moved inside her because after stretching she smiled. We spoke about other things for a while, and drank some of the beer I had in the fridge. That night we were both right there, with each other. I didn’t even think about how good it was, I was so caught up. I walked her to the gate and she went off down towards the tram stop. Watching her

walk, the notion of leaving clanged in my head like an alarm – so obviously a bad idea. I went back inside and gathered my for and against lists, ran them under the tap, and threw the sodden lump into the bin.

Mark called the next morning. He and Klara were engaged.

After hanging up the phone I called the travel agent and booked the next possible flight to Buenos Aires, which left that night. The price didn't matter. I started packing, and an hour later Klara called. I was still dazed, but she wanted to thank me for talking to her the other night. She asked me what I was up to, and I lacked the wits to do anything but tell the truth. She gave a short yelp of excitement and told me to come around that night; her and Mark would drive me to the airport I don't remember much of what happened now. I remember the feeling of hearing him tell me their news, feeling like a glass at the moment it hits the ground and shatters. A protracted crash.

I could feel the bile rise in me the moment he answered the door. Luckily, I'd arrived earlier than they'd expected – Klara was out picking up takeaway. I couldn't focus on what we were saying; my thoughts grew so loud it was as if the world closed in around me. I was responding instinctively, unthinking, to what I felt, like a dog worked into a frenzy. I don't remember what we said, but it turned sour quickly. It was my fault. That said, the world I'd built for myself had been destroyed. It was illusory, and on some level I knew that then, but if anything it made it worse, because not only had I lost it but it revealed that I never had anything at all.

I didn't slam the door when I left, shortly after arriving. It stayed open, and although I didn't see it, I have a vivid mental image of looking from the street through the open front door

and seeing Mark standing confused in his kitchen. Because it all happened so quickly for him to be angry right away.

By the time I arrived in Argentina I had calmed sufficiently to force myself through an apology email to Mark. I don't know if he ever read it, because I didn't check that inbox while I was away. For all I know, he died before I even wrote it.

## The Owl; The Start

I woke the next morning in the grip of a vicious hangover. I lay there a while, trying to feel less sick, until I remembered what I'd been told the night before. Eighteen months. The whole time. I'd sat around at Maria's a while but didn't see Klara again, and left the apartment alone. The surface of my tongue felt like tissue paper. I drank from the glass by my bed but the disturbance nearly made me vomit, so I rolled onto my back and stayed as still as possible. Then I remembered the Valium in my suitcase. I made it to the lounge room and puked there, straight onto the carpet. I found the bottle and tipped two into my palm, took them back to my bed and swallowed them with water. Then I cried. Eventually the tablets took effect and I was absorbed into a flat, empty sleep.

When I woke, something from the night before came to me. Words I'd heard people speak but hadn't registered, after Alex told me what had happened to Mark:

'She was getting over it,' someone said.

'I knew this would happen.'

'We had to tell him. We had no choice.'

'She was getting over it.'

What my return really meant was not a welcome return to the fold but that they had to dig it all up, console me in my mourning but not let it again become their own. And what was more, while we were still friends, I now sensed an insistent undertow beneath everything, an awareness of how impossible it would be for me to understand what the last eighteen months had done to them, together.

I remember sitting in that chair, staring at the floor. My time away came to seem a kind of limbo, a state in which I was neither truly dead nor truly alive. My return to Australia made my death come true, and anything else I experienced was rendered vestigial to that. I hated myself for thinking it, but sitting there amongst them, I felt like I was at my own wake. As if, for all practical purposes, Mark's death had spelt my own. Because someone for whom death is certain is in a sense already dead.

And I may well have been dead to them a long time. Once he'd recovered from the venom of my attack he'd have realised how baseless it was, but he'd have told the others, and so for the past eighteen months I'd have been no more tangible than a whiff of bad air. My hope was that he'd have seen it for what it was, at least in part: an unfair expression of my deep trepidation about the trip. But that didn't really matter anymore.

Everything came to a head a few weeks later, when I went to Maria's apartment for a dinner party. I'll get to that, but I need to explain how I met Klara, first.

It was my last year of undergrad, over ten years ago now, and I'd pretty much given up on the idea of meeting anyone interesting. She appeared from within a crowd at a party at Mark's house, from the backyard—mid-laugh—spinning across the floor in a flourish of joy. A joy that didn't end when she knocked into me and I caught her. She turned to face me and, still in my arms, still giggling, asked my name. She disappeared as soon as I answered, and I spent the rest of the night keeping an eye out—bleached hair, leather jacket—pretending to concentrate on conversations with other people. She had the aura of an apparition or something supernatural, a creature that would show itself once, reappearing fleetingly in the surfaces of crowded mirrors or at the ends of long hallways.

I didn't see her again the rest of the party. About one AM I decided there wasn't any point in sticking around and said goodbye to my friends. I knew that by leaving I was cutting the last link I'd have to her, that she'd drift out into the inner-north uni party atmosphere, visible only momentarily at gatherings in terrace house gardens or warehouses, indistinct. I stopped by the front gate and in a moment of drunken sentimentality looked back towards the party. I could make out the dark shapes of people mingling and drinking. Gang of Four's drums and metallic guitars launched themselves out of the backyard, bleeding into the street.

I turned to go. Just outside the front gate, by the road, someone was standing beneath a tree, reaching up towards a low-hanging branch. Streetlight cast a pale wash across the scene, but she was obscured by the shadow of the foliage. Even in the night her blonde hair was luminous. My heart skipped.

I stepped closer. She was muttering, making clicking noises with her tongue. Just beyond her outstretched fingers sat a small white owl. It mewed. I paused. Actually having an owl in front of me felt like witnessing something not meant to be seen, like seeing the back of my head in a bathroom mirror.

I moved around to her side. Klara's face appeared as her cheekbone dropped away to reveal a profile formed by the gentle triangle of her nose, lips parting as she cooed to the owl.

I stood awkwardly, my mind blank. She was too engaged to notice me and I was too nervous to speak. But I had to do something. I took a step back.

'Hey,' I said. No reaction. Louder: 'Hey.'

'This owl is hurt, I think one of its wings is broken.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Poor thing.'

Then she looked at me, dead on, the same face I'd seen earlier, but made sincere by the bird's plight. It had gained a sense of gravity. Much later, as I told her when we were together, I realised I'd seen each end of her personality that night: her weightless, almost diaphanous enchantment with life, and the supreme seriousness with which she regarded the suffering of others.

'Paul, right?' I went to answer but she interrupted. 'Can you get it down? You're taller than me.'

'Okay.'

She looked back at it for a moment before stepping aside, and relinquishing the bird's fate. The trust implied in that step may have been what let me let Klara burrow into me, become lodged there. I moved across and reached up, encircling the bird with both hands. It screeched and struggled, but I restrained its wings and held it easily. As I lifted it down, a claw caught my wrist and drew a quick shot of blood. I held the bird to my chest and it resigned itself to my grip. Klara pulled her jacket off. I placed the bird inside and she closed the jacket over it, folding it so the animal's face poked out like an infant wrapped in a shawl. Klara held it to her chest. Her upper arms were streaked with abstract tattoos done to look like the strokes and splatters of a paintbrush.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I'm going to take it to the vet tomorrow.'

'I hope it's okay.'

'Me too.'

We stood there. She held the owl, watching it. I was watching her.

'How did it get into the tree if its wing's broken?'

She looked at me. I thought she was going to shake her head and just walk off, dismayed. Eventually her eyebrows knotted and she looked away, stared into the middle distance.

‘That’s a good point,’ she said, looking back at me. We both stared at the bird. It purred, apparently innocent. ‘Maybe another bird attacked it?’

‘I guess,’ I said. The creature was still cute, of course, and definitely injured: it still deserved sympathy. Despite that, it now felt like there was a murky patch within it, that it was hiding something, that within the bird or its past, something wasn’t right, disturbed on the most basic terms of its being. It opened its tiny beak and cawed.

‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘I’d better get this little guy home. See you round. And thanks again.’

She hurried off with the owl. I looked down: blood was streaming from my wound, dripping from the wrist. I went back into the party and washed it. As the water flowed across the cut I tried to reconfigure Klara’s face, but the pieces kept transforming, merging instead to create the faces of people I remembered well. I dried the wound, applied bandaids, and left, again. The tree was empty, of course, Klara and the owl nowhere to be seen.

The next day I had to work. I got up, hungover and vomited on myself in the shower. I recalled the incident with Klara and the owl but the precise contours of her face eluded me. I made my way to the op-shop where I worked and spent the morning in a haze. Eating lunch, I was struck by the conclusion that Klara would come in that day, that she would, as I wanted, appear in my life again by accident. I started feeling better, and in the afternoon, yes, someone came in who looked an awful lot like Klara, or, at least, how I remembered her to look. I was friendlier than normal, asked her how her day was. I even worked a joke in there. And I made sure to check for tattoos, and she had one, a swirl of colour up one arm, that could’ve been feathers or flowers or an abstract pattern.

It troubled me the rest of the day. In a way I'd been given Klara—I was right, my conviction was well-founded. But the ambiguity shattered it. If it was her then I'd squandered my chance. The only way to check was to find her.

When I got home I sat in the back courtyard and smoked a cigarette, as I did every day after work. The sky was broad and textured, the air sweet with the smell of jasmine. I thought about what happened at work. I could have let it go and lived with the possibility that I saw her. There was poetry to that. The uncertainty, having both seen her and not. Or I could venture to find out, try to find her, quiz Mark about her, check her tattoos against what I remembered of the girl in the shop. But finding out for certain seemed mundane in comparison.

I rolled another cigarette and blew thick clouds into the sky. It had dimmed, gone purple with grey banks of clouds, a fade of blue over to the east.

It was at the end of the uni year the night I met Klara and she took the owl home, October or November, amongst the lengthening dusks and weeks of dry warmth. I spent a couple of months not really doing anything, working once a week and living off Centrelink. I went to a lot of house parties then, walking between the same few suburbs, all those filigreed terrace houses and weathered brick walls. I met girls who could have been her, deciding in the week between Christmas and New Year's that I'd been right the first time, that she was basically lost to me. That was until one party in the first week of the New Year when I caught sight of her in the tiny backyard, undeniably this time, sandwiched between the side of the house and a corrugated iron water tank, lighting a cigarette. Fairy lights looped across the area; oranges in the neighbours' yard bulged ripe and luminous in the light.

'Hey,' I said. 'Klara.' She looked up.

‘Hey,’ she said, smiling, but obviously trying to work out how she knew me. Then her face lit up. Recognition.

‘Paul!’ I grinned.

‘How’s the owl?’ She laughed, louder than I’d expected, clapping me on the forearm as she answered.

‘You know what? I took it back home and put it in the spare room. I made it a little bed with blankets and left it water and some chopped up veggies. But,’ she drew on her cigarette, ‘when I came for it in the morning it wasn’t in its bed.’

‘No?’

‘I couldn’t find it. It wasn’t in the room, but the door was closed and the window didn’t open. I was a bit freaked out to be honest. I kept checking throughout the day. Eventually I found it, perched on top of the wardrobe.’

‘Wasn’t its wing broken?’

‘Yes! Exactly. I took it to the vet and that’s what she said, that it was broken.’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said.

‘Me neither.’

We laughed, caught each other’s eye, held it. When she broke eye contact my gaze followed the line of her eye to her temple and down, cresting the jawbone to the chin. And it was there, somehow implanted in the structure of her face: a *curve*, which is the only way I can describe it. It repeated itself throughout her, this elongated angle, across the planes of her body: a motif that, if somehow transcribed into words, would explain her.

We spent the night there, talking. Friends of ours would join in then move on, but we were the core, stable. That night I saw many iterations of Klara: the joy I'd first seen on her face, sobered by an earnest authenticity that seemed to contradict it, how one person could be both light and heavy. That duality played out through her whole character: heartfelt sympathy balanced by wry jocularities, insightful observations deflated by her own self-conscious crudeness. She never let the parts of herself rest comfortably, one thing always supplanted another. I watched her lips move, the flickers of her eyelids, and realised that she was somebody with whom I would never become bored.

We kissed later that night, the curve resting in the angle of her hips, in the cup of her closed palm. The party was at its height but we left then and I walked her home, where we fell into bed together. We saw each other every few days, our relationship slowly strengthening, gaining weight and form, until we were together. At least, that's how I remembered it.

## **I Couldn't Tell You Why, Even if I Knew Why**

A week after I learnt of Mark's death, I received another email from Maria. I'd unplugged the phone when I got back from her apartment that night. I was drunk when I did so, and didn't notice until the next day. I felt no need to plug it back in right away. Maria's email invited me, along with a few others, to a dinner party the next weekend. I said I'd go. There was no reason not to, and as pessimistic as I felt, I knew that if I was going to recover from the shock of Mark's death I was going to have to accept the support offered to me.

Maria's apartment was near the top of the building. My fingers trembled as I pressed the buzzer on the street. Then her voice, hoarse with static.

'It's Paul,' I said, concerned that I should have made my tone lighter, that it sounded burdened and Maria had already begun to regret inviting me. Or worse, that she could hear the slur of alcohol.

'Come on up,' she said. She sounded happy. I pushed the heavy door open. The elevator was quick and silent. Another flush of anxiety before I knocked. But I did and when she opened the door I was greeted with a broad smile and a hug.

Jacob was on a leather two-seater, the vacant barstool must have been Maria's. He stood to shake my hand, beer in his left.

'Good to see you, mate,' he said, cheeks flushed. He was always well-presented, with flawless hair and accompanied by the whiff of cologne. His pristine appearance suggested a certain superficiality to me, but I returned the nicety and cast around to greet the others. My hand

was warm and clammy from Jacob's grip. Alex, older than the rest of us by a significant but indeterminable margin, shook my hand and patted me on the back.

'Welcome back,' he said, quietly. I gave him a quizzical look, to which he offered a raised eyebrow. He was referring to something but I was incapable of identifying it. I remembered what the others had said about Klara getting over it, but pushed it from my mind. He returned to his chair and lit one of the thin cigarillos he smoked. No, we wouldn't be talking about Mark tonight.

The others were in the midst of a conversation that they soon fell back into. The apartment was roomy and comfortable, feeling more like a small house than an apartment. High ceilings with decorative cornicing, while sweeping curtains covered what must have been a huge window. There was a restrained sense of class to the furnishings. Maria handed me a beer and, a moment after sipping it and complimenting her choice of art (a Miro reproduction occupied most of the space between the front door and the wall) I heard my name, and Klara was beside me.

'Hi Paul,' she said. I greeted her effusively and we hugged, longer than with anyone else. It was in the moment following the hug, which was impulsive and natural, that a spasm of self-consciousness shot through me, and I jerked away from her and for the first time that night felt I was doing something wrong. The curve was still there; it was still her.

I looked around the room again. I didn't know what I expected: Mark was not there.

'Sorry about the other day,' Klara murmured.

I touched her arm. 'It's alright.'

The dinner Maria prepared was sumptuous and extravagant, an actual feast, probably the first I'd ever sat down to. She eschewed the traditional three-course approach in favour of a wide spread

of shared dishes: trays of smoked meats and fish; glistening roast pork; various salads: olive and long bean, couscous and duck, a strange yoghurt and cinnamon concoction; a fractal, multi-coloured sushi platter; a citrus and bluefish tostada. The world of food in front of us suggested either that Maria was a more complex person than I knew, with talents and interests ranging far beyond the obvious, or that she had filled the last year and a half with new passions. And what that would mean I was at a loss to interpret.

As enticing as the food was, I ate carefully, reserving my attention for the subtleties of interaction. The discomfort still twitched in me. I drank and relaxed, but the sensation that these were people I used to know and would never again was persistent, that somewhere between now and then they had changed, had taken on roles which intertwined with one another's, formed a perfectly closed circuit.

But that was the first I'd spoken to them in many months. How would I even know?

At one point the conversation trickled to a stop. Perhaps everyone had food in their mouths at the same time, or perhaps Mark had surfaced in everyone simultaneously. I suddenly remembered, out of nowhere, that the last time I spoke to Alex he'd been researching Irish resistance to British colonialism. He'd only just started back then, and had yet to formulate a key direction. I asked him about it.

'What's that?' At first he seemed not to remember. 'Oh, yes. That. No, I stopped that before it really started.'

'Really? That's a pity. I remember you always looking into one thing or another.' Before I left, we would have long discussions about history and anthropology—our respective fields—and where they merged. He'd graduated with honours, decades ago. While he didn't pursue further institutionalised study, I couldn't recall a time when he hadn't been engaged in his own personal research.

‘Oh, I’m still very much interested in history. Lately I’ve just been looking more into the theory of history, rather than specific events or narratives. I’ve been thinking about the discourse historians use, the way they establish frameworks, that kind of thing. Looking at history as a practice rather than engaging in it as one, I suppose you could say.’

‘Oh.’ We had always agreed that the most fascinating element of studying people—whether living and breathing, or the stories about those who had been—was the flesh-and-blood events themselves, rather than the abstract notions surrounding the studies. ‘Sounds like a bit of a departure,’ I managed. ‘But interesting.’ People were staring at their plates. I caught a glance from Klara, who smiled and looked down again. I wondered if I’d said something inappropriate, whether there was another revelation waiting to spill out. Maria topped up our wine glasses. People smiled and thanked her but nobody offered a new subject. ‘Can’t say I expected it,’ I said. I smiled at Alex, but he wasn’t looking at me. ‘But I suppose it makes sense. After studying something for a while, eventually you’re going to want to look at how you study it. Everyone changes.’

‘Yes they do,’ Jacob said, a little too eagerly.

Alex praised Maria’s cooking, a sentiment the group echoed enthusiastically, which prompted Maria to elaborate on its origins—where she learnt the recipes, how she chose each dish to complement the others. She told us about a chef who constructed a dish designed to be eaten in a specific order—four stages, from raw fish to fully cooked. As she spoke, the awkwardness of my attempted discussion with Alex dissipated. I managed a laugh from Jacob.

Halfway through the meal, Maria engaged me in a lengthy interrogation about my work trip to Argentina. It felt strange to verbalise what had for so long stayed within me.

‘Gauchos, right?’ Alex said. ‘Hispanic cowboys, outlaws!’ I looked down at my food.

‘Well, their descendents at least,’ I said.

Maria placed her knife and fork alongside one another in the middle of her plate.

‘And what, exactly, were you looking for?’

‘Basically how much of an influence this one guy—Diego Juarez—had on the cultural narratives of the groups in this part of Argentina. There’s still debate as to whether he even existed, if he was multiple people, even if he was actually female. So I interviewed, literally, hundreds of people, listened to their stories, graphed their family trees, that kind of thing. Trying to sift through the contradictions and the ambiguities and see if there’s actually anything beneath the stories. That was the first part, at least.’

‘And then,’ Alex said, the movements of his historian brain visible on his face, ‘to assess the influence of these stories, the cross-influences, the confluences, the twists and turns of the oral tradition, how it shaped these people.’ I grinned. Alex was drunk.

‘So,’ Maria said. ‘Was he real? Or was he a she?’

‘To be honest, I’m still not sure. There were definitely historical figures doing the things he’s rumoured to have done, but whether a single person did them, and precisely who that was, elude me, although I expect to find answers in the data I’ve collected.’ I felt myself slip behind the comforting shield of jargon, my stock academic phrases. ‘The dates are vague but not overtly contradictory, so there is a possibility that there was one person, one agent, behind the mythology. And there are a few stories about female gauchos, too. What is more common in these situations is that the exploits of many individuals get attributed to one person, who ends up more-or-less mythical, half real and half fake, comprising as much what they didn’t do as what they did.’

‘Like Shakespeare.’ Jacob winked. The table offered an appreciative laugh. I glanced at Klara. She hadn’t laughed but was smiling, pushing her fork around on her plate. I watched her until the commotion died and the attention returned to me.

‘So your intention is to deduce, once and for all, who this person was?’

‘If I may be so bold,’ I said. ‘The leading theory at the moment says the opposite, basically says what I just explained. I think there’s enough evidence to mount a case that a single person was behind most of it.’

‘Wouldn’t this mean,’ Alex said, gesticulating with his wine glass, ‘that if this person was, in fact, responsible for these exploits, he or she would become one of the most significant figures in the history of that region?’

I nodded. ‘Yes. Perhaps *the* most significant. Significant cultural figure, at least.’

‘What a discovery,’ Alex said.

‘All riding on that teensy, minute detail,’ Jacob said. ‘Whether or not the bloke actually existed in the first place.’

With that, the conversation drifted onto other things. We finished the wine and I began to enjoy the freewheeling talk and laughter from the group. Even though I was relieved the spotlight had shifted from me, in a way it made things worse, because without the pressure my anxiety became tangible. I became introspective, felt vulnerable. It was impossible to view the night from a neutral standpoint, always held in comparison was the way things used to feel, and the worst was that I didn’t even know if I really did feel a certain way once, or just remembered doing so. So I may well have been holding that night, which was by most criteria enjoyable, up against a standard that never existed. This thought wormed its way into my head, got itself

comfortable up there, wouldn't budge. I couldn't pay attention, just felt worse and worse as it chewed away at me. Mark should have been there.

I stammered an excuse and slipped into the bathroom, the alcohol hot and heavy in my body, where I switched on the exhaust fan and vomited into the toilet.

Back in the dining room, Maria was clearing the table. I had time to sit down, light a cigarette and smile at Klara before there was a knock on the door and the first of Maria's other friends showed up. They introduced themselves but there was no time to really talk before another knock intruded and more people entered. This repeated, and soon the apartment, though large, was dense with people. The banquet was replaced with a selection of liquor and wine. I found myself in conversation with a wiry man with a messy beard and big, peering eyes. He mentioned Borges, which surprised me, hearing Argentina's most celebrated author mentioned so soon after I returned home. Before I could question him further he was distracted by a dark-haired woman and turned to pursue conversation with her.

My drunkenness became a pleasant haze. Words rose from the din, cut off from their speakers, jostling and blending in the air. I planted myself against a wall, outside the bustle, somehow finding a vestige of solitude there. I smiled, in what I imagined to be an ironic manner, at the dizzying party.

My glass emptied itself. I took the few steps over to the table and poured another. Beer, wine, scotch, I thought, dimly. Tomorrow didn't bode well. The liquid splashed into my glass and I noticed Klara waiting for me. I straightened up and beamed at her.

'Having fun?'

'Plenty,' she said.

'Me too.'

‘Doesn’t seem like it. This is not accusatory,’ she assured me. ‘Just an observation.’

‘Well, you know, sometimes I like to take a minute out from the proceedings. Just get some space and watch things unfold. Prepare myself to dive back in.’

‘Makes sense.’ She nodded, pretending to consider my point. ‘It’s just that from the other side of the room it looks a lot more like you’re stewing in booze and laughing to yourself.’ This made me laugh.

‘The first part’s probably true. The second... Well I don’t remember laughing out loud.’

‘Why don’t you show me what you’ve been watching unfold.’ We moved back to my spot. I felt a newfound appreciation for it: the whole room was visible, as was the east wall of the adjoining room. Jacob was the only other member of our core group left in the room. Everybody else, through coincidence or something else, had drifted into the adjacent one. The sensation was very much that of being in a lounge bar somewhere in the middle of the city. Suddenly I couldn’t even see Jacob—whether he’d gone elsewhere or I’d forgotten him—and in a very real sense Klara and I were alone together.

She was dressed in a deep blue dress with a subtle sheen to it, and over that a black cardigan with silver buttons. She had chips of diamonds in her ears. I was struck by the lustre of her hair, still so blonde it was almost white. All that remained of her piercings was a silver ring in one nostril. Immediately I remembered what she said about me laughing to myself and became terrified I was staring at her.

‘Fuck, it’s good to be back with you lot,’ I said, wondering as I spoke if it were true. ‘I missed you, you know, stuck all the way around there.’

‘We missed you, too,’ she said, placing a hand on my forearm. ‘It’s really good to have you back.’ It took everything I had to believe she wasn’t trying to convince herself.

‘I just feel like everything’s been a bit fucked up since I’ve been here.’

‘It’s tough for everyone, yeah. But it’ll get better.’

‘Shouldn’t I be the one saying that stuff to you?’ I immediately regretted invoking Mark’s memory. She just smiled, looking past me.

‘I’m okay,’ she said. ‘I’m tough.’ We smiled at each other a moment before I hugged her. She accepted it. There was something unfamiliar about her, as if she was narrower, sucked in somehow. And the perfume, or the shampoo smell in her hair: I was reminded of something I couldn’t recall, that I might have smelt in a dream, or somewhere long ago. Something sweet and distant, like the ocean on the breeze, several blocks inland, when the water is out of sight.

Releasing her, I was reminded of the art projects she used to undertake. She’d been fascinated by Tehching Hsieh, a New York performance artist, and his One Year Performances: a year spent in a cage; a year spent punching a time clock every hour; a year tied with rope to Linda Montano. Klara’s pieces were less drastic than that (a fortnight blindfolded; a week spent following strangers from the CBD to their homes), but were better documented, and later incorporated into larger, material pieces. What I enjoyed, and what I think she did too, was the disconnection between appearance and reality. A young woman walking idly through town was not that at all.

I asked her if she’d been doing anything like that lately. She looked amused, as if entertained by a thought, or a memory, or had invented one, before embarking on a typically vague response. But this led onto other topics, and we talked. It was as much a release of tension as a gathering of information, and for an hour we were oblivious to the party. Oblivion had always been, for me, something to be sought after—the most blissful repose imaginable—and if the specific action of me being born, my exact consciousness coming into being, wasn’t so unfathomably rare an event, and that event so short, I would genuinely entertain suicide as a

potential life decision. Any kind of oblivion you're likely to find is limited: orgasm, books, drugs, engagement in a truly transcendental meal, the best kind of sleep. Everything ends. And like all those, this short spell was bound to break, and did, in the form of Jacob appearing beside Klara and inserting himself into our conversation, placing himself, in effect, between us.

'You two've been going at it all night,' he exclaimed, apparently unconscious of his tasteless double entendre.

'So have you, by the looks of things,' Klara said, raising an eyebrow at the beer Jacob was clutching. He laughed and spittle landed on my face. I brushed it away. I enjoyed a hypocritical feeling of superiority, and judged Jacob for being intoxicated, or for showing it. He turned to me.

'So how was it,' he asked, clapping a hand to my shoulder. 'The big trip?'

'Very informative,' I said. 'I don't feel much like talking about it at the moment, sorry. I spent a while talking about it at dinner, I'm afraid I've used up all my best witticisms.' Klara was watching, her expression urging me to continue. 'Well, if you insist, I suppose I could expand on it. It's a pretty horrible place, really, everything you've heard is true. It's filthy. It's hot, it smells and if you're not careful you probably won't come back.' I sniffed pretentiously. 'I recommend it highly.'

What I was saying was not clever, just rude, but he didn't seem to notice. I excused myself for the toilet, and while I was gone someone turned up the music. I was tempted to leave, and standing there peeing through the gap in Maria's polished oak toilet seat I decided I was too tired for the trains and would call a cab in the hallway.

Back in the apartment I made a half-hearted attempt to find Maria but decided to abscond, avoiding as many people as possible. Klara found me, though, apparently having lost Jacob.

A hand on my shoulder, she stood on her toes to yell into my ear.

‘You’re not going without saying goodbye, are you?’

‘Of course not.’

‘It’s too loud in here. Let’s go outside.’ I nodded, and moved towards the door. She grabbed my wrist and led me back the other way, deeper into the apartment.

Passing through the crowd was one last horror. We finally broke out of the din and onto the fire escape. The noise died as soon as the door latched behind us. Before I had time to take in the view Klara had started up the ladder, her knees in line with my head. I stuck the beer in my jacket pocket and followed.

There, something strange happened, halfway between the mess of the party, with everything it brought up in me, and the roof—a future I could see as being pristine and still. I stored a few details from the party, claiming something back, because I knew that by the time I came down I’d have forgotten most of it. Halfway up the ladder I looked towards her. Klara’s dress had ridden up. I could make out the top of the stocking gripping her thigh, an inch of pure white flesh between it and the hem of her dress. There was something sublimely erotic in this. An inch of flesh could be more seductive than a whole body of it, it just depends on which inch that is. Those two strips of skin suggested so much: the discontinuity of her clothing, an access point in an otherwise well-formed suit of armour. I stopped climbing, waited for her to finish, content with watching the way the high heels of her shoes hooked over each rung. Seeming so much better suited to climbing than my own flat soles.

I felt that I was following her into a private space.

I pulled myself onto the roof. Klara was standing over the other side, her back to me, looking out. It was the first time I’d been on a rooftop in the middle of the city. The hovering

feeling, being level with the middles of skyscrapers, the lights, glittering and incessant, the drift of traffic noise below and the trains moving on elevated tracks around the streets, vanishing between buildings leaving the rattling echo of their mechanics in the air. I strolled over and stood next to her, without speaking. A ledge ran around the edge of the building, about a foot high.

For a while we just watched, paced slowly around the edge of the building. I tried to work out where we were, which way we were facing. And, from there, exactly which streets I was looking at, which buildings I could identify. Nothing worked; I couldn't find a point of reference.

Gradually my thoughts turned to the party. There was no concern anyone would notice us missing, but I thought about Jacob and how I harassed him, and realised with an icy clarity that the game with Klara didn't start there, rather it had been in effect since she approached me as I poured that scotch, and by taking her over to my spot on the wall I had agreed to its terms, even if I had only just discovered what they were. The lingering weight of her hand on my forearm; our playful alliance, mocking Jacob; her firm grip, locking her fingers through mine—I lined these moments into a climbing trajectory, one culminating now, with the city spread beneath us: her taking me up here, a clear move, and demanding an equal response. I had no idea what that could be, even what I wanted. Was she trying to separate me for a reason and, if so, did I want any part in it? Grief makes people strange. Suddenly it seemed that by taking part in the game I had obligations, regardless of my desires (some of which were, to be truthful, aligned with the purpose of the game, although the greater desire was to not sleep with Mark's widow), and that if I failed to fulfil them I was any combination of weak, flighty, or unreliable; cruel or obtuse; in display of a distinct and unattractive inadequacy.

So to prevent this, and to somehow prevent the other thing from happening too, to hover between these extremes, at least until I could work out what was going to happen, I talked. I ran an endless, labyrinthine monologue, which to my ears was grammatically correct if disarmingly (and incomprehensibly) complex. I began to take pleasure in it, using words to

obscure rather than clarify, bundling up a mismatched collection of thoughts and impulses, filling the space on the roof with my nonsense.

After a few minutes of it, though, I started to believe what I was saying. And it's only without memory of what I said that I am capable now of writing about it, since I believe I might have said a few rather personal things. Things that might have made Klara uncomfortable, if the mere fact of my ranting hadn't already. I felt myself slipping away from meaning and into narcissism, and there was a sense of trying to expel something from myself, to rid myself of something through the sheer exhaustion of possibilities. Nothing can happen twice by virtue of its already having happened once. If I was upset about something besides the obvious, even if I didn't know what it was, then by saying everything I was sure to say the one thing I needed to.

I don't know how it ended, but it must have, because at one point there was silence, or as near to silence as you can get in the middle of the city.

Klara stepped onto the ledge. I rushed to her.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Oh,' she said, facing the edge. 'Don't worry, it's okay. I won't jump.' She giggled, though there was no humour in the laugh. She held her right hand out to me. I took it and stood behind her. I wrapped my left arm around her waist (an action we performed years earlier, horizontally, staring out a rain-glossed window on what I can call, with the benefit of hindsight, the day our relationship truly started to buckle under the pressure of idleness).

I dropped my chin onto her shoulder. With a foot of concrete beneath her she was about my height. That unfamiliar smell returned; her body felt firm and soft at the same time.

I wondered, then, holding her, why I didn't draw us back to the safety of the roof. She had the strength to topple us both. I linked my hands around her.

‘You remember that one time...’ Her voice was calm. She stared out ahead of her. ‘We ran into each other on the pier?’

Moments from our past appeared before me, as disparate as the few stars in the dampened city sky above us.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. Her body tightened and she turned her head. Her profile appeared in silhouette against the glow beneath us.

‘You don’t remember our first date?’ There was an edge to her voice. ‘We ran into each other on the pier beforehand?’

‘I remember kissing you at that party.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘At the port, where we went for our first proper date. You got there early and wanted to have a drink before we met. You told me later, you were nervous. But there wasn’t a bar nearby. So you went for a walk along the pier. I remember you telling me. You thought the sea air would clear your head. But I was out there, killing time. So instead of getting time to gather yourself you were thrown right into it.’

She laughed out loud, a laugh that carried into the empty air before us. I remembered nothing of it. I was sure I was correct about the events of our relationship—eleven years later it was still the only serious relationship I’d ever had, and besides, we’d played the narrative game, essentially an elaborate shared nostalgia, building the events of our lives into myth.

My head cleared, as if someone had poured cool water through it, and I understood what was happening. It was obvious now. Mark. She was describing her first date with Mark. I’d been there when he got home afterwards, his skateboard roaring on the footpath, the sharp crack as he stopped and stomped its lip, sending it flipping to his hand. He burst into the house elated; we drank all night. He told me they’d gone to the port.

I had to say something. I knew she was smiling because the outline of her face changed and beneath my hand, almost imperceptibly, her belly quivered with the shadow of a laugh.

‘It was special,’ I murmured.

Her fingers squeezed mine. ‘I love you.’

Out of nowhere a heavy door slammed.

Klara shrieked, lost her balance. I tightened my grip around her and threw us backwards. I hit the ground hard, my right arm taking the weight, a deadening pain shooting through to the shoulder. Her scream continued as she fell on top of me. She realised she wasn’t plummeting to her death, started crying. Through sobs she mentioned her ankle, but I couldn’t see it with her on top of me and she didn’t move, just lay there, stunned. There was a scrape on her cheek. A bruise was beginning to form.

‘What the fuck?’ A man’s voice. I had forgotten about the slamming door and what that meant. ‘What the hell are you two doing?’ I strained to see who was approaching but he was behind me, and with Klara on top I couldn’t turn. I held her by the shoulders and tried to sit her up. She complied slowly, as if asleep. I stood, leaving Klara sitting there, and turned to see Jacob staring at me. Even in the dark I could tell he was loose and wild with drink.

‘Look mate,’ I started. ‘This isn’t what it looks like. She’s hurt, get some ice or something.’

‘You’re fucked,’ he spat. ‘You’re such a cunt.’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ I said. ‘I didn’t do anything, neither of us did. Don’t be a dickhead. Get some ice.’ He made to turn and for a second I relaxed, thinking he’d seen sense. Instead he whirled and lunged at me, clumsily, the alcohol slowing him. I sidestepped and he stumbled, but didn’t fall. He threw another punch, missed. I backed towards the fire escape. He came at me

again. This time his fist connected. Not hard, but enough to hurt. I swung at him, and as drunk as I was, he was drunker, and my fist landed somewhere near the middle of his face. There was blood.

It was then that I noticed Klara sitting up on the ledge, one shoe off, foot on her knee, staring at me, shocked and dishevelled. That was also the moment at which there were voices behind me and Maria was there, and someone else I didn't recognise. They had seen me hit Jacob, would soon see the mark on Klara's face and her wounded ankle.

I should have explained myself, should have blamed Jacob, called on Klara to defend me. I should have sputtered and shouted, insisted on my story, demanded the truth. Seeing the blood on Jacob's face, the impossibly vulnerable huddle of Klara's body, I came up against the uselessness of words. The rooftop tableau seemed to reveal every nuance of my pathetic being: my infatuation with Klara, my opportunism in going up to the roof with her, my forever unresolved fight with Mark, the pointless jealousy that characterised me. And it revealed it silently, unassailably, a scene which said, for everyone to see: this is how he is.

I left without saying anything, and nobody tried to stop me. For a long time, that stood as the last night I saw any of them.

## Shedding Everything

I worked daily, analysing my research findings and typing up my results. Since I had funded the trip myself I was not beholden to publishers or funding bodies. I took my time, working when I felt like it, observing the way links emerged in the material, invisible cross-currents that gradually made their presence felt as I came to inhabit the territory more fully, like shy animals learning to trust humans. Somehow the months passed.

Despite the number of interviews I'd conducted, all the data I'd gathered, I wasn't any closer to an answer to the question I'd set out to answer: the identity of whoever was behind the old gaucho stories. I don't doubt that the answer was buried in there somewhere, but I lacked the ability to line the facts into a coherent order.

As the months passed, the nights grew longer. I became familiar with the moonlight slanting through the windows of my living room, the way it changed, the way the light was never the same one night to the next. I spent those evenings staring out at the sliver of sky I could see between the roofs of neighbouring houses. I couldn't work anything out. I read once that there is no cure for memory. During this period I discovered what that meant.

One thing that always got me, though. One thing I could not understand. When I left the apartment that night, Klara never tried to contact me again. I knew she was still in mourning, and would continue to be. I wasn't worried about what she'd said on the rooftop, her confusion. But I was worried about her, and believed we could have helped pull each other out of the mire Mark's death had thrown us into.

Lacking a better explanation, I decided Klara saw me as a risk to her own wellbeing. That she associated me too closely with Mark or that there was a chance we'd end up sleeping together

again. Whatever her reasons, I'd never find out. All I knew then was right in front of me: I had no past, and everyone I knew had disappeared.

The only change I wanted to make while away was to shed Klara, or her memory, or the part of me that loved her. The money shrine had been desecrated, so all I had to do was lever out of the part of me that wanted her. Whether I'd done that in Argentina or not, it didn't matter. After the events of the party, I had shed her either way.

I decided, the morning after the party, that I wouldn't be returning to work.

## Eating the Answer; Another 16; Sleep

I had my research to keep me busy, but the shock of losing everybody close to me—literally everybody close to me—didn't abate. I was on my bed reading a Graham Greene novel when I remembered something Mark did for me once. Greene wrote that for most people, the cities they lived in were no more than a few buildings, a few streets, a few people. Eleven years ago, after Klara left, I lost touch with my friends, didn't leave the house, gave in to my anxiety. In Greene's terms, the city shrunk down around me.

One day, after a few months of this, Mark arrived on my doorstep. We went for a walk, going nowhere, and talked about it. The things he said then let my city open up again. Not that he said anything particularly profound. It was just having that connection with another person, knowing my actions affected someone other than myself. It was only after Mark left that day that I realised how much definition I'd lost. Not just physically (I'd grown fat), but in a deeper way, too, as a person. I decided that night, cooking the first healthy meal I'd eaten in months, that the definition I'd lost would have continued had I stayed isolated, that eventually I would have dispersed completely, not a person any more.

So walking the suburbs had helped back then, and maybe it would again. At the very least it was a kind of tribute to my friend.

I started catching trains. I would go to the end of the line and explore the suburbs around there. Then, when that was done, get off at the penultimate stop and explore there. And so on.

I found a community apparently untouched since the 60s—corner store butchers with hand-painted signs, olive trees and corrugated iron fences, tin roofs gleaming orange in the dusk sun. I got utterly lost in one of those outer-suburbia fabricated-home super-suburbs, all twisting courts and boulevards. I wandered the leafy domains of the rich: wide avenues in the shade of

enormous fig trees, the ground softened by their fallen fruit. Porsches moving silently through automatic gates towards mansions barely visible from the street.

These adventures, however mundane, served their purpose. While walking I was distracted by the detail around me. I had time to examine the colour of the ripening pears hanging over someone's fence, the decades-old newspapers tacked up in rundown delis' windows, a lane saturated in vicious anti-Vietnamese graffiti. I wondered if I was the first to walk down there since the slogans were painted, why they were still there. I would arrive home completely drained and empty of thought. I'd fix dinner, which I barely tasted, wash up, drink a glass of water and then, after lying on my bed and opening my book, fall asleep.

I invented several rules to guide my project. One, that the only suburb I would know the name of was the stop I had to get off at. I would do my best to divorce my knowledge of the area from what I saw, attempting to shed any preconceptions. I wanted to experience the city as one continuous stretch, what it was, rather than have it broken into artificial blocks of named suburbs, or experience it as disparate suburban islands linked by trains.

The second rule was to leave the house promptly at six o'clock in the morning. This would beat the rush, and I liked the idea of being out of sync, but really I liked the calm beauty the suburbs have early in the morning, almost eerie in their peacefulness. It seemed a shame to miss that. The second part of this rule was that I would return home as soon as I detected a dimming of light. That way I would experience the dusk and sunset while still managing to get home before dark.

The final rule was that I would make no attempt to permanently store anything I saw along my trips. No photographs, no notes—nothing. The idea was to unburden myself of an attachment to the past, to accept the momentary nature of the things I saw and to leave them at that. Which is, really, all anything ever is.

Of course things remained, hence my ability to recount them now. I'm not going to suggest that these things still exist, or that they existed in the way I remember them to. If I discovered anything it's that my past is just images.

One morning I set out as I did every day, at precisely six AM. I walked to the train station and caught the Sandringham line. On the train's map, I counted the circles down from the final stop to work out where I needed to get off. I waited, pressed the button, and moments later was alone on platform, the sound of the train receding.

The suburb bore an uncanny resemblance to the Adelaide neighbourhood I grew up in. European trees and native Australian shrubbery on wide median strips running through the streets. Old shopfronts with ads still in their windows, painted signs still visible on the awnings. It was a suburb for middle-class families and the elderly, parks scattered throughout it, a well-funded public primary school. It sat at the bottom of some foothills which rose to the east and lent it a pastoral air. The sound of people hitting a tennis ball echoed unseen across the blocks.

I wound my way through the suburb with no direction in mind. I crossed through a park and stopped in front of a bronze statue erected in the middle of it. A typical colonial representation, some lesser-known servant of the Crown. Whether it was the sculptor's fault, contemporary art, or some other, ineffable cause, the statue's face had been shorn clean off. A perfectly flat plane—effaced. I stared at the strange thing a while, moved so the sun's reflection fell directly onto the plate.

I didn't focus on anything particular but my gaze would catch on certain things: old graffiti slashed across an electrical box, a discarded skateboard, a triangular flag fluttering atop a flagpole. At one point I came across a double-block house which formed a wall against the road, unpainted brick gone soft and orange with age. Half the housing block was taken up by the

massive brick wall, the other half a normal driveway and front-yard situation. I stood before it, confused. It resembled my childhood home. If there were details differentiating them they were too subtle to recognise. When I was young I played in the front yard, rode my bike up and down the driveway, fell off and smashed my face on the concrete once.

If this neighbourhood was anything like the one I'd grown up in, there would be an elderly European couple living next-door who spent their days standing by their front gate, watching the empty street, or sitting in their living room, looking out through the gauzy curtains. I moved on, eventually following the block around the next corner.

Halfway down, a gravel lane opened running behind the houses. Networks of lanes criss-crossed through my old neighbourhood, so it didn't surprise me to find them here either. Without hesitating, I turned down it, between the back yards of the houses.

An itching sensation passed through my body as I stepped onto the gravel, as if thousands of crickets were reverberating under my skin. A cry formed in my throat, but the sensation dissipated as quickly as it had occurred. My flesh was left feeling absent, as if a layer had been removed. I rubbed my forearms and kept walking, the soles of my sneakers kicking clouds of fine dust.

These lanes always were still. Like being between two places, hidden by the trees in the back yards of gardens. Towering eucalypts; nectarine, orange and mandarin; woolly acacias. The yellow gravel and blue tongue lizards, the empty sky, the feeling of being somewhere that doesn't exist.

From somewhere nearby came the murmur of someone's radio, but I couldn't make out the words.

I made it to the middle of the lane, sheltered by the foliage of an enormous lillypilly tree. Its fruit had dropped in a sticky carpet atop the dirt, purple juice leaking. It grew out from the

corner of a backyard, easily taller than the house. I stood at the breezeblock wall that bordered the property. Such an empty place in such a busy city. Just audible was the radio, and behind that, which might not have been there at all, the distant hum of cars out on the main road. I stuck my toe into a gap in the breezeblock and pulled myself up so I could see into the yard. The lawn hadn't been mowed in a while, but wasn't yet completely out of control. Fruit trees lined one side of the yard. The driveway extended to the end of the block, stopping beneath an empty car port. Pallets of bricks suggested that the back patio was undergoing renovations. A sundial stood in the centre of the lawn. I hitched myself up and jumped the wall, landing on a bed of ivy. I fully expected someone to burst out of the house and confront me, but nothing happened. From over the wall I could hear the patter of lilypillies falling to the earth.

Once I'd taken a few steps into the yard my concerns about being caught evaporated, and for no rational reason—I just stopped thinking about it. The flowers running alongside the driveway, upon closer inspection, turned out to be made of a kind of plasticised cloth. The sundial in the centre of the grassy patch had no dial, was useless. As I wandered the yard, my attitude towards the house shifted imperceptibly until a point when, plucking an orange from a tree along the fence, I knew I was going to enter the house, had always been going to, and it was only because I wanted to explore that I hadn't already. Tinted glass ran along the back of the house, except for a small brick unit which I assumed to be the toilet or bathroom, judging by the plastic tubing running out of it.

I peeled the skin from the orange and bit into the flesh. Juice sprayed, splattering onto my shirt. As I ate, I tried to remember what time of year oranges grew, but soon discarded the question. Surely I was eating the answer.

I approached the back door as I would have my own, wiping the juice from my face, not paying attention to anything around me. I assumed the door to be unlocked. Or rather, didn't assume at all. The thought never crossed my mind.

‘Hi,’ someone called, behind me. I turned. A girl was peering over the wall I’d just jumped. It didn’t occur to me to invent a story, since an amiability in her voice told me she didn’t think I was an intruder. I walked over to her.

‘Hi,’ I said. She could have been seventeen or eighteen: fair hair, clear skin with a spatter of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her forearms rested atop the wall.

‘Are you the new owner?’

‘I... Will be,’ I said. ‘It’s not official yet.’

‘Oh. This place has been empty for ages.’

‘Really? Huh, the real estate agent didn’t mention anything weird.’

She gave me a look. ‘It’s not really *weird*, is it? Anyway, I’m Lana.’ She curled her left hand around the edge of the brick and pulled herself up, extending her other hand. I shook it, unable to help but smile at a mature gesture performed in such a juvenile way.

‘Paul,’ I said. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘You too. So what are you doing here? Just having a look around?’

‘Yeah... I’m not really sure. I just wanted to come down and see it again. I’ve never owned a house before.’ I am not usually a good liar, but my new role felt natural. ‘It’s an odd feeling.’

‘You think a lot of really normal things are strange,’ she said. I didn’t know what to say to that. Then she laughed. ‘But that’s okay. It makes you interesting.’ We spoke for a few minutes. She told me she lived down the lane and used it often, but hadn’t seen anyone around this house for ages. She seemed bright enough, and if she didn’t suspect me of lying about my position I’d have chalked it up to a trusting nature rather than a stupid one.

‘So you’ve lived here a while then?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I live with my parents in that house over there.’ She turned and pointed over the back fence. The top floor of a white, two-storey house was visible there. ‘My whole life.’

‘It’s a nice area,’ I said.

‘Yep.’

Another silence.

‘Are you... Studying? Or working?’ I asked, eventually.

‘Neither,’ she said. ‘I decided not to.’

‘Why not? It’s kind of important.’

She scrunched her face up. ‘Maybe for some people, not for me. Anything I want to learn I can do from home. I probably learn a lot more than most of the kids at school anyway.’

‘What about a job? You need to graduate to go to uni. Even some TAFE courses.’  
Talking to Lana like this I suddenly felt very old.

She shrugged. ‘I’ll work that out when I come to it. I’m fine for now.’

I decided to let it go. I didn’t want to upset her. And, in a weird way, I kind of believed her, that it was actually for the best. ‘I take it this is your first year out of school, then?’

She shook her head. ‘Nope. I dropped out at the start of Year 12.’

‘Don’t you get bored?’

‘I have hobbies.’

I nodded, looking up at the house she'd pointed to. A window faced us. Had she seen me from there, watched me jump the fence?

'Anyway,' she said. 'I should go. Maybe I'll see you around another time.'

'Maybe. Bye, Lana.'

With one last smile she hopped down from the wall and disappeared.

I crossed the lawn, feeling that by saying it out loud, the house had somehow become mine.

The back door slid open as easily as I expected. Inside the floor was tiled. Bulky curtains let a thin light in, keeping the heat out, too. Goosebumps prickled on my forearms. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust, but once they had, the building seemed immeasurably larger than it had from the outside. An effect most likely due to the stripped interior. Not just furniture, but most internal walls were missing as well. A couple still stood—obviously load-bearers—but it was like being inside a warehouse, bare concrete scars on the walls where partitions had once been. Such a fundamental alteration didn't fit with the superficial renovations outside, but maybe the owners—or whoever did this—thought there was more wrong inside the house than out.

I moved slowly, coming to the end of the tiling. Stepping onto the next surface—carpet—a dim shape moved down the other end of the space. I stopped, one foot on tiles, the other on the carpet. It was only there for a flash. Frozen in place I tried to rationalise my situation. If truly abandoned, it was possible people squatted in the building. Unlikely in these suburbs, far from the centre of the city. But possible.

A minute passed and nothing happened. I moved my other foot to the carpet and saw another scuttle, again down the far end of the building. Stopped. Moved again, stopped. Could it? I crept along, half-crouched. What had initially appeared in bursts stabilised into a steady dipping

motion. About halfway, I straightened and looked back towards the entrance. The light petered out a few meters into the building, barely illuminating the stretch of tiles. If I afforded myself this pause it was because I knew I was no longer in danger. Finally, right at the end, barely visible in the darkness, I found myself staring back out of a mirror.

More disconcerting than anything the mirror could reveal was the very fact of its being there. Unframed, it covered most of the wall, which was probably the back of the old brick wall that faced the street. The mirror ended maybe a foot off the ground and presumably went right to the top—without more light I couldn't tell. Who would need a mirror that size? An image of dancers training in the dusty space.

I needed light once there was something to see. I didn't care that opening all the curtains might show the neighbours I was there. I felt I deserved my time in the house. I fumbled in the dark, running my hands along the rough rendered walls. I couldn't find the curtains, or any glass—all the windows had been boarded up. Cardboard boxes had been flattened over the panes, fastened in place with duct tape. Tearing these down didn't seem right. I would have been altering the building, stating my presence physically: as it was I was spectral. The taste of orange lingered sweet in my mouth.

I marched back to the glass doors and pulled those curtains back instead. The space was flooded with light. I'd grown used to the gloom and the sudden brightness dazed me. Now that the mirror was visible, the already cavernous space expanded to near infinite proportions. The walls gleamed an irrational white—an absence of colour beyond white. The backyard was both behind and before me, stretching out forever. It was as if I were adrift in a field of light.

Tiredness overcame me. I wandered aimlessly around the house until I lay down on the carpet, and fell asleep.

‘Are you okay?’ I opened my eyes to see someone crouched beside me. I jumped, startled, before realising it was Lana. It took a minute to recognise her. My neck was stiff and my left arm numb.

‘I’m fine,’ I said, groggy. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I-’ Here she paused. My mind cleared a little. Although she’d done the right thing by trying to wake me, she knew she’d have to confess to looking into my backyard. Or what she believed was my backyard. ‘I saw you lying on the floor. I thought maybe you’d hurt yourself.’

‘What? Oh, thank you. No... Something weird happened.’ Sensing that this was nothing serious, her face broke into a grin.

‘I’m not surprised!’

I looked at her, creased my eyebrows, not understanding. Then I laughed. ‘Okay, well this one really was weird.’

‘Uh-huh.’ She stood up and crossed her arms, glanced around the house. It was growing dim outside. How long had I slept? ‘What’s with the mirror?’ she asked.

‘I, uh, I don’t know. That’s what’s weird.’

‘You don’t know? It’s your house.’

‘It was there when I bought it. I’ll probably get rid of it when I move in.’

‘It is weird. Kinda cool, though.’ I stood up. She started towards it.

‘It is kind of, actually,’ I said, following her.

We stood in front of it. The light, not to mention Lana’s company, negated most of the discomfort I’d felt before, though I was still wary. I looked at our reflections. Me in a blue shirt, sleeves rolled up, jeans fretting at the hems. My dark hair looked black, the light made my

features sharper than they were. She was in jeans and a grey hooded jumper with JLB in block, college type lettering on the front. I didn't know what it stood for. She was not a beautiful girl, although her face had an endearing quality, probably the effect of both its gentleness and her tendency to smile. The brightness of her face exacerbated my deep-set eyes.

'You're very tall,' she said.

'You're... About normal, I think.'

'Has your nose always had that kink in it?'

'No. Someone punched me, years ago.'

'Why'd they punch you?'

'They were drunk.'

'Were you?'

'Yes.'

'You don't seem like the kind of guy who goes around getting into fights,' she said.

'It's true, I'm not. That was the only fight I've ever been in. Except a few little scraps in high school. And it wasn't even a fight, really. Just one punch.'

'It must have hurt.'

'I'm okay now.'

Throughout the exchange we maintained eye contact through our reflections. She stood casually, hands in the pocket of her jumper, not bearing even the slightest trait of insecurity, as if she did this sort of thing all the time.

'Good,' she said, eventually.

It didn't occur to me until I'd walked her to the back wall and she'd hopped it and disappeared—again—that if you were to put our second encounter in the most objective terms possible it would seem to be something completely different to what it actually was. A girl in an empty house with a thirty-year old stranger who had lied about living there. No—it was that, too. The problem's just in what people might think about that description. The sun reddened in the fading sky, the clouds turning pink.

By the time I got off the train I'd decided that I would somehow have to come to start living in the house. Which, in a way, I already had.

## De Chirico I; Pink and Green

I woke in the middle of the night. The dream still stood with stark clarity. I remembered long shadows cast over the yard by objects I couldn't perceive, the way the space around me seemed to swell and contract. I felt tense. Hovering over the memory of the dream was the feeling of someone just out of view, hidden in the periphery, watching everything but remaining out of sight. The dream brought to mind an image from De Chirico. I got out of bed and took a book of his paintings from my shelf—one of the few books remaining after I packed my things away. Leaving my bedroom, the tension dissipated. It was only then that I realised the house phone had been ringing. The microwave clock read 3:15.

I made a sandwich, then filled a glass of water from the faucet and sat down at the kitchen table. I eventually found the picture: *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*. An empty plaza, the shadow of a figure cast from outside the scope of the piece. A young girl running with a hoop. As with much of De Chirico's work, a triangular flag fluttered in the far distance, the terrain subtly warped. It is a painting with a menacing air to it—something horrific seems about to occur, although the painting offers no answers. At one point it occurred to me that the girl was Lana and the shadow cast was my own. This disturbed me. I didn't see myself capable of doing anything malicious, let alone to her.

I stayed with the book until sunlight broke through the blinds. I may well have fallen into sleep, sitting up in the chair. But I don't think I did. I have no memory of sleep, just happened to find the right painting at the right time, when it somehow fit perfectly into where I was then. Strange how a painting can stay the same for sixty years and one night suddenly transform. Maybe no art is ever the same thing all the time, is rather as many things as there are people to see it. I stayed awake until the sun was high, then left the house. It was only when I stepped onto

the footpath that I remembered the phone call, and wondered who might have been trying to talk to me.

It took nearly an hour to get back to the abandoned house. As usual, the trains were quiet. Alone like this, I had time to stare out the window at the landscape rushing past, ruminating on my reasons for travelling out there again. Part of me acknowledged the hope that Lana would be there.

Eventually the train stopped in Mitcham. A sandstone building that may once have been a station master's office. The train carried on; the area was deserted. Sunlight passed through the pines running along the tracks, casting a dappled light across the surface of the platform. The chopping sound of a helicopter floated miles above. I crossed the empty main road and headed into the narrow streets of the suburbs. Only once the road was out of sight could I hear the drift of car engines over the houses.

Strange, I thought, passing a yard in which a sprinkler had been left on: strange that someone called last night. A wrong number, perhaps. Stranger that I hadn't recognised the sound. I wanted to believe it was Klara calling. The time of night suggested a crisis, practical, emotional, spiritual—I was comforted by the thought that she might have needed me in such a situation.

Instead of walking straight in through the front gate I turned the corner and went back through the lane again. The moment something turns to ritual. The same radio was playing on the edge of audibility, the same gravel crunched under the soles of my shoes. It could easily have been the same day, any day.

I stood with my arms resting on the breezeblock wall, looking into the garden. The plastic flowers were convincing from this distance, the sundial plausible. I started to wish there was

somewhere I could get a cool drink. Maybe the water in the house was still functioning. Sweat dribbled from my brow.

I found a foothold in the wall and heaved myself up over it, anticipating the drop and landing with a pleasing agility. As soon as I'd done so the sound of an aeroplane faded in overhead. A plane cut a line across the sky, vapour extending behind it like a tail. Inseparable from that image was Mark's, and with it a sickness that materialised in my stomach like a lump of clay. Suddenly my whole situation seemed ridiculous—here I was breaking into someone's house, again, for no discernible reason, making friends with a girl half my age, spending whole nights awake just sitting at the kitchen table. I sunk to the ground, resting my back against the wall. What was happening to me?

I'd left the curtains open the night before. Another idiotic move. I thought of the neighbours I'd had as a child, the old couple who stood at their front gate all day. Any observant neighbour would notice the difference, which was exactly the kind of thing I didn't want to happen. With this thought came the startling realisation that despite this jolt of self-awareness, I was planning on returning here anyway. I held my face in my hands. Knowing where I was gave rise to disgust; I imagined Mark seeing me here, or Klara—I didn't care what the others thought.

I had started scratching my lower back. Soon the itch intensified, spreading like fire across my hands and up my arms. I looked down. I'd sat in the bed of ivy covering the ground beneath the lillypilly tree. I jumped up with a start, my skin burning. The flesh around my wrists was already turning a splotchy pink. Then, as if it couldn't get worse, the itching started on my face. I ran inside and turned left, towards where I thought the bathroom might have been. Dead tubing stuck out from the walls above a gutted vanity. A section in the corner where a shower would once have been, but again just the stumps of missing faucets poking out from the tiles. My face burnt like someone had thrown acid on it. I could barely see.

I wanted to scream my lungs out, smash my head against the wall, give up. I went back outside and Lana was standing there, by the sundial. She gasped when she saw me and rushed over.

‘What’s wrong with your skin?’

‘I fell in the ivy.’

‘Are you okay?’ She must have noticed my face by then. I could only imagine how it looked, patchy pink from the rash, eyes rheumy, cheeks shining.

‘It burns,’ I said. ‘There’s no water inside.’

‘Wait here.’

I stood, too overcome to think about anything. Soon enough she appeared again and jogged over to me with a white tube in her hand. She uncapped it and squeezed a worm of paste into her palm. She halved it between her hands, grabbed my wrists and ran her hands up and down my arms. Coolness spread across my skin, the pain dissipating. She squeezed more out and took my hands. She spread the cream across my skin, massaged my palm. Her eyes remained fixed on my hands as she did this, apparently concentrating. I felt the delicate bones of her hands, the sense of care implicit in the action. Her skin was clear, a brush of tiny hairs across her cheek, only visible in the sun; her nose pointing up slightly at the tip; her eyes a distinct green. Her palm passed against my cheek, and in the motion I detected something like tenderness. Undoubtedly just a consequence of the gesture.

She capped the tube and slipped it into her pocket. She was wearing cut-off denim shorts, a sleeveless red blouse with a flower pattern and a pair of white rubber thongs.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘That helps a lot.’

‘I’ve had stings like that too. They hurt.’

‘Yeah, it was really stupid of me actually, I just sat down in it.’

‘You weren’t paying attention?’

‘I guess not.’

She looked at me. ‘I wonder about people like you sometimes. How you can get so wrapped up thinking about something that you don’t even notice the simple things around you. Then I wonder, are you smarter because you’re thinking about all these important things, or are you stupider because you don’t notice the really obvious stuff?’

‘Maybe neither—too stupid to notice the obvious stuff, not smart enough to think anything important.’

‘You don’t seem stupid,’ she gave me a scrutinising look here. ‘Unless there’s something you’re hiding.’

I grinned. ‘It’s pretty hard for a stupid person to fake being smart. As soon as they meet an actual smart person the jig’s up.’

She considered this, cocking her head and looking out over my shoulder, towards the roof of the house, or the sky behind it. Perhaps deciding if what I’d said was a compliment. ‘Look at that,’ she said, pointing behind me. I turned.

‘What am I looking for?’

‘See the weather vane? What’s that on top of it?’

‘It looks,’ I said tentatively, ‘like a whale.’

‘A big blue fish.’ She almost whispered it. eventua

‘A whale’s not a fish,’ I said. ‘It’s a mammal.’

'I know.'

We were silent. Somewhere a bird made a noise like a ratchet.

'Yeah,' she said. 'There's a window beneath it. Might be an attic.'

'Might be.' If I'd bought the house I'd know whether it had an attic, but she didn't mention it.

'He heaps me,' she said.

'What?' The phrase was familiar.

'It's from a TV show.'

'It's from something else, too.'

She was staring at the whale. Then she spoke. 'You want something to drink? No-one's at my place.'

Instinctively I felt the urge to beg off, make some excuse, a moralistic voice needling me. But the silence of the suburbs drowned it out, the years she'd spent here, alone, her relentless friendliness: she was lonely.

I followed her down the lane, away from where I entered from the street. It formed a T-junction just a few meters on, and we followed the intersecting lane away from my place. We soon came to the rear of a large, two-storey house. Overlapping planks of wood, all white, with a black tiled roof. I think the style might be called colonial. It wouldn't have been out of place in a Mark Twain novel. Unlike mine, though, Lana's house had a gate that led onto the lane. She fiddled with the latch and held it open for me. I stepped into her yard.

Flowers grew in vivid bursts along the fences and in patches throughout the yard, long grass rising between them. A copse of citrus trees huddled in the back corner, lemons and limes.

The house overlooked it all, majestic above the wildness of the garden. Lana led me along a path of shiny quartz pebbles towards the porch. Two deckchairs sat beside a small wicker table. It held an ashtray with the remains of a couple of cigarettes, an empty glass, a lighter and a book.

‘Wait here,’ Lana said. ‘Sit down if you like. I’ll be back in a minute.’ I lay back on one of the deck chairs and closed my eyes. The light burnt red behind my eyelids. I wondered if that redness was blood, lit up by the sun, or just some optical trick. The cream had worked its magic; I no longer felt the need to rip the skin from my body. Instead it felt insubstantial, as if it wasn’t really there.

I remembered when I first met Mark. It wasn’t until I let myself remember it that I discovered I’d been holding off, fending off any thought of him. The memory came over me like painkillers kicking in.

## Moving; Settling

'I actually have no idea what you're talking about,' I said to Mr. Fanshawe, my high school principal, after he accused me of stealing.

'So you say. But you wouldn't be in here if nothing happened, would you?'

'I'm not saying nothing happened. I'm just saying I don't know anything about it.'

'Mr. Domenico identified you, Paul. He saw you near the supply room and when he went in he noticed the missing equipment.'

'What would I want with a bunch of science stuff?'

The absurd image of a locker crammed with beakers. The true-to-life image of the bag of weed in my schoolbag, the weed me and Maria were going to smoke after school.

'I'm reluctant to imagine,' Principal Fanshawe said. 'That is beside the point, though. Theft is the issue here.'

'Why would I do it if I didn't want the stuff?'

'Look, Paul. Students lie to me every day. It's just as easy for you to say you had no reason to steal them as it is for you to say you didn't steal them in the first place. It doesn't make it true.'

'What about Mr. Domenico, though? What if he was wrong? He's got glasses.'

'Mr. Domenico is *long*-sighted. He's sharp enough to identify a student, especially one in his home group. I trust his judgement.'

I stayed silent. Mr. Fanshawe had decorated his office with all kinds of cheesy stuff I assumed was meant to make it comfortable. Photos of smiling students, certificates, drawings from kids in the primary school. We were sitting in these low, armless, sofa-type chairs he used with everyone. He tried to keep it “egalitarian”. That was his word. There was actually an apple on his desk. I’d have laughed if I wasn’t facing imminent expulsion.

‘You’re a good student, Paul. You do well in class and you don’t cause trouble—’

‘Exactly!’ I interrupted. ‘I’ve never done anything like this before, why would I start now? I’ve been here what, three years?’ I paused for effect. ‘Someone else could have sneaked in there after me. It was probably one of the new kids. They’re all from the country, they don’t care about rules.’ At the start of the year, about twenty rural students joined our year group. I’d made no effort to integrate with them. They seemed as good a group of scapegoats as any.

‘I think I can trust Mr. Domenico’s version of events.’

I turned away from Mr. Fanshawe and stared out the window. A girl carrying a violin case walked towards the music rooms. Clouds drifted across the sky, my guitar teacher’s beat-up 70s Saab reversed out and followed the edge of the oval around to the exit. Done for the day.

‘Besides,’ he said, smiling at me. ‘If you didn’t do it, you won’t have anything to hide when we search your locker.’

I stared at him. There was still the ghost of a smile on his lips, and I could tell he was giving me time because he expected a confession. I tried to calculate what would end worse—saying I stole whatever went missing but that I threw it in the bin, or letting them search the locker, then the bag, hoping they wouldn’t find the pot *or* recognise the smell.

‘Well?’ He looked at me like a bored cat keeping a bird alive just because it can.

‘Search it,’ I said. ‘I’ve got nothing to hide.’

It couldn't have been more than a minute or two until the lunch bell rang and the locker area flooded with students. I held the lock with one hand and started fiddling with the dial. I deliberately messed up a few times, tried an embarrassed grin.

'It gets stuck...'

'Plenty of time,' Mr. Fanshawe said.

I couldn't draw it out any longer, and at the exact moment the pins fell into place and I yanked the lock open, a baritone with the shadow of an Italian accent called Mr. Fanshawe's name from across the courtyard.

Mr. Domenico was dragging a student by the arm.

In the other hand he had a long, fluted glass object, something purportedly used for science but from where I was, looked a lot more like a bong. He called out again. 'I caught him. Red handed!'

Neither me nor Mr. Fanshawe moved or spoke, so convinced we both were of my imminent demise. For a moment it was as if a fundamental element of the universe had been altered, the change impossible to fathom until reality kicked back in and Mr. Domenico thrust the kid towards us.

'Here is the thief,' he said. Mr. Fanshawe still didn't speak. His face did something I'd never seen before. Then Mr. Domenico's did the same thing. I looked back and forth between them until I realised they were confused.

'Mr. Fanshawe?'

'Yes. Oh, right.' He looked from me to the other kid. 'You two *do* look similar.'

It was our turn to look puzzled.

‘Unusual,’ Mr. Domenico announced. ‘Very unusual. You could be twins!’

‘Not really,’ we said, in unison.

By now the kid was grinning. I felt a smile form on my own face; the whole thing suddenly ridiculous. Then the school bell rang and a few seconds later students burst out into the plaza. It filled quickly. Mr. Fanshawe turned to me, and apologised in a raised voice over the growing din.

‘Come on, you.’ He grabbed the other kid by the arm and led him back towards his office. It only took a moment for them to be subsumed into the crowd, and Mr. Domenico with them, who didn’t even say sorry.

I took the weed from my bag and decided to find Maria and just get blazed during lunch. It was probably safer.

The next day, exceeding even my most optimistic predictions, my apparent doppelganger was back at school. He sat next to me in English. I’d never noticed him before.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘I’m you.’

I laughed. ‘How’d you get off so easy? I thought you’d be suspended at least.’

‘Ah I just fed them a sob story about not fitting in and it being hard living away from my family. They bought it. Now I’ve just got a week of detention. I’m Mark, by the way.’

‘Paul,’ I said. ‘What were you going to do with the stuff, anyway?’

‘Make meth,’ he said, deadpan. A second passed. I laughed. ‘Nah, just doing it for kicks. No idea what those two were on about though, hey? Can’t say I see the similarity.’

‘Neither can I,’ I said.

Mark and I shared the most basic of objective attributes—dark hair, angular features—but only in these general terms did we resemble each other. After Mr. Domenico’s mix-up nobody ever mistook us again, but it turned into a running joke between us, intensified by the fact that we were nearly inseparable in the years leading up to graduation. So it was that the first time Mark brought up leaving Adelaide and going to Melbourne, it seemed that it had already been decided. Not by either of us, necessarily, but rather by some larger, deterministic force. It was October and it was starting to get warm. School had finished for the week and we were walking across the oval to the bus stop when he mentioned it.

‘There’s no reason we couldn’t,’ he said. It seemed unfathomable to me. I’d never even been there. ‘We’d both get Centrelink. There’s more jobs there.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘Better than this place. What reason do either of us have to stay? There’s nothing here.’

Walking through the empty oval with nothing but the broad, flat buildings in the distance, he suddenly seemed right. We’d talked a lot about how we both wanted to go somewhere else when school was over but now that he’d mentioned it—mentioned things like jobs, the cousin he had there, finding a house—the idea gained weight and form, was something more than words, became a possibility.

I thought about my aunt and uncle, waiting at home for me. They were older than Mum and moved down from Sydney to look after me when she died three years earlier. That was the extent of my family, in Adelaide or anywhere else. I never met my dad; he died before I was born.

‘There isn’t anything here,’ I said.

‘You’d love Melbourne, man.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

Four months later, after we’d graduated, when February dried the country out, turned it brown, we were speeding down Princes Highway with two suitcases in the back of the car, passing a joint between us.

I bought the car with some of the money I’d inherited from Mum. It wasn’t much in the long run but it was a kind of safety-net. It meant that if I failed in Melbourne I would not be failing for good.

The pot settled in, made me woolly-headed. Mark and I stopped talking and I watched the scenery pass. The journey felt no more significant to me than going on holiday, but Mark was committed, and for him the trip was seminal, every moment profound. I think it represented something to him that it didn’t to me. But his attitude was infectious. Towards dusk the city appeared as a glow on the horizon, and as we got closer the highway filled up, trucks and cars moving silently in the same direction. We went quiet again as we crossed the bridge, the city lights spread out like circuitry. I felt another node form in the system of my life, felt myself entering a complex network.

For the first two weeks we stayed with his cousin, who was never home, and somehow found a two-bedroom place in South Yarra. I took time to adjust but Mark dove in. I don’t doubt that I stayed because of Mark’s relentless efforts: meeting and befriending people, getting us

invited to parties, dragging me to gallery openings and gigs and screenings. He carved us a niche there. If I'd moved by myself I would've spent my time alone, enrolled in uni but attending lectures by myself, reading and growing lonely.

When I imagine how that would have turned out, I see myself return home after a year, only to watch Maria depart, and I never met Klara, and the city swallowed Mark.

Three years after we moved to Melbourne I met Klara. After two years we broke up, and the way it worked out, the ways in which it changed me, meant that I wasn't upset when her and Mark got together two years after that. And it would have been crazy if it did, since they stayed like that the whole time. Until. Anyway.

Mark spoke to me about it early on. Before anything happened between them. He knew what Klara and I had been through together and he also knew we hadn't really seen each other during the intervening years. He brought it up one night as we were walking home from the Waterlight Café.

'How are things between you and Klara?' She had served us at the café a few times, so it wasn't totally without context.

'We're cool,' I said. 'I genuinely feel nothing about it. She and I were different people then. I've changed so much. You know, people are made up of all kinds of different people, jammed together into the same body. The person that loved her is gone now.' I knew why he was asking and wanted to make it easy on him.

'That's good,' he said. We didn't speak for a while, just walked. Across the street, a group of businessmen staggered out of a Chinese restaurant, boasting loudly. 'I was thinking of asking

her out.’ He said it suddenly, quickly. He glanced at me, then back at the footpath in front of us. His hands were stuck deep into his jacket pockets.

‘You should. She’s nice.’

‘I just, you know, I don’t want to make things weird.’

‘It won’t,’ I said.

During this period I was doing postgrad at Melbourne Uni and spent a lot of time in Carlton and Fitzroy, even though we were still living in South Yarra. We’d moved into a slightly bigger house by then, though, and Klara was around a lot. We got on well. While talking to her I often thought that it should have been at least a bit awkward, or while she and Mark held hands, or went off to bed together, that these things should hurt me somehow. But they never did. I decided once, alone on the tram home after drinking with them both, that because I had been so thoroughly destroyed by the end of our relationship, part of me had also been reconstituted entirely. It was as if my reaction to our break up had burnt out the part of my personality that could be upset about those things, and something new grew out of that, something with no connection to the person who had loved Klara.

One time I talked to Mark about the curve, that repeated angle in her form, her *leitmotif*. I wanted to know if he saw it too, or it was just something in the way I looked at her, as much a part of me as it was of her. I tried to explain while we were drinking one night on Swan Street.

‘You mean she’s curvy,’ he said, watching me.

‘No. No, I mean, there’s like, an *angle*, to her. Like, everywhere. Like a pattern, a theme.’

‘I’m not following.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘I guess it’s too hard to explain.’

I came to learn their schedules, the rhythms of their lives, knew roughly where they were throughout the day. This felt like intimacy to me. I'd be studying in my room while they were out, and in a moment of thought look up, stare at the wall. In those moments I became aware of the silence in the house. I'd check the time and know where they were in a general sense: what they were probably doing, when they'd be back. And it felt good, knowing they were out there.

On Thursday afternoons they finished work early and hung out together until the early evening. I stayed late at uni Thursdays, but occasionally ran into them on Lygon Street while getting a quick dinner. Later they'd come home and we'd drink together.

One Thursday I left early for some reason, it might have been the end of semester, and went down to Lygon to get food. It was one of those rain-speckled days where you never really get wet. As I stepped out of the café I saw Mark and Klara on the other side of the street. I walked towards the curb and realised from their body language that they were arguing. I stopped and watched. I don't know why, I guess I was stunned. I'd never even seen them bicker before, much less have a full-blown argument. Klara threw her arms up, in dismay or frustration, or something else, and stalked off. Mark shouted something at her but I couldn't make out the words over the bustle of the street. He went the other way and didn't come back to the house for three days. When Klara appeared on the doorstep Friday morning I told her I didn't know where he'd gone, but didn't mention having seen them fight.

I never found out what they'd been arguing about. Mark said he'd been in Adelaide visiting family, which might've been true. The night he got back, Maria and Jacob and Klara and I were drinking in the lounge room, mixing cask wine and orange juice, smoking Champion Ruby. We went quiet when we heard the harsh drone of someone riding a skateboard up the driveway. We heard someone fiddling with the front door, the clicking of the lock and Mark's whispered

curses. The door opened and he grinned when he saw us. It was as if he'd just got back from work, like he'd never really been gone at all.

Klara got up without speaking and together they went into the kitchen. They were there for no more than a couple of minutes, and when they emerged Mark was still buoyant, and Klara was smiling. He poured himself a drink from the cask and sat down and we all just went from there.

Everyone went to bed and I lay on the floor alone, listening to Serge Gainsbourg, drinking wine from the sack and smoking. I felt happy for everyone and for myself, and distantly sad about Klara, seeing her with Mark. I laughed at the ceiling; the thought that Domenico was right, that even though Mark and I didn't look the same we resembled each other anyway. How things can make you happy and sad at the same time. And that just mixed with everything else, added another layer to the texture of the night, and I was carried on the wave of immediate nostalgia, the feeling that comes, only when drunk, with the awareness that what you are experiencing is fleeting, when the present feels like the past.

## De Chirico II

The itching had almost completely subsided; just a pleasant tingling remained. Lana came back outside with two tall glasses filled with ice and an amber liquid. 'It's iced tea.' Then, as if that wasn't enough of an explanation: 'Peach.'

'Thanks,' I said, reaching for the drink. I gulped the whole thing immediately. Lana was watching me. She didn't say anything, just took a sip and set her glass on the table. Then she sat on the edge of the other deckchair.

'So what do you do with your time if you're not at school?'

'I'm a painter.'

'Oh, cool,' I said, remembering the previous night. 'Have you heard of an Italian painter called De Chirico? Giorgio De Chirico?'

'I don't think so.'

'You'd probably recognise some of his paintings. He was a surrealist.'

'Oh, like Salvador Dali.'

'Sort of. Well, yeah, they're similar.'

'I don't like Salvador Dali,' she said, plainly. 'Lots of it I think is just ugly. Ugly shapes, ugly composition. Some of the pictures of his wife are pretty good.' I made an agreeable noise in response. I could see what she meant. She crossed her legs.

'Do you know anything about the people who used to live in my house?'

‘They were the Hudsons, or the Harrisons, or something like that. I was pretty young when they moved away. The wife went a bit nuts after her daughter Janet died. The mum’s name was... Christy? Christine. It’s a pretty horrible story actually. Janet was married to this guy. He had some job where he went away a lot. He might have been in the army? I don’t know, I was young. My older brother was friends with him. Apparently he was obsessed with Janet. As you’d hope, I guess. But I mean it’s hard to tell the difference between what people feel and what they say about how they feel. Anyway, he was away a lot. And the daughter, Janet, she started getting a lot of attention from some other guy, someone she worked with, I think.’

Lana lit a cigarette. I did too.

‘I only know this because it all came out later,’ she said, exhaling. ‘Obviously nobody knew all this stuff then. Anyway, one day the husband just didn’t come back from his work trip. So obviously she freaked out. Weeks went by and he still hadn’t come back. I guess she started to get over it, sort of. The other guy, from her job, he was around, and they kind of got together I think. At first people, Mum and Dad at least, were a bit wary about Janet seeing someone else, but I think the consensus was that her husband had abandoned her. This was a while afterwards though. A year or more. But then one day Mum answered the phone and Christine told her Janet killed herself.’

Lana stubbed out her half-finished cigarette. ‘She’d found all these photos of her husband in a folder in the new guy’s desk.’

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Just in transit—candid stuff, you know: getting off buses, leaving the house. But also flight details, logs of when he left the house, how long he was gone, all this data on his movements. He was keeping precise records of where her husband went, and had been for *years*, way before the husband disappeared. Apparently he went psycho about it when she confronted him. I don’t

know if anyone in the neighbourhood found out for sure, but everyone said he'd planned a murder. Shortly after Janet confronted him he disappeared too. Mum and Dad said he went to jail, and I heard from someone else that he was bashed to death in there.'

'That's... Horrible,' I said.

'Told you. I was too young to really know what was going on then, but obviously I found out about it. After that, Christine turned into a recluse. Just stayed in that house—your house—all day. I guess there's nothing unique about that. Her husband kept going to work for a while, but then he left, too, I don't know why, maybe because she kept getting worse, or changed somehow, and he couldn't deal with it. Whatever, he had his reasons. So there's this woman, all alone, daughter dead, husband off somewhere else, living in this big house. Nobody really saw her. Not long ago, maybe a year or so, she had the entire back part of the house renovated, most of the garden too. Then just before it was finished she moved away. Just vanished one day, like her husband. A gardener kept coming for a few months, so I guess she was paying him, but then he stopped about a month ago. Maybe she died, maybe she ran out of money, maybe she figured it wasn't worth the trouble. Who knows.'

'What a depressing story.'

'It is, isn't it? You know the worst thing about it, though? The truth's all locked up. Nobody who could explain it is around anymore. It's pretty absurd really, to plot someone's death like that. Like, you wouldn't believe it. But everyone who'd know is gone.' I didn't say anything, just thought about it, staring out across the yard.

'How would you even cope with something like that? That someone would go to that length. How could you even tell they had it in them? Of course you'd kill yourself looking over everything, looking for signs he was nuts.'

‘You would have to come to terms with it, or you couldn’t move on,’ I said. The words sounded flat and obvious.

‘Well, Christine’s mum didn’t. Or couldn’t, or whatever. One day, bam, her daughter’s dead.’ Silence descended. I didn’t know what to say, whether Lana had finished talking or if she was trying to put words to the rest of it. Somewhere, unseen, a pigeon cooed. Abruptly it stopped and didn’t start up again. Something rustled in the long grass at the end of the yard. Cat, snake, rat, wind?

‘Do you ever think how there’s things in people you can never see are there?’

‘It’s occurred to me. People do surprising things all the time. Even people you know,’ I said.

‘Maybe that’s the problem, the word “know”. We say we know people but all we can do is learn what they show us, then try and predict what they’ll do. So we don’t really *know* them, we’ve just learnt some of their patterns. Have you ever thought about how many things someone thinks each day? It must be millions. Now compare how many things you say to a specific person each day. Nowhere near the amount of things you’d thought, right? It’s impossible. So there’s no way to actually know anyone else, like the way you know yourself.’

‘I don’t even know if you can go that far, to say anyone understands themselves.’

Another silence. I glanced at Lana, tried to guess what she was looking at. A chunky clump of cloud hung in the otherwise clear sky. Who was this girl, who thought these things?

‘I don’t have much else to do other than paint and think about things,’ she said. Her monologue must have raised the question to her, too. ‘You spend enough time by yourself and you end up getting pretty caught up in some questions. It’s the closest you can get to a conversation.’

‘I’m envious,’ I said. ‘You think very clearly. To be honest, I’ve got a lot of spare time at the moment too.’

‘I thought so.’

‘Yeah, well, I don’t use it as productively as you do.’ She didn’t respond to this. We stayed that way for some time, lying there on the rubber upholstery of the deck chairs, looking at the yard. What would have happened if one of her parents came home? How would I explain myself? I reached for my phone to check the time before remembering I didn’t have it. It was difficult to say exactly how long ago I’d left this morning.

‘What time is it?’

‘I don’t know. Afternoon, maybe?’

‘Okay.’ I could either keep talking to Lana until she said I had to leave, or go back into the house. And do what?

‘Do you want to see some paintings?’ Lana asked.

Her bedroom was the converted attic, which Lana had since taken to using as a studio. Over by her easel, the wooden floor was splattered with paint of many colours. A single bed stood in the far corner, a leather jacket draped across it. I wondered why she had it out during summer. Simultaneously I wondered whether Lana ever had blonde hair. Prints, postcards, sketches, photographs and paintings covered the wall, surrounding a window. The room was devoid of the affectations teenage girls usually fill their rooms with—or at least the kind I remembered from my teenage years. No photos of friends in cute frames, no stuffed animals or knick knacks. The linen on the bed was a mature cream and maroon. Sunlight slanted across the room, casting a rectangle along the floor.

‘Look,’ she said, moving over to the easel. ‘I just finished this morning.’ She stood to the side of the painting. It was a watercolour of my house. Glancing out the window I could see the real thing down there. The enormous lillypilly tree obscured much of the house but both the backyard and the attic window were perfectly visible. So that was how she was able to turn up when she did. Her picture caught the house at dusk, the glow of the sun behind it, the backyard slipping into darkness. The watercolour wouldn’t allow for rich colouring, and as such the whole thing had a kind of washed out, absent feel. Looking from the painting to the actual house, I decided the representation better reflected the way I thought of the building. Her painting somehow evoked the subjective experience of being in the yard, rather than the crude physicality of the bricks and mortar.

‘You’re good,’ I said. ‘I can see why you don’t get bored.’

‘Oh, I get bored,’ Lana said, moving across the room and sitting on the bed, leaning back on her elbows and crossing her legs at the ankle. ‘Like I said, you tend to think some pretty far-out stuff when you’re by yourself all day.’ I sat in a wicker armchair a few feet from the bed. Presumably the partner of the coffee table outside.

The room darkened. A knot of cloud had moved across the sun.

‘Maybe I should start painting,’ I said, although I’d never considered the option before.

‘You don’t think about starting painting. It’s just something you do.’

‘You’re probably right. If I actually wanted to do it I would have done it by now.’

‘For everyone I know who does it, it wasn’t that they decided they wanted to be a painter, they just didn’t stop drawing from when they were kids. Every kid draws, and then some kids keep drawing as they grow up. Then for some reason people start calling them artists, even though they just kept doing what everyone used to do when they were younger.’

‘I’d never thought of it like that. I think you’re right.’

‘I don’t know if I’m right or what. There are lots of people in the world, who knows how most of them do whatever they do.’

She leaned over to her bedside table and opened a drawer, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray. She lit one with a lighter she had in her pocket, perched on the edge of the bed. I took a cigarette from the pack in my top pocket and lit up. It sure was strange, smoking cigarettes in a teenage girl’s bedroom. I felt like I had somehow intruded into the experience of her first ever cigarette.

Lana broke the silence. ‘So why’d you choose this place?’

‘Good question,’ I said. ‘To choose something implies intention and I really just felt like I appeared there, or, by then, that I’d been there all along. ‘I guess I’ve always liked the area. It reminds me of where I grew up.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Adelaide.’

She got up from the bed and walked over to a chest of drawers. She stood on her toes to reach the top of a desk fan, where its oscillator switch was. At that moment the room lit up, clouds revealing the sun, and in the sharp glow of light through the window behind her I could see the outline of her waist through her thin top, a slight curve beneath the fabric. Then she turned the fan on and moved back to the bed. It was during those few moments—her gestures connected into one smooth motion—that I first saw the edge of sensuality to the natural grace with which she carried herself. She took the rest of her cigarette from where she had left it, had one drag, and stubbed it out.

Lana had a near-infinite supply of questions about my time in Argentina, and we spent the rest of the afternoon talking about it. I felt like I could say whatever I liked and not risk boring her. I told her about the gauchos that had become such an integral part of Argentinian history, their stories and mythologies surpassing those of the Wild West in both violent action and emotion. It got late, near dusk.

‘You’d better go,’ she said. ‘My parents’ll be home soon.’

‘Fair enough,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the tea.’

‘That’s okay. What were you going to do today, anyway?’

‘Huh. You know, I’d completely forgotten I was here to see the house. Just check what kind of fittings I should buy, what needs doing, that kind of thing. Nothing exciting.’

‘Fair enough. Have fun.’

‘Yeah, you too. Might see you round.’

I hopped the brick wall knowing she was probably watching me from her window. I turned, seeking it out. It caught the full glare of the sun and glowed like a panel of heated metal. I waved.

It only occurred to me then that she must have thought it strange that I entered by the lane both mornings. Chances are she hadn’t asked earlier because of the ivy situation. Probably meant she saw through my lie about owning the place. I guess the fact that she asked me inside meant she didn’t care, or that she thought I was interesting enough to take a risk on. She must have been lonely, up there in that big house.

Inside, I moved past the tiled ex-kitchen and lay down in the middle of the carpet. Without any real rooms it was difficult to decide where I was, and difficult to even think of the place as a house. I closed my eyes. Lights, bright and distant, moved in the black space.

I spent what may have been an hour going over what Lana and I had spoken about. I wondered whether this would turn into something like what had happened with Klara and the rest of them. If something uncontrollable would ruin everything. That said, it was chance that I was away when Mark died, just as it was chance that I stumbled upon this house and met Lana. Or was it? Everything fit so neatly together here: the striking similarities between this house and the one I'd grown up in, the lucky coincidences of it being unlocked and abandoned, Lana's almost immediate comfort around me. That was the strangest thing—that she had trusted me so quickly. If she didn't detect anything dangerous in me it was because it wasn't there. She as the girl with the hoop, nothing but my looming shadow visible. Perhaps there was an air of eccentricity about me: entering from the back, my general confusion about the whole situation. Probably I seemed like a bumbling oddball, too incompetent to pose a threat. Still, any attempt to rationalise her behaviour—or anything that happened here—would be unfounded. In truth I knew nothing concrete about the situation of the house, or about Lana for that matter. All I knew was that I felt at home, that the house was somehow already mine, or had been, since a long time ago, before I even knew it existed. Maybe, even, before it did.

## *Un Caballo y un Cuchillo*

Throughout the evening and into the night I kept returning to Lana's story, the depths of that man's obsession, his total disregard for the pain of others in the pursuit of a goal. It worried me to know that people were capable of such things, but more troubling still was the knowledge that those people were not all that different from me. That's where madness starts, isn't it? When we stop being able to tell when our actions are irrational, when we lose the points of reference that keep us who we are.

I prepared a simple meal and ate out the back, still turning the story over in my mind. It reminded me of an interview I conducted in Argentina. I went to the shoebox of tapes I had open on my desk. Each was labelled by place and date. The dates were basically useless, but the names sent jolts of memory through me, summoning porches, sunrooms, barrooms late in the afternoon. I flicked through until I found the one I wanted: an old woman living on a farm on the western shore of Laguna del Monte, near the pampas. I'd interviewed her on the front porch of her ranch house. There was a view of the water which she watched as she spoke in her laconic Spanish.

'When I was a girl there was a folk tale the adults would tell because it happened near this farm, to the northeast. Its hero was Julieta Moreira. It was her story and her lover's, whose name is lost. You will have heard of the freedom of the gauchos, who went where they liked and submitted to no law. Those with families went months without seeing them; Moreira went with her man and was, so the tale goes, every bit his equal both on horseback and with a *facón*.'

'A knife,' my recorded voice said.

'Yes. Now, part of the story escapes me, but Moreira's man wronged her somehow. I cannot remember the details of his crime, but it went against the valorous ideals for which

gauchos are remembered today. Perhaps he slept with another woman, perhaps he insulted her some other way. When Moreira learnt of his wrongdoing everyone expected her to challenge him to duel. As you know, this was how gauchos settled matters of honour. But she did not. Instead they continued as usual and spoke no more of it. Until one morning when he woke to find himself completely alone. She had vanished, leaving only his *facón* and a single horse.'

'No matter what he'd done, to take his horse would have been unthinkable.'

'Nobody in the area saw Moreira again, but many people saw her lover. He devoted every remaining day of his life to finding her.'

'Did he find her?'

A crackle passed through the speakers. Probably wind. When it let up she was mid-sentence.

'...in the foothills of the mountains to the west. Moreira was working as a nurse in a small village there, and had been since she'd left him. The story has it that she fell pregnant, but that his actions showed that she could not trust him to raise their child. She was not surprised when he arrived in the village, when they were both old. He had nothing but his *facón* and his poncho and his horse. Their child had grown and left for the city years before. They say that when he saw her he lifted the poncho from his shoulders and folded it across his left arm, then drew his knife. She went inside and emerged with her own *facón*, the knife she could have killed him with thirty years before. They walked up, further into the mountains, and neither was seen again.'

'What does it mean,' I heard myself ask.

'Moreira never forgot her betrayal,' she said. 'Neither of theirs. A gaucho will duel someone they think wronged them; by leaving her lover she abandoned that kind of valour. Perhaps she did it for her child, perhaps she could not bring herself to kill the man she loved.'

Word filtered down from the mountain town to the lowlands, so when my parents first heard the story, as children, they heard that she became a nurse as an act of atonement. But the larger story is that everything ends, at some point, that the events we set in motion invariably conclude. What they did to each other bound them together. In the end, both died honourably.'

'How is it that we know her name and not his, nor his crime?'

'That is just the way things go,' she said. 'But in the end, she is the one whose story we tell. Julieta Moreira lives on.'

'Could it be that Julieta was actually Diego Juarez?'

The tape rattled in its slot.

'I have heard people suggest such a thing,' she said. 'But gauchos kept no records, and rarely let anyone else make concrete records of their movements, either. She may have been; she may not have. I don't think anybody will ever know.'

## Same Place; Different Place

A month or two after the catastrophic party at Maria's apartment, I found myself in a part of North Melbourne I hadn't been to in years.

It is hard, now, to remember why I came.

The streets were wider and emptier than you would expect of a suburb so close to the city. If you walked up a hill from the train station, you could look through the side streets right down to the skyscrapers and the river. There were converted warehouse apartments and crumbling-brick townhouses, ivy walls and Holdens from the 60s. I was the only one on the street and it was sweltering hot. I found my way down to Wakefield Street and was surprised I remembered it. It was too long ago for me to say if it's changed or not. As I stood on the doorstep and prepared to knock I felt as I did the first time I visited Mark there. Seeing this tiny part of what I knew to be a huge city, how everything—chairs on porches and graffiti and people riding bikes and the vast network of crowded trains—spoke of the boundless diversity of what happened here, what could happen to me.

'Paul?' I turned, startled, and Maria was standing in the driveway.

'Maria?'

'What are you doing here?'

'I-' I had not prepared for this situation. 'I thought Klara lived here.'

'She moved,' Maria said. 'A while ago. I'm moving in.' She was holding a great mass of fabric I assumed would be turned into curtains or something. She let out a great sigh. 'It's been a tough day. Give me a hand with these, would you?'

So I helped her move her stuff in to what was, a long time ago, Klara's house. The entire place was stripped: every surface a gleaming white, completely devoid of furniture, no pictures on the walls, blank surfaces everywhere. We dumped the stuff on the lounge room floor and moved into the kitchen, where Maria put on a pot of water for tea. I scanned the place, searching for any evidence of Mark or Klara having lived here, and came up empty handed.

'So you're renovating, then?'

'Yeah. I thought it needed a new coat of paint.'

'It's not how I remember it at all, like it's a completely different place.'

'That was the idea,' Maria said, pouring steaming water over the teabags. She took a mug and moved past me towards the back door, gesturing to the sugar as she does so. 'No milk, sorry,' she said over her shoulder. 'No fridge.'

The backyard was how I remembered it, but it was a jolt to see the decrepit mess of brick walls, rampant ivy and the rusted-out iron water tank juxtaposed against the unfamiliar neutrality of the actual house. It didn't seem right that one part of the past be retained so perfectly when the rest had disappeared. We sat at the small wooden folding table and lit cigarettes. I could see the backs of the neighbouring houses, which were newer than that one.

Once, Maria and I would have had no shortage of conversation. But by then there were only a few things to mention, all revolving around the one great subject, and beyond that we were strangers. I stubbed my cigarette out and lit another; she started speaking.

'I suppose in some way it's all our faults,' she said.

'I'm past blaming anyone,' I responded.

'That's big of you.'

‘It’s not a moral stance. I just don’t see the point.’

‘No, it doesn’t help.’

‘Well, there’s that. And it’s not logical. It doesn’t make sense to blame anyone.’

‘What’s done is done, I guess,’ she said.

‘What I mean is,’ and here I wondered if she was even willing to engage this degree of conversation, or if she wanted to just float above it, acknowledge it but not dive into it, just idly comment on its surface. But she brought it up. Did she have a choice? ‘Anyone would have done the same things were they in the same position.’ Here she eyed me. I knew what she was thinking. ‘I mean, not down to the detail, but in principle. In the principle of the action anyone would do the same thing. You all,’ I gestured towards her, ‘it wasn’t your choice to be where you were when Mark died. I didn’t choose to be overseas when it happened. I can’t blame you for the logical responses you made to the situation and I don’t see how you can blame me for how I acted in, if you are capable of empathising with, what was a very trying situation.’ I took a drag of my cigarette; watched clouds obscure the sun. ‘To say the least.’

‘We all understood how tough it would have been for you.’

‘I don’t think you did, but go on.’

She took a deep breath, appeared to be trying to steady herself. ‘It was all just too disruptive. You were too disruptive.’

‘This is what I’ve been trying to say, that my presence took you all back where you didn’t want to be.’

‘Will you let me finish?’ We held a gaze, I nodded. ‘Regardless of how well justified your actions were it was too difficult to have you around. People started to feel uncomfortable. Klara felt uncomfortable. You were an enigma to us—you disappeared for a year and a half and when

you came back it was as if you were a different person entirely. An unpredictable person. And then you did, well, you know what you did. And you know what happened.'

'Maybe it would help if I try to explain. We've got distance now, we can view it objectively.' I looked out at the city. It towered, inscrutable. It didn't matter what I said, that everything had changed. 'Maybe we'll understand it better. I would like to understand it better.' I could tell by the softening of her expression that she was convinced—she was always charitable. 'Before I start, let me say that I appreciate your willingness to listen. You probably know that since that night at your old apartment I haven't been in contact with any of you, not really. A lot has changed since then. But I've been thinking about it ever since. Talking about it might let me see what I've discovered. If anything.'

I decided right there that I would probably never see Maria again. So in knowing that I decided to tell it as truthfully as I could, charge right through social conventions, bare my insecurities and weaknesses and cruelties. Maybe it wasn't fair to use her like that, but if the alternatives were writing myself into an ever-tightening spiral or saying the same things to strangers, then it's a sacrifice I had to force her to make.

And there was, admittedly, the possibility that what happened still upset her, and that it might help lessen it.

'I don't know if anyone there noticed but I arrived at your apartment that night with a few drinks in me already. I was in two minds about the night. On one hand I saw it as the first return to the way things had been. Maybe even that if things were never to be as they were, maybe they could be different in a very similar way. On the other hand I didn't see how I could handle it. Too much going on, too many changes. You know that Freud thing—the uncanny? Yeah, I was scared it'd be like that but on a social level. Everything that tiny bit off. Whatever, that's too much to go into right now. I'll try to get to the main part.'

‘Klara and I were getting along well. Really well. Everyone knows we always had. After dinner, when the others got there and Klara and I started really talking, well it was good, it was close to how things had been before. And you know, and I’m just being as transparent as I possibly can be here, because Mark wasn’t there it was like things had been when we were together. You know. And I’ve always thought about that time as one of my happiest.

‘And maybe this was just paranoia but I felt very sensitive the whole time that I was being scrutinised and even surveilled by everyone else there. Every gesture analysed, every comment I made guessed at over the noise of the room. And there are reasons for that. Things people had said during dinner and before, the way Jacob spoke to me when he found out Klara and I had seen each other in the days before. I knew then, as I spoke to her, that everyone expected—almost wanted—me to try something with her, and that they were just waiting to judge me for the unforgivable interest in my best friend’s widow. And there are more reasons for that paranoia, which of course go back to my previous relations with Klara, and suspicions I knew other people in the group held. But there was also that Klara and I were the only two so close to Mark, and that we had once shared a closeness and some of that remained. But this is all too much to talk about. To explain all that properly would take hours—days—might not even be possible. So I’ll try to strip it down further. That moment on the roof.

‘I wasn’t trying to fuck Mark’s wife. I wanted to be close to her. I didn’t want a relationship with her; she was the only one I felt understood me and I think she felt the same way, for reasons too subtle and numerous and contextual to recount. I think everybody else there had it in for me; I think they were confused and worried and weren’t trying to hurt anyone, even me, really. The more I strip it down the more needs to be said. The more I expand it the more detail I miss.’

The air cooled and the sky had dimmed to an opalescent sheen on a grey backdrop. Trains rattled down the tracks; lights in city buildings were revealed to be on; a bat flapped across the yard, the sound of flight leathery and physical in a way a bird's is not.

I stood up, pocketing my cigarettes. 'Thanks for the tea. I know the way out. Take care.'

I stopped at the back door.

'Wait, before I go. How's Klara?'

Maria's brow knotted. 'You haven't seen her?'

'Of course not. I haven't seen anyone.'

'Paul, nobody's seen Klara since the party.'

'What?'

'I tried calling her a few times but she either didn't answer or was evasive when she did. Nobody could get anything out of her. I went around a few times. She wasn't home, or she didn't answer the door. Nobody's seen her for months. I try contacting her every now and then but never get anywhere.'

'What do you mean, evasive?'

'Well, she wouldn't answer questions. I don't know. I think Mark's death affected her more than she let on. I'm not sure she knew who I was when I called. Even the night of the party, after you left. She was so disoriented. It didn't make sense—the graze on her head was tiny, the doctor didn't even think she'd been concussed.'

I stepped out onto the street and started the walk back to the train station. I felt the heat in the pavement, still emanating after the sun had retreated. The way things remain long after the action has ceased and the players have gone home. I wondered, passing an old man standing on his front porch, a girl riding her bike, a woman carrying groceries home from the supermarket, whether anyone can ever make their history known to anyone else, or if it's locked tight inside us. Then, remembering the floundering way I spoke, expanding and contracting and generally missing the point, I wondered if it was even possible to explain it to myself, and then why I was carrying this big unknowable mess around inside my body, and what other people carried.

I didn't want to get back on the train immediately. I walked the steep hills around North Melbourne near the station, eventually finding a bench with a view of the city. So Klara had gone somewhere else too, or at least stopped going to the places people could find her. First Mark, then she and I. The old group had splintered almost entirely. I didn't know if Maria still saw anyone else, or if the fragmentation extended to them as well, if what had once been a tight group had been ultimately forced apart by the failed motor on Mark's small plane. It didn't really matter.

## Onions

I awoke with a start. The shrill insistence of a ringing phone rent the air. I sat up, confused. It was coming from somewhere over the other side of the empty house. I stood up and rubbed my head, unsure what to do. The ringing stopped. Silence descended and isolation came over me. As if I were standing at the bottom of the ocean, alien fish moving unseen around me.

I glanced up, where the ceiling would be once my eyes adapted to the dark. I'd dreamt of the attic, things moving about up there. Nothing I could get a clear view of, though, nothing that would reveal its shape. I wandered across the room. Somewhere there was a phone, plugged into the wall socket, probably left sitting on the floor.

I still felt foggy from sleep, and cold—I was only wearing a shirt and jeans, my sleeves still rolled up. I left by the back door, sliding it shut behind me. The yard looked spectral in the misty light of the moon, like a hidden grove from a Celtic folk tale, somewhere humans were not meant to be. Lana's window was dark. I jumped the back wall and started walking back, sneakers crunching the gravel, wondering just how late in the night it was, and who was trying to call.

It was approaching midnight by the time I arrived home, which told me nothing. The time was useless without a frame of reference; I could have been gone several days. I was hungry enough for that to seem like a possibility.

I tossed some onions in a frying pan, stirred them as they sizzled in the oil, then added garlic and some ground spices, followed by some chickpeas I'd had sitting in water for a while. Then I poured in a can of diced tomatoes. I put some rice on to boil and when it was done, stirred it into the chickpea mix.

I thought about the house. I don't know what I was expecting. Nothing really had happened, after all. There were a few strange things about the place, and I'd met Lana, but that was about it. Nothing suggested any more than that. Still, I knew I would be returning the next day. I hadn't even looked around the front yard, and I wanted to take a peek in the attic. Lana would be interested. Telling the dark story that lay behind the house revealed what seemed like a fascination in her.

I scraped the last of the rice from the bowl and pushed it into the centre of the table, leaning back in my chair and lighting a cigarette. It made sense. She'd probably been looking out her window at that house her entire life, and knowing what had happened to the people living there would have endowed the house with a palpable presence. She'd painted it, after all, an action which implies a specific curiosity about the subject. Painting is a way of coming to understand something, of becoming so familiar with its details that you form a kind of intimacy. But then you stand on the other side of the object and it's as if you've never known it at all. That, or you know what it's hiding. I stood up and extinguished my cigarette under the tap before tossing it in the bin, unable to decide which perspective was right.

Realising that her curiosity probably lay in the house, rather than in me, produced a twinge of sadness more profound than I thought I was capable of feeling about us.

I lay on my bed, reading. Despite my nap I found it difficult to concentrate on the words, finishing whole pages without absorbing a thing. I returned to the start of the chapter, read a few lines, and drifted off to sleep.

## The Waterlight

Klara left me about two years after I finished my degree. I moped around for a while, but finally enrolled in a doctorate, realising that I found satisfaction in institutionalised research. Mark didn't have the same need for structure, and floated around indeterminately in the years after graduation. I don't say that with any judgement, and never passed any. He was a lot happier when he'd finished, though that could have been attributed to other things in his life, too. He had more time to skate, for example, but discovering his blossoming infatuation with Klara was probably the most important. It was during this period when we started going to the Waterlight Café a lot.

A postgrad friend of mine, Steph, worked there two or three nights a week. I came in with Mark one evening because after meeting up for beers it became clear that neither of us felt like drinking. The café was a large room sectioned off into private booths. Each had a sliding door of frosted glass, lit by lozenge-shaped lights mounted onto the walls above them. We always sat in the same booth. The first night, Mark noticed a large mirror mounted above the doorway. It faced the front window, and contained within it was the image of a brass whale—a nearby shop's handcrafted sign. Cigarette smoke gathered in a haze above the partitions.

Steph served us coffee and a plate of scones we didn't need to pay for. She chatted to us for a moment. Each booth was equipped with a button that must have a buzzer at the bar. We pressed it once, as much out of curiosity as because we needed anything, expecting my friend to appear. Instead we got Klara, wearing the same outfit Steph had on.

Her surprise gave way to excitement almost instantaneously. We chatted for a moment, she and I. Mark and she had never been that close and I don't think he'd seen her that often in the years since we broke up. The one thing about not dating Klara that differentiated her from other people was that talking wasn't awkward. Mark was uncharacteristically silent during our

exchange. After she left, though, he excused himself to go to the toilet. I never found out if that excuse was legitimate or if he just went so he could talk to her alone.

From then on we took the café as our nightly refuge, our home on the north side of the river. We got stoned there most nights of the week after I left the university and Mark had finished work. In exchange for pot and company my friend never charged us for coffee. Klara only worked Wednesday nights, and each week Mark would take longer and longer to return from the toilet.

One Thursday afternoon I called Mark from a payphone and asked if he wanted to get stoned that night. I could hear the rattle and smash of people skateboarding in the background. He said he couldn't, that he was busy that night. I didn't really mind, ended up staying late in the office and finishing some referencing I'd been putting off doing. I got a tram with Steph. She was on her way to work. She did something like seven to twelve every night. We talked a little, she asked how I knew Klara, told me she'd seen Mark and Klara talking whenever we came in. I smiled and said I thought that's what he'd been doing. Steph got off the tram and I continued home by myself. The globes strung across the front of the National Gallery glowed, the fountain danced in their soft light. In the window of the tram I could see the passengers reflected, dim shadows of themselves going about their lives. I smiled, anticipated having the house to myself that night, and what that meant.

The next morning Mark's bedroom door was closed. He must have come in at some point during the night. I got ready for uni and caught the same tram back into town. I ran into Steph in the hallway outside our offices. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes glazed and rheumy. I said she looked tired.

'Klara didn't come in to work last night,' she said. She pushed an errant lock of hair from her face. 'I had to cover for her. It was busy.'

‘Shit,’ I said. ‘No notice?’

‘Nope. Manager might fire her.’

‘Fair enough.’ I unlocked my door and stood there. ‘That sucks.’ She nodded and turned, mumbling something and moving down the hall towards her own office. I watched her retreating figure, how her shuffle made even walking seem a challenge. I thought about Mark’s closed door and couldn’t suppress a grin as I sat down at my desk. In the end, Klara never went back to work there.

## Teeth on the Floor; A Kindred Spirit

Again I woke to the sound of a telephone ringing. Determined to answer this time, I jumped out of bed and rushed through the lounge into the kitchen. I misjudged the single step leading to the kitchen, tripped, and landed on my side. My shoulder took most of the weight. I pulled myself up and made it to the phone, getting the receiver to my ear just in time to hear the knock of hard plastic and the drawn-out beep of the disconnect tone. My shoulder ached. I got some ice from the freezer, wrapped it in a tea-towel, and went back to bed.

Lying there in the dark, though, I couldn't sleep. I sat up and held the ice against my shoulder. The skin numbed and the pain subsided. My mind was wide awake, clear and alert. After twenty minutes of this I decided to get up and go for a walk. My body needed something to do. When I got back I would sleep, or it would be morning.

Usually you can tell where your skin ends and the air begins, but when I went outside that night I felt as if I were part of the empty space around me, a being without edges. Moonlight spilled out between a membranous network of clouds. Bird calls filled the air. It must have been near dawn. I walked through the suburbs, carefully presented front-yards and late-model cars. I felt as if the people that owned these things were living in another world. It seemed impossible that I could share streets with them, walk the same footpaths.

The surroundings started to take on an air of difference, an unfamiliarity that at first was barely noticeable but soon became overbearing. Simple things: tree branches reaching over fences, cars parked in a row along the street, the brass numbers on someone's front door—these became dislocated from their meanings. I could see their shapes but not what those shapes meant. It didn't feel so much that I had stepped into an illusory world but that the illusory nature of the world had until that point been totally convincing, only then revealing itself. But as

nothing more than a sensation that grew inside me and formed a screen between myself and the physical world. I caught sight of my arm, the hand growing out of it, the fingers out of that. What was it? Even that was alien, how this flesh and bone and skin could somehow fill up space in the world, and at the same time comprise a part of it.

I caught sight of myself in a car window. My torso seemed long, my arms distended. I looked as unworldly as everything else, wondered how people accepted me here without so much as a second glance.

Soon I started thinking about everything that had been going on. My pace picked up. Lana appeared in my head. What was going on with that? What the hell? It was as if someone else had made those decisions, lived out those interactions. What was I doing making friends with a girl that age, smoking cigarettes with her, in her parents' house? All social interaction suddenly seemed tenuous. The very fact that I'd managed any encounter appeared to me as the consequence of extreme luck, a tight-rope I'd not known I was walking. It seemed impossible I hadn't fallen, that I had managed so long without anyone picking me up on it, saying: 'Hey, what on earth are you doing?' Right then, if someone had approached, I wouldn't have been able to talk. The very concept of talking was impenetrable to me. I would have stood there quivering, my teeth would have fallen out, and the person would have just looked at me, seeing exactly who and what I was, and something minute would shift in their gaze and they would be looking through me, having decided that I was not somebody who was there, at all.

I came to an intersection and just charged through, hands in pockets, staring straight ahead. Maybe a bat disturbed a tree branch, or maybe the glare of a streetlamp caught on a house window, momentarily illuminated, but something on the other side of the street caught my attention. And a second later someone appeared there, walking the other way. I kept going. There was no reason they'd want to talk to me, it was too early in the morning, people don't just approach strangers at those hours, not in the suburbs. Probably it was just someone else who

couldn't sleep, or an early riser, or someone who worked the graveyard shift returning home. I glanced at them again. They'd stopped next to a tall plank fence. Everything was bluish grey in the light. I looked away, looked back. They were looking at me. A man—the light made his age hard to place. One thing I definitely noticed, though. He was wearing a waist-length coat, which might have been dark green or grey, and looked to be some kind of old military jacket. I watched him as I walked, and he watched me. He didn't appear dangerous, just surprised by my presence. Although I didn't get a close look, I detected an element of distrust in his look, as if he didn't quite believe I was there.

The night gives way to fancy, and perhaps it was an indication of my mental state that I seriously considered the possibility that the man was Mark, appearing as a ghost. Or that he faked his death, or that his doppelganger was an augury of my own.

I took the next right and looped back to my house the long way in an attempt to avoid him. I calmed down a little as I walked. He was like me, wandering the streets because he couldn't sleep, and maybe there was nobody there when he woke up. Even his staring began to make sense. Maybe he was in a similar place to me at that point, my arrival disturbing, or confirming, whatever struggle there was between his inside world and that around him. By the time I made it home I'd come to think of him as a kindred spirit, even wished we'd spoken.

The night sky had begun to lighten. I boiled some water and fished an old teabag out from the back of the cupboard. Sitting at the kitchen table I faced east, looking out the window to where the sun would soon begin to rise.

## Wrong Number

At first I couldn't identify the sound. In a flash, the frustration of missing the previous calls erupted and I dashed into the kitchen.

'Hello?'

'Hello?' A woman's hesitant voice.

'Can I help you?'

'This is,' she spoke hesitantly. 'The only number I remember.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm not sure I can answer that.'

'Because you don't want me to know or because *you* don't know?'

'There's a difference,' she said, as if making an observation. I thought about hanging up. 'I'm a woman. I think I'm about thirty-one, but I don't remember my birthday. I'm in a room.'

'Why did you call me?'

'I'm sitting in a chair next to a small wooden table with a telephone on it. There's a bed somewhere behind me. There is a lamp on each side of the bed and when you're in the bed there is a big painting of a woman on the wall in front of you.'

'Are there any windows?'

'Oh, yes. There's a big window in front of me. But the curtains are drawn.'

'Open them.'

'No,' she said.

'Why not?'

'Not now.'

'Is it daytime?' I glanced outside. Just to check.

'Yes.' So we're in the same place. Sort of. Narrowed it to approximately half the Earth's surface.

'What's the phone number where you are?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did you call me?'

'I don't know. I don't remember calling you. All I remember is this.'

'Did you have an accident?'

'Maybe. That would explain it.'

'So you don't remember who you are, where you are, what happened to you, or why you're calling?'

'No. I'm sorry.' What was the point in trying?

'I have to go,' I said. I stood there with the receiver to my ear. She didn't speak. At some point I hung up and the silence was thick and inky around me. I caught my train, hopped the wall and sat down to smoke. Lana appeared, as she did, and although I didn't stop thinking about it, I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the woman's call. We talked for a while, smoking cigarettes, until she said something about water and we went round to her place.

I don't know if she noticed anything in the way I spoke to her that day. I felt removed, as if we were speaking through letters that took months to arrive. As I left that afternoon I felt guilty. I guess I just thought it was interesting and that I was obliged to share my interesting things with her, because that's what she would've done.

The sky darkened early that night. As the train passed behind houses I watched the clouds gather and slide across the sky. There was nothing rational about it, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd been a bad friend, that it was the first in what would become a series of betrayals forced by my own weaknesses. The sharp-cut metal rooves of factories dominated the landscape, crossed by strips of highway. Somewhere, half-hidden by a caryard, a public park grew shadowed and dangerous. All through the city, things got grey.

## Hudson, Ashby

Over the next few weeks I found myself returning to the house every day except weekends, when Lana's parents were home. I located a hardware store a few blocks away and would arrive with cans of paint, lengths of wood, power tools, bathroom and kitchen fittings. I never did anything with them, just stacked them neatly against a wall in one of the house's many shadowed corners. These trips began to form what I saw from the outset as a lonely and absurd routine. I had no life and no friends to speak of, but would make the trek every morning and return every evening. Lana began as a surrogate social life, and later became a genuine one. The work I pretended to do, a ghostly imitation of a week's work.

While neither of us acknowledged it, a cautious closeness developed, first manifesting as a brush of her fingertips across my forearm or a blush I could feel glowing on my cheeks.

Beginning with De Chirico and moving on to other artists, once a week I would arrive with a new art book for her. She made several apt comments that impressed me. When I showed her De Chirico she mentioned a sense of loss, or longing, that she saw in his obsessive repetition of sickly green skies, distant locomotives and haunting piazzas.

'There's obviously something in his past he can't get over,' she said, and I agreed, explaining that his father had been a train engineer and that railway lines ran behind his childhood home. I told her the sad story of how De Chirico turned his back on surrealism, devoting himself to a nostalgic, and ultimately unsuccessful classical style. She flicked to the back of the book and grimaced at what she saw. 'He felt betrayed by the Surrealists,' I said. 'I've always thought he wanted to get back to when life was safe and simple. Innocent.'

When Lana came the next day, I told her about the phone call. At first she didn't have much to say. She sat cross-legged on the slate, staring up at the sky.

'I have absolutely no idea who it could be,' I said.

'Who do you suspect?'

'Nobody,' I said. It was the truth. 'I can't think of anyone.'

'It must be a wrong number,' she said. 'She obviously didn't give you any clues.'

'Not really.'

'Do you think she'll call back?'

'I didn't give her a reason to.'

'Do you know anyone with a mental problem?'

'No,' I said. 'The last person I remember talking to on that phone was my landlord's wife. Yeah, her husband ran off one day.'

'Was she old? It might be her. Maybe she's gone crazy.'

'Huh. You know, I'd never thought of that.'

'It's a long shot.'

We chatted a bit longer. I asked her a few questions about herself but she evaded them so tactfully it wasn't until later that I realised she hadn't given me any real answers. She looked at me.

'Have you checked the mail lately?'

'No.'

Lana stood, took a last drag of her cigarette and flicked it to the ground. Looking up at her with the sun burning above her head she looked tough somehow. She exhaled a cloud of smoke. ‘Let’s go check it then.’

I had no idea where the mailbox was. By that stage it didn’t seem like Lana would care, she’d more than likely deduced that I didn’t actually own the place anyway. All the same, as we walked down the drive I kept a keen eye out for it. It appeared as a small metal door—about the size of an envelope—set into one of the brick pillars of the fence. There was an identical letterbox at my old house with which I had my first close-up encounter with a spider. I might have been four at the time. When I swung the door up a huntsman scuttled out and ran up my hand. I jumped and flicked my hands. The spider disappeared.

There were a few letters in there. I took them and we returned to the rear of the house. I was carrying the letters but hadn’t looked at them yet. Lana hid whatever curiosity she felt, although she didn’t have as much reason to feel curious as I did. So maybe she wasn’t. We sat down and I flicked through the mail.

‘You should buy some chairs for out here,’ she said.

‘Yeah. That’d be good.’

‘But we don’t really spend much time out here, do we?’ There were three letters addressed to two people. Two for Christine Hudson, presumably the woman Lana had mentioned whose daughter died, and a mysterious entity by the name of Lynton Ashby. I suspected the latter to be a pseudonym.

‘What do you make of this?’ I passed her the letter with ‘Lynton Ashby’ written—almost drawn—in an elaborate cursive. She stared at it a moment before tearing one end of the envelope off. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘You weren’t just going to look at them, were you?’ I thought briefly of someone coming to check for mail they hadn’t tried to have forwarded.

‘You’re right. What’s it say?’

Lana cleared her throat and started reading. At first the sound of her voice was all I could focus on, clear and bright in the near-silence of the suburbs. Then I fell into the words themselves, the world the sounds evoked, and her voice vanished.

*Ellis*

## Christian Ellis' Belated Confession

Dear Mr. Ashby,

I don't believe you know who I am. I intend to tell you, eventually; indeed, this is one purpose of my correspondence.

You have been affected by me. A long time ago now, but if the events that transpired had an impact upon you anywhere near as powerful as they did upon me I know you will not have forgotten. And I believe they would have had such an impact. But who knows? I am old now, as you are, and perhaps the intervening years make old things seem more significant. Whatever the reason, the events of the summer of 1917 have never left me. Quite the opposite—I cannot think of a single moment in my life since that has not been informed or inflected by what I did that year. The burden has been great and I hope in that by writing this letter, explaining myself and my reasons and, in the most desperate act of hope I can imagine, attain your forgiveness, then the burden will lift and I will be able to die.

Don't worry—I will get to that.

If, in an act of grace, you continue reading my letters, you will come to know who it was that affected you back then. I have other intentions but that is the only outcome I can promise. I hope it is a sufficient trade for your time and the consideration of mercy, although I am inclined to believe that even a consideration is too generous a gesture.

I should note that we have been in correspondence before. But I am afraid you did not know this either.

To truly begin: I am sorry. An apology may have little value alone but the rest of this correspondence would be nothing short of an indulgence without it. At its heart, this is the point of my writing you. I am sorry.

I moved to Adelaide, as you may have been told, in 1916. I had been working in an academic capacity at Melbourne University when my mother died. In the weeks leading to her death I suffered a particularly embarrassing and permanent ostracism from my friends and colleagues at the university, but the details of those weeks can be omitted here. Remember that, though. Again it is intended as a description, rather than an excuse, but it is an important description. I did not return to Adelaide in time to see my mother before she died. I stayed on in her house, packing her things into boxes and storing them in the cellar. It took me a long time to wrap, pack and store them all, as I would quickly become fatigued. Still, I thought it better to relieve the house of her memory, and decided I would rather live with a few chosen reminders of her life than surrounded by the things she saw every day. When I finished the house was sparse.

I stayed in for quite a while. I can't remember now—a week, maybe two. I couldn't sleep, so late at night I would leave the house and stroll the deserted streets, the suburb as hushed as I remembered from my childhood days there. I would soon become weary and return home. Perhaps I would sleep, but most likely I wouldn't.

Forgive me. I cannot remember when she said you left for war. Regardless, you would be aware of the public attitude towards men who refused to enlist. The few times I left my house for the shops or post office I was glared at, knocked about on the street, once even confronted by a pair of ladies offended no less by my apparent fitness than by the fact that I wasn't in Europe compromising it for their well-being. It is easy to be self-righteous when there is no responsibility

to act. To make things clear, however: I have always been afflicted by what I much later learned is called chronic fatigue syndrome. I had trouble finding medical acknowledgement of my illness, but after corresponding with a doctor friend in Melbourne, was able to receive his recommendation that I was unfit for military service. While official, this evidence did nothing for my reputation around town. There was no convenient opportunity to reveal it to them, and as an outsider I became an easy focus for the frustration they felt during the war. Because of this I spent most of my time indoors, reading, or—once the bushy trees I planted for privacy began to thicken—nurturing the produce I grew in the back yard. I could work at my own pace and rarely had to leave the property.

One thing I have learnt is that we are not owed understanding; the most significant events in our life are never guaranteed to appear before us clearly. I cannot speak with certainty that what I am referring to was one of the most significant events in your life, but I allow myself the presumptuousness to assume that it was. I believe I am offering you an opportunity to understand. Or at least providing you with another few pieces to the ever-broadening puzzle of a life.

My address is printed on the reverse of this envelope. If you do not wish for me to continue, please let me know.

True apologies and regards,

Christian Ellis

Lana was still standing when she finished reading. The sun might have moved incrementally, or she might have. She held the pages before her. I watched her expression but got nothing from it.

She folded the paper and slipped it back into the envelope. She sat down next to me and handed me the letter.

‘Can I have a cigarette?’ I passed her one and she lit it. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think that was probably the kind of letter we shouldn’t have read.’

‘Do you think he’s still alive?’

‘Which one?’

‘Either.’

‘I don’t know.’ I looked at the front of the envelope. ‘Huh. No postmark.’

‘So it could have been sitting there for months.’

‘What do you think he meant about being able to die?’

Lana looked at me. ‘I think he believes his guilt is keeping him alive.’

‘That’s what I thought, too.’

We finished our cigarettes in silence. That was one of the things about spending time with Lana—for a lot of it we didn’t talk. Some people make silence feel empty, and you feel the urge to fill it in. Some people make it feel full.

‘I’m hungry,’ she said.

We crossed the yard and hopped the breezeblock fence. The insect buzz of a lawnmower was audible, somewhere over the rows of fences. From this distance it was almost calming. I stood in the lane with my hand still resting on the fence. I looked at the sundial, the lily-pilly tree, finally to the house with its whale weathervane.

‘Come on,’ Lana called. She was over by the gate. I looked back to the house before following her.

Three days later we checked the mail and there was another letter addressed to Lynton Ashby. Wordlessly we made our way back to the house and Lana tore the envelope open. Then she started reading. This happened every three days until the letters stopped. After finishing a letter, Lana would become quiet. I said nothing, assuming she needed rest after reading aloud for so long, but I also suspected that making the words into sound, taking them into her body, had some emotional effect upon her too. The depth of Ellis’ guilt certainly had an effect on me, and given her physical closeness to the story I couldn’t take her silence as neutral acceptance. She would always excuse herself for an hour or so after reading. She would return lighter, as if having shed something. I often wondered if she cried during those times.

I never felt it appropriate to ask her about this, despite becoming close. Usually we would sit a while, smoke a bit longer, then go into her house for lunch. Discussing the letters was rare. A comment or two, at the most, but usually we let them sit. I know that Ellis’ words remained active within me, kicking and stirring until the next letter came. I can only assume the same happened to Lana.

There was never any suggestion that we wouldn’t finish reading.

## Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

This is the first time I have attempted to explain the events of which I write, even to myself, and as such they are coming forth in a great torrent of memory. I have pages and pages of letters to you right here, in the drawers of this very desk. I feel it best, however, to give you time between letters so that you may process what I tell you and form a stance. Or decide not to read them. If you would like me to cease writing you, please send your request to the return address printed on the back of this envelope. Or, if you prefer, burn my letters without reading them.

I was there several months before events escalated. It was a Friday afternoon, verging on evening. I was low on ink and had several letters to write over the weekend. I hurried to the shop, but upon arriving—just in time—found the shop full of people, yet strangely hushed. I paused on the threshold; all conversation had died as I entered. They watched as I moved towards the counter, but the attendant wouldn't serve me: he claimed they were closed. My cheeks flushed with a fiery rage. I stalked out, one hapless young lady catching the full blaze of my glare.

That night I sat at my desk, smoking a cigar and staring out into the vacant night. I could feel something roiling in me, but it was only later that I understood the night to be a turning point. I changed then. Something deep inside me shifted and transformed. Some people lose their capacity for compassion over a long and painful life. I believe that I lost it in that moment. If what I did seem to you the actions of a monster then perhaps they were, but know that my monstrosity was not born, but made.

Saturday passed without incident, for I did not leave the house. Sunday morning, however, I was fixing myself a simple breakfast when I heard the snap of the mail slot closing. Unusual for a Sunday. I ignored the envelope on the ground, instead opening the door to see who'd visited. I was just in time to see a slender, black-clad man disappear onto the street. I closed the door. It was almost nine o'clock. There was a Catholic church nearby, so I concluded that the priest had stopped by before service. I laughed at the thought of his little legs carrying him off my property, to safety, him crossing himself as he walked.

After breakfast I opened the letter. Although it wasn't a letter. I'm sure you can guess what he'd given me—one of those white feathers they sent to men deemed too cowardly to fight. I presume it functioned as a visual pun on a particular colloquial use of the word "chicken". Either way, it didn't bother me. I saw the feather as nothing more than an amusement—the irony of being accused of cowardice through an anonymous gesture. I found a piece of tacky gum, stuck it in the bottom of a tiny brass pot—no bigger than a thimble—and lodged the feather in that. Then I placed it on my mantelpiece.

That is enough for today. I could write more—have written more—but with every instalment realise just how much of an exchange the writing of a letter is. I will not demand too much, although I hope my brevity doesn't frustrate you. I am also finding the writing of these letters to be more draining than I had previously imagined. Again, if you would like to contact me, please do so by the address on the rear of the envelope. If you would like me to send it all, I will send it all.

True apologies and regards,

Christian Ellis

## Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

In a way, all I have told you thus far is prologue. This is not to diminish its importance; on the contrary, were I to start with the events of strict relevance to yourself, a prime purpose of my letters would not be served. I hope you can forgive me this mild deception. If I had mentioned in my first letter that she would not arrive until the third I doubt you would have read them. But you had to, in order to receive the most comprehensive account of the incidents and my motivations in initiating and prolonging them. The scene had to be set, so to speak.

I imagine that by now you have deduced my identity. Certainly it is printed at the bottom of each letter, but a name is not an identity. I suppose that's what I am trying to accomplish here, isn't it? To show you myself, to build a person. Specifically an identity built around the events of 1917, with them at its core, as it were. Forgive my tangent. Perhaps I am nervous.

It was a damp winter's day, and I was surprised when someone knocked on my front door. I couldn't think of a single person who would brave the wind and rain to speak to me in person. As I approached, the thought appeared clearly before me. Nobody *would* come to me, unless with some urgent matter. I paused. My entire family had passed away with the exception of my brother, who was in England and had been for some years. I could think of no reason why he, or any of my acquaintances in Melbourne, would want to contact me. Certainly not urgently. That left the people of the neighbourhood, none of whom I could imagine wishing to contact me in person. Whoever was at my door was almost certainly there to harangue me in some way.

They knocked again and I just stared at the door, feeling visible. I moved down the hall, pulling the curtain just enough to see the path leading from my doorstep to the street. A young woman. Somehow she was familiar, though I cast the impression from my mind immediately, sensing its impossibility. I knew nobody here. I needn't describe her to you.

I watched her leave my property before returning to my desk. Moments later I was startled by her visage at the window before me. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Rain dripped from the edges of her umbrella, she wore a silver locket around her neck but was otherwise simply dressed. She had an open, approachable look about her. I nodded to her, stood up, and left the room to let her in.

She took a sip of tea and placed the cup and its saucer on the table. Then she smiled. She had come to apologise.

'On behalf of Father Barth,' she said. I recalled the feather.

'Is it your position to apologise?'

'I think he would apologise, if he understood.' The look of concern faded, and was replaced with the easy amiability I eventually recognised as her default expression.

'Oh?' I sipped my tea, then rested the saucer on my crossed knee. 'And what is it you understand that he doesn't?'

'You,' she said. 'If I might be so bold as to presume.'

'You understand me, do you?'

'Better than he does, I think.' I didn't say anything. I must have unnerved her because she sighed and the smile dropped. 'Perhaps I am being presumptuous. All I meant to say was that I think the people around here are wrong about you.'

‘Simply differing from popular opinion isn’t grounds to assume you know the truth of the matter.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Her hands were still in her lap but they were moving together now; she appeared to be squeezing the web of skin between thumb and index. ‘It’s just—it’s just that given what they say, it seems impossible that they *could* be right.’

‘And what do they say?’ I felt a mild thrill, took another sip of tea.

‘It would be rude to repeat it.’

‘I know the words aren’t yours.’

‘Still.’

‘My girl,’ I wasn’t sure there was enough of an age gap for me to get away with the condescension, but she didn’t react. If anything she seemed pleased, the affection it might have implied. ‘If people are speaking ill of someone else, it seems, by my standards, that you have a duty to inform them.’

‘It’s gossip,’ she said.

‘What they are doing is gossiping. What you are doing is telling me so. Don’t I have a right to know what others say about me? I’m new here. I know I haven’t been totally accepted by my neighbours, but I haven’t wronged them either, have I?’

‘No. It’s just...’

‘Yes?’

‘They say you’re a coward, that you’re selfish, that you value yourself more than everyone else and that what you are doing is sinful.’

‘Do you believe in sin?’ She was shocked. I would later learn it was because nobody she knew had ever questioned the idea, not because she was offended by it.

‘Well, yes, of course I do.’

‘I think I remember something or other from my schooldays.’

‘You don’t go to church?’

‘No,’ I said.

She gave a fleeting smile but didn’t make eye contact. She picked up her tea and took a sip, then another. Then she placed her cup back down. ‘I should go. I’ve said enough. Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Ellis.’

‘Please, call me Christian. Christian Ellis.’ She stared at me a moment before allowing herself a short laugh. ‘And you didn’t disturb me, quite the opposite. It was a pleasure.’

As she crossed the threshold she turned to bid me farewell. I saw her eyes focus on something over my shoulder, brow knotted. The look passed and we said goodbye. I closed the door, turning to see what might have caught her eye. I pouted, unable to determine what. Then I saw the feather, sitting perfectly upright in its little holder. No doubt she’d heard about it at service the day before.

It was then, only moments after she’d left, that I realised why she seemed familiar to me. It was her I glared at in the shop, when I had been refused service. I felt a twitch of endearment towards the young woman.

From now on, Mr. Ashby, the majority of my correspondence will appear as above. Please forgive any literary pretension you find in my choice to express the events through dialogue. I have tried to write these events so many times; this is the only way that feels natural,

or that comes close to expressing the truth of those days. As usual, I will wait three days before posting my next letter. I hope it finds you well.

True apologies and regards,

Christian Ellis

### Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

I will dispense with formalities, as this letter can be seen as a continuation of the previous rather than an independent correspondence. Please be assured that all etiquette is implied.

I did not expect to see her again, but hoped I would. Nothing in our first conversation suggested any need for another, but by the end of the week she was once again on my doorstep. Yes, I had been pleased by her visit, but it would take more than a friendly gesture to reach me; I had been diligent building my insulation against the world and the intentions of its inhabitants. So when she knocked, in a manner that would become familiar, I responded to the sound with suspicion.

I paused with my hand raised before the doorknob. I may not have answered at all had it not been for something she said, at a volume indicating that she knew exactly where I was.

'Mr. Ellis. It's Sophie. Please open the door.'

I hesitated, then crept across the room, stomping as I returned to the door. I opened it to find her there, rather pretty in a pale blue dress, the silver locket resting against her chest. It was apparent from the expression on her face that my little trick with the footsteps hadn't fooled her. She said nothing, just smiled with what I then interpreted as shyness but upon later reflection decided was bemusement.

'I'm glad you're home,' she said.

'Yes.' We stood there a moment. 'Well, come in.'

Again I made tea and carried it out to her. How quickly little rituals form. I placed everything on the table and poured for us both. I took mine and sat back in the same chair I'd used last time. It was only then that I noticed her hair had fallen from its clips and lay loosely across her face. Her cheeks appeared flushed and her eyes were burdened with tiredness. I was disturbed to notice a smear across the top of her blouse. Regardless, it was not my place to pry. I had since recovered from my earlier embarrassment and took the opportunity to direct the conversation.

'So,' I began. 'After you left the other day, I realised I'd seen you before.'

'In Colwan's shop.'

'You remember.'

'I wouldn't have come to see you if that hadn't happened.'

'It's harder to hate someone when you realise they're a person too, isn't it?'

She shifted in her seat. The light folded across the fabric of her dress, falling in from the window beside us. A break in the cloud let the sun peek through; the garden appeared a misty yellow. A clock ticked. I sipped my tea.

'I never hated you,' she said. 'I didn't know... Nobody knew. Knows. They have no right to treat you like that.'

I stared at her. She had not come the other day to apologise for the feather, rather for the situation in Colwan's shop. It occurred to me that she may not have been aware of it. I stood up and stepped over to the mantelpiece. 'Have you seen my feather? I took the opportunity to mount it. I'm not sure how one goes about mounting a feather—perhaps I should have framed it—but here it is, anyway.' I took it from its place and passed it to her.

'Is this...?'

‘A gift from the priest, yes.’

She looked up at me, her eyes wide. ‘I didn’t know about this.’ I made a dismissive gesture with my hand.

‘It doesn’t matter. To me it’s just a feather.’

‘But it says nobody respects you. They look down on you.’

‘I knew that anyway. Excuse my brashness but I don’t care what they think. I know my reasons and I am justified in them.’

‘What are your reasons?’ She seemed nervous asking the question, as if it would cause offense, but when she risked a glance towards me I detected in her look a certain defiance. I coughed politely and returned to my seat.

‘I have a medical condition that prevents me from performing any kind of sustained physical work. Even mental work is unduly taxing. There is a recommendation from a doctor in Melbourne sitting in my desk. The government is aware.’

‘Why don’t you tell people? I’m sure everyone would understand. Father Barth would even apologise.’

‘By the time I was given a chance it wasn’t worth it.’

‘Do you look at us all so disdainfully?’

‘Ignorance should be a sin.’

‘Everybody’s ignorant,’ she said. ‘Of something.’

‘But everybody has the opportunity to change that, to some degree, and nothing compels us to make decisions out of our ignorance.’

Something flickered in her eyes. I couldn't read it then and to this day I cannot be convinced of my later interpretations. It could have been resentment, easily, but it could have been the first flash of awareness that things in the world might not have been how she had always thought, if I may be so presumptuous as to assume I was capable of showing her that.

It could, as I decided that night and believed for many years, have been attraction.

She placed the feather on the table.

My eyes wandered from her face and rested on her locket. I touched my chest where it would have lain had I worn it. 'Is there significance to that?'

She mirrored my gesture, taking the necklace in her fingers. 'It's from my fiancée,' she said. 'My love. He gave it to me when he left.'

'I'm sorry.'

'He wanted to go.'

'Valiant,' I said. She made no response. For a few moments neither of us spoke. I coughed again, an attempt to bring her back into the room. Nothing. 'Where is he?'

'Versailles,' she murmured.

'Ah.' I knew nothing of the war.

Eventually she looked up and smiled at me, a sad kind of smile, and I could tell she was not smiling for me.

'You have family though?'

'In Port Elliot,' she said. 'It's on the south coast, if you haven't heard of it. Most haven't. My mother lives there.'

‘What brought you to Adelaide?’

‘Work. Because of the war.’ I later discovered, as you would know, that this was a lie.

‘Ah,’ I said.

Another silence crept in, but she didn’t allow it to grow. ‘I should go. Thank you for the tea.’ She rose and I led her to the doorway. On the threshold she turned to me.

‘You know, we’re not all ignorant here.’

It was my turn to smile. ‘I realise that now,’ I said. She nodded. I watched her move down the path and disappear onto the street. The air was crisp and clean. I stood there, looking at my garden.

It has probably occurred to you by now, Mr. Ashby, that I have provided substantial detail regarding what was said and done during her visits (if you suspect I am omitting things for your peace of mind, I am not. Evidence of this will come in later letters). I would be lying if I were to claim I remembered it all now, as I remember yesterday, or used to be able to remember yesterday. I still believe it to be mostly accurate. I have always been fastidious in my journal keeping, and after my first visit from Sophie I was drawn to my desk to record in as great detail as possible the events of her visit. I transcribed our conversation from memory, as accurately as I was capable of. I described our movements, intonation, glances and gestures; I recorded my impressions and emotions, my intuitive responses and any inferences I drew from her. Pages were devoted to my attempts to capture the image of that ambiguous and inflammatory flicker in her look.

That is all I can manage this week. As usual, I hope this letter finds you well, and that what I have described has not strained you too harshly. Although I fear we are coming to the parts of the story that will.

### Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

I hope this letter finds you well. I will dispense with formalities and begin immediately.

Over the weeks, Sophie and I became, if not close, then at least comfortable. No, that isn't right either. I was drawn to her, but always present was the thought of you, sir, firing from the trenches or lying wounded on some makeshift stretcher. Not that I cared too much. You were an abstract notion, then, not a person. But still a disincentive. I believe Sophie was drawn to me in some way, too, although she would not have admitted it to herself and allowed it only to manifest in strictly platonic terms.

Winter passed slowly. Without any other direct contact, Sophie's visits became the high point of each day. We fell into routine, though at the time I was apt to think of it as ritual. Is there a difference? I would light a tremendous fire in anticipation, so that by the time she arrived after work the room was warm. She told me of her work as a station guard in the city. I must confess that I found the details rather dull. Nevertheless, it pleased her to contribute to society, to play however small a part in the war effort.

We shared deeply of ourselves in the weeks leading up to the day she brought your letter. Objects in my home prompted questions from her, which I answered with stories. I do not remember now how many of these were true. She mentioned that you had been injured in battle and described in great detail her terror at the possibility of your death. I knew of you, but as I mentioned you were no more than an abstraction, a trivial detail in the circumstance of her life. It was because of your intangibility that I was capable of doing what I did.

Spring came. After a day or two of rain the sun returned, so I used the opportunity to tend to my garden. The turf was still muddy and a sweet, earthen smell hung in the air. The light made everything seem fresh and new. I lost myself inspecting the pumpkins. They had survived the mild winter and were just about ready for harvest, slick with dew. Suddenly I was startled by a voice.

‘Christian?’ I turned to see Sophie a few yards behind me. She clutched a handkerchief, her eyes puffed and rheumy. Her voice was choked; she had evidently been crying. I took her in my arms. At first she didn’t speak, just sniffed and sobbed, but eventually she calmed down sufficiently to remove herself from my embrace and sit on the nearby bench. I sat beside her.

‘It’s not wrong that I come to you, is it?’

‘Why would that be wrong? Of course not.’

‘I know how you feel now,’ she said, staring at her hands.

‘What did they say?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

I put my hand on her shoulder. She accepted it.

‘Sophie, think about how complicated your situation is. Your fiancée is at war, your family live on the coast, you’re practically alone here—I think it’s perfectly understandable that you’d want some companionship. They can’t possibly understand the intricacies of the situation so you know their judgements don’t mean anything. Their view of you is so tragically limited as to not really be a view of you at all.’

‘That doesn’t make it hurt less.’

‘But at least you know they’re not really talking about you.’ I decided it would make things too complicated to mention that we are as inscrutable to ourselves as to anyone else, and that in the same way, you cannot even really talk about yourself. As things turned out, though, opening her up to the idea might have helped her, if helping her were possible.

She didn’t cry again, just sat there staring into the garden. I wanted to run the backs of my fingers along her cheek. I stood up. ‘Come. I want to show you something.’

Most of the pumpkins were obscured but some were visible, their orange husks bright against the foliage. I knelt beside one.

‘Hitch your dress up a little,’ I said. ‘Kneel down.’ She hesitated, then slipped her handkerchief away and carefully lifted her skirts. In a moment her face was beside mine. I fixed my eyes on the vegetables.

‘There’s something special about pumpkins,’ I said, talking off the top of my head. ‘Maybe it’s how vividly they’re coloured, or their weight. Yes, I suppose that’s it. They’re a vegetable of contrasts, aren’t they?’ Sophie was staring at me, either out of fascination or confusion. I ignored it, and stroked a pumpkin. ‘Try it.’

‘What?’

I took her hand and placed it on the pumpkin. ‘Feel the ridges,’ I said. ‘How firm it is. How solid. Then think: not long ago, that rock-like thing was a flower, soft and fragile.’ I wondered if there was a metaphor there, then wondered if she would, and what she’d imagine it meant. I watched her face soften, her suspicion dissipate. She was thinking about the pumpkin. ‘Heft it,’ I said, almost whispering. ‘Feel its weight.’ She put her other hand to it and slid them both around to its underside. As she did this I reached behind me and pulled the secateurs from my belt, snipping through the vine in one swift motion so the pumpkin dropped into her hands. I stood up.

‘That’s yours,’ I said, tucking the secateurs away. ‘You should keep it. Make a soup.’

There was mud smeared across the tops of her fingers. She set the pumpkin on the grass and noticed the mud which had soiled her hands. Instinctively, she went for the handkerchief in the pocket of her coat, before realising she would dirty her clothes if she did so. In that moment, seeing her stranded, disgusted by the filth on her fingers yet unable to clean them, I felt a fondness swell in me that might have been capable of overcoming the coldness I’d let myself develop. Of course, I showed her to the bathroom to clean up, but the change had occurred.

Once she’d washed and we were back outside she took her handkerchief and wiped down her pumpkin. ‘It’s big, isn’t it?’ She smiled at it.

‘It’s a good one,’ I said. She turned to me.

‘Thank you.’

‘I’ve got plenty more.’

‘No, I mean for everything. I feel better now. And you’re right—the townsfolk can’t understand me. It doesn’t matter what they say, I know what’s really happening.’

I wasn’t going to contradict her.

‘I’m very thankful to have you.’ I smiled at her, then opened my arms. She hugged me. Our cheeks pressed. She released me and planted a quick kiss near my mouth. She made to move but I held her by the arms. Our eyes met. ‘I should be going,’ she said. I held onto her, captivated by a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead; the rosy blush spreading on her cheeks. There was the light of recognition in her look. I took it as an opening and guided my face towards hers. She pulled herself from me. ‘I should be going.’ I did not speak. I retrieved the pumpkin and handed it to her. She struggled with it, then found her grip and mumbled a

goodbye. I watched as she hurried past the house and towards the street. She was carrying my pumpkin.

I took a glass of whiskey as consolation for my failure, but by the time I was pouring my third realised there was not necessarily a reason for any heaviness of mood. It was entirely possible that the rejection was forced by her moral obligations to yourself, Mr. Ashby, as well as by the old-world values she was so admirably trying to shake off. My spirits lifted immensely.

My thoughts blunted but exhilarated with drink, I went into the garden and harvested my entire crop of pumpkins. I brought them inside and spent the rest of the night peeling, dicing, mashing, baking and boiling the flesh, endeavouring to cook the whole batch before I fell asleep. I kept the whiskey nearby in case my motivation flagged, and amused myself with daydreams of the life Sophie and I would somehow share. I made pies and soup. I roasted the seeds and baked cubes of the flesh until their edges browned. By the time I was finished I had a larder of orange food.

If I was going to become human again, that day and night would have constituted the first step towards my recovery. But the next morning she arrived with a letter in hand. It had been opened, and it was from you, and it bound our fates together in a neat double stroke. No more than a week after the first letter, I submitted an order with a Sydney retailer for two identical Royal typewriters. They arrived within a few days. I took one from its case and roughed its edges with a stone taken from the garden. I then slotted it into the dusty case my mother's old typewriter had been stored in and placed it next to the front door. The other I left as it was, pristine.

The first letter she read detailed your release from hospital and return to the front. It became something of a ritual for her to read from your letters when they arrived, and I developed the ability to disengage entirely from the meaning of the words she read, instead letting the

pleasing tone and rhythm of her voice carry my thoughts. It seems fitting now that everything came of, and developed through, letters. Letters such as I am writing now—but that you are also reading now (two nows).

I have mentioned that I felt myself drifting towards misanthropy; that I felt any connection between myself and other people dissipate, could muster no empathy for others. Your first letter to Sophie provided the final push in this direction: my plan developed amidst the soft patter of your words made sound; the plan itself held letters as its core. And now, of course, I am asking my forgiveness the only way of which I can conceive.

During one of her early readings, I enquired into the nature of your relationship with her. No doubt the two of you had discussed this, and certainly you were both aware of the circumstances of your meeting. Even so, I would like to relate what she told me. She may have told me differently and this might reveal something to you. If not, perhaps it will stir memories of your own and give you something good.

She finished reading. Our eyes met and I considered her at length. ‘You are quite committed to this man, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I am indebted to him.’

‘How?’

‘My childhood was an unhappy one. I know that is not unusual, but its common nature made it no easier.’ She seemed to gather herself, taking a deep breath. ‘My father was not pleasant to me. A sailor and drunkard. When the war began he enlisted in the Navy, but was rejected. That evening he forced himself upon me. By chance Lynton, who had been courting me for a short while, had just enlisted. He came by to tell me, and heard my cries.’ She glanced at me. ‘The rest you can imagine. Lynton took me in and found me the job in Adelaide. We were engaged shortly after. He saved me.’

‘And your father?’

‘He re-enlisted the next day, apparently the Army took him. Then he was killed.’

‘A sad story,’ I said.

‘Not as sad as it may have been. Lynton saved me. He is the single important thing in my life, and always will be.’

It occurs to me as I write, bringing these events into sharper focus than since the days in which they happened, that these letters might not work. They might infuriate you, might consolidate whatever ideas you already hold about me. This is a risk I am willing to take. I implore you, if you have read this far, please at least read the next letter. If I may allow myself another literary indulgence I will leave you here, but not before mentioning that in my next correspondence I will detail the strange and debased account of how, through illusions justified by no valid morality, I killed you, and became Sophie.

### Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

I can allow myself no preamble.

I remember little of those letters of yours; as mentioned in my previous letter I used the time to construct my plan. The idea appeared transparent and fully-formed, an icy breath of insight. I knew what I needed to accomplish, and how I would do so. Ordering the typewriters was the first step. The second I made one afternoon, as the garden was beginning to flush with colour.

My gaze was resting on a rain-glazed pearl of blossom just outside the window when I detected a shift in the room's mood. Sophie had stopped reading. I looked to her and smiled.

'What happens with correspondence between you? Are you able to write him as well?'

'I reply to every letter.' She straightened in her chair, proud. I rose and went into the kitchen, as much to hide the leer disfiguring my face as to prepare more tea. I returned with a plate of lamingtons and another pot. She took one of the cakes. As she bit into it, a flutter of desiccated coconut fell across her chest. I'd hoped it would. With the cake in her mouth she was unable to excuse herself, and she would never brush the crumbs onto the floor of someone's house. The same hopelessness as with the pumpkin flitted across her face and again endeared me to her. She swallowed, as daintily as possible, and placed the lamington on her saucer, alongside the teacup. 'Excuse me,' she said, trying to collect the crumbs in her napkin before disappearing into the bathroom.

One might think the fondness I felt for her would have prevented me doing what I did. It did not. If anything, it strengthened my resolve to have her for myself, although I suspect even now that any sexual motivation was secondary. Something deeper drove my need for her, something to do with the relationship between myself and the greater world. I am still at a loss to explain it properly. I did what I did to make a point, and the more perfect she was the more perfectly the point would be made.

By the time she returned from the bathroom, her difficulties with the lamington overcome, I had picked up the typewriter in its weathered case and placed it on the table. Sophie noticed it immediately upon returning.

‘This is for you,’ I said, gesturing to it. ‘It’s a little scratched but it types beautifully.’

She unlatched the case. Even from where I was seated the machine sparkled. Her eyes widened. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘It’s beautiful.’

She left shortly after. She turned on the threshold as she usually did to resist some point I had made and to assert her own position. This time, however, she sat the typewriter on the bureau next to the door and thanked me again. There was a gravity to her voice. She wrapped her arms around me in a short, tight hug. When she released me she was blushing.

The evening was a feverish one. Towards midnight I would usually take a stroll through the neighbourhood. It was the only time I could tolerate it, when I could be reasonably convinced I was the only person on the street still awake. That night, however, I stayed in. I knew what I needed to find but I was incapable of finding it. By now, I’m sure, you’re acutely aware of the document I needed. Sophie’s parents would have contacted you after everything happened and, if they hadn’t worked it out by then, your return would have clarified it all. And what a chilling clarification it would have been.

So why do I avoid naming what it is I needed? Guilt has caught me, as you know, and to mention it explicitly before its necessary inclusion in my recount causes my stomach to quiver. Forgive my cowardice, but I have difficulty facing what I have done. Certain elements trouble me more than others.

A thought—that you died in Europe and never returned. I had not considered it. No reader for these letters. No contradictions in Australia—the truth locked tight with me. If you died there, as you seemed to—but didn't—the secret history is contained. Just a thought; I am sure you are very much alive.

By morning I had found a solution. As with the initial formulation of my plan, it wasn't the morality of the scheme itself so much as the logistics that troubled me. My doctor friend—the one who wrote my medical exemption from service—had a brother who was tragically killed during the same war you served in. You might have known each other—Marcus Laine? Unlikely, but possible. The poor lad's plane was shot down over northern Africa. Nevertheless, if anyone I knew could get me what I wanted, it was most likely the doctor. I resolved to book a train to Melbourne that day, and to send a telegram announcing my visit. Having finally plotted the means by which I would acquire what I needed, I retired to my bedroom and collapsed.

The following morning I woke late and set about composing the first of the correspondences between you and I. In a way, the letters you are now reading could be seen as their continuation. I imagine you eventually suspected someone other than Sophie was behind them, and, if you have not already done so, could probably identify the first letter I wrote you. My records of conversation with Sophie were useful in imitating her voice, but it was difficult approximating her writing style with no examples to draw from. I settled for something rather generic, given her privileged but not extensive education, and given your responses, could only assume I had not fallen too far from the mark.

I posted the letter on the way to the station, having copied your postage details from the back of one of the letters Sophie brought to my house.

In Melbourne I stayed with the same friend who had recommended my medical exemption. After making sure he was asleep, I slipped into his office, closed the door, and clicked on the small lamp by his desk. If the difficulty of finding it frustrated me, it relieved some worry too, because his brother's military death notice was packed so far down at the bottom of his files there was no way my friend looked at it regularly. I glanced at the document. Nothing I couldn't manage with a typewriter and a custom stamp. I was glad for the extra day I had in Melbourne.

The next morning my friend was still snoring. I left a grateful note explaining that I had lectures to attend and caught a train into the city. The State Library had a dictionary of typesetting, and I spent half an hour with the notice open in front of me, trying to determine which typeface I needed. I found it—or one close enough—and walked the two blocks to a typewriter repair shop. I paid for another typewriter with the specific request that it come equipped with the necessary face. I was to return at five. I returned to the library, and after an hour or two tracing the stamp from the death notice, produced something clear enough to use as a model. There was nothing explicitly military on the oval seal, and while it was a risk, I doubted the tradesman would suspect forgery. By the end of the day I had my typewriter and stamp. I bought a pad of red ink, tested the stamp, and paid the man a generous tip.

I slept soundly on the train back, arriving in Adelaide fresh and alert. I set up my desk as soon as I got home, and was using a light pencil to mark the margins that would help align the typewritten text on the new page. It was not long before I had a completed copy. I made a second and went about filling in the details. I copied most of it from Marcus' notice, simply changing his name to yours and substituting an appropriate date.

I cannot continue. Whether you believe me or not, this has been difficult to write. If it comes easily off the page I am glad—it was not easy to put down. I feel I am becoming sick. At the end of my previous letter I promised further revelation in this one, but my will has fallen to the same ailment as my body. I simply cannot proceed. You will receive another letter in three days.

### Christian Ellis' Belated Confession (cont.)

Dear Mr. Ashby,

It is possible that this will be my final letter, where my explanation and your experience overlap.

I passed a fortnight twitching in anticipation of my letter arriving in Europe. Sophie and I were growing ever closer, and while my *faux-pas* in the pumpkin patch was not forgotten, we seemed to have mutually—silently—agreed to ignore it. Or so I thought. One morning she arrived on my doorstep, radiant as ever, although with a subtle distinction of which it took me a few moments to determine the source. It wasn't until she had sat down that I saw she was no longer wearing your locket. Something stirred within me. I was not listening to what she was saying, was incapable of it. I later decided I was overcome by the complex realisation that the past was not as I understood it to be.

If I interpreted her discarding of the locket correctly, which later events suggested that I did, then it came at an unfortunate time. Had it happened several weeks earlier I would not have had to prepare the false documents, send you that letter, or inform anyone of your death. As it was, however, the machinery had been set running and I had no choice but to ensure it continued doing so.

My father was a corporal during the Boer War. His deep blue dress uniform, complete with medals, was stored amongst my mother's things in the cellar. I retrieved it, packed it into a travel bag and caught the train to Port Eliot. On the way to the train station I slipped one of your death certificates into Sophie's mailbox.

I changed into the uniform while on the train. Her mother answered the door, and I am afraid I remember no details of her face or appearance. I adopted a grave manner and informed her as best I knew how that you had died. I passed her the envelope and she did not start crying until she saw your name on the page. The collar of my jacket was heavily starched and in the heat became itchy from my perspiration. My head swam. I offered my condolences and assured her that your effects would arrive by post, including a medal for bravery. I invented a name for it, ignorant of any legitimate awards, but I cannot imagine she heard me.

I am not proud to admit this, but in the interests of transparency I am forced to tell you that upon returning to Adelaide I entered into the happiest part of my adult life. Sophie's mother had suspected nothing. The forgeries were of excellent quality and I had no doubt that Sophie would be fooled too, especially upon receiving the telegram her mother had almost certainly sent by the time I arrived home. I could not fathom my plan failing. As far as I could tell, everything had fallen into place; all I had to do was allow the momentum of causality to direct Sophie into my waiting arms.

Sophie did not visit me after work that day, as I had expected. I drank a glass of champagne with dinner to celebrate my success, and finished the bottle while reading in my garden. The long summer days kept the air warm, and I could read by the light of the sky until almost nine o'clock. Periodically I would stop and gaze out over my secluded world—the firs I planted shielding my garden and me from the peering eyes of the neighbourhood. I ran my eyes over the pumpkin patch, the row of fruit trees along the back fence. The sky was smeared with pastels as the sun retreated. I was no longer someone who let life happen to them, but an agent of its vicissitudes.

While Sophie was in mourning, I took it upon myself, as her closest friend, to collect her mail in her absence. No doubt the neighbours witnessed me doing so. Shortly after she retreated to the coast your reply came. I stashed it in my desk without reading it.

Do you remember that I mentioned sending for two identical typewriters? This is why. I fed a clean sheet into the one I kept and readied myself. The brevity of the letter you read belied the effort it took to write; when I finally pulled the finished letter from the machine I was weak with exhaustion. I didn't even read it. Overcome, I stretched out on the carpet of my study and went to sleep.

It is with a heavy regret that I inform you, as you have no doubt already ascertained, that the last words you believed to have shared with Sophie were in fact shared with me, the executor of your undoing. It is impossible, although I have tried, to imagine the abandonment and despair you must have felt upon reading my letters. The front was a wasteland, but one illuminated by the flickering hope of a woman waiting for you at home. To have that light extinguished—I am sorry.

I hope that at some point in your life you found love again. I did not. After escaping Adelaide I sought penance from myself, and renounced the pleasure of women for many years. And, when I capitulated and began to seek their affections, found myself universally unsuccessful. What I have done to you is terrible, but you were young then, and I hope I am safe in believing that you were luckier—and happier—than I during the intervening years. I hope there is someone holding your hand as you read this.

I continued collecting Sophie's mail in her absence, an action duly heeded by the neighbourhood. As smoothly as things went, however one thing troubled me: that Sophie might return before I had convinced you she was no longer in love. As we both know, however, I had no need to worry.

'Thank you for saving my mail,' Sophie said, the next time we saw each other. I handed her the small bundle of letters she'd received. She set it on the table without examining it.

‘Has something happened?’

I put on a quizzical face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Something in the neighbourhood. It feels different.’

‘You’re asking the wrong person, I’m afraid.’

‘People don’t seem as kind.’

‘That’s odd,’ I said. ‘If anything, people should be nicer to you, knowing what you’ve been through.’

‘Yes,’ she said, distant. ‘I would have thought so.’

There was a moment’s pause in which I stared at the floor with a sombre expression.

‘How,’ I murmured, ‘have they been less kind?’

‘It is as if I’ve done something wrong. They think less of me, but I can’t imagine why.’

‘I know the feeling.’

‘How do you cope?’

‘I know they have no reason to judge me as they do.’

‘But they do with me?’

I shrugged. ‘I couldn’t say.’ Another pause. She seemed tense, coiled like a spring.

I leant towards her in my chair, elbows resting on my knees. ‘We’re on the same side now.’

‘We’ve always been, haven’t we?’

I took her hand, squeezed it. ‘Of course. But now there’s no getting out of it.’ I released her. She threw her hands to her face and dropped back in her chair.

‘How can they just turn on me?’

‘People are fickle.’

‘You’d think, after everything I’ve been through, that...’ Her voice cracked. I kneeled beside her and placed my hand on her back, palm flat against her spine, slotted in between her shoulder blades. Her small body shook. I took her hand.

We sat like that for some time. Sophie’s breathing would calm and she would start up again, whimpering and wheezing. At one point she let out a broken moan, almost a wail, and if I was going to feel remorse, pull myself out of the situation and rectify it as best I could, that forsaken cry would have been what made it happen. Maybe, if she hadn’t spoken, it would have.

‘I need you, Christian.’

It felt like much, much longer, but her disintegration only took several days, which we spent barely leaving one another’s sight. As she became less capable of ordering her thoughts she became more rabidly obsessive over me. I did not feel I was sharing that time with a person. She touched me more often, from the moment she arrived back from Port Elliot. At first it was for comfort, as a way of grounding herself, as if by confirming my physicality she could confirm her own.

She woke me before dawn. It was still dark. I remember being startled by the weight next to me, her airy floral scent in my sheets; it had been a long time since I’d shared a bed. She was mumbling. At first I thought she was half asleep, but when I saw her face, her eyes white discs, almost incandescent in the weak light from the window, I knew she was conscious. She grabbed my arm. I couldn’t understand a word she was saying. Then she stopped. I could hear her breathing, short gasping breaths.

‘Everything is wrong,’ she said.

I watched her breathe, swaying almost imperceptibly.

‘This isn’t,’ I replied. The focused circumstance of my bed, then, the two of us: that was all that existed, and in this tightened world her tiny motion was like the shuddering of plates beneath the earth. She got out of the bed and gathered up her clothes. ‘You can’t leave,’ I said.

‘I have.’

She returned to Port Elliot then. I don’t know if she spoke to her mother before she walked into the ocean, but her body had disappeared before the morning was out.

The rest you know. You are entitled to your own interpretation of my story, but I would like to make a comment on the nature of Sophie’s final statement which, I believe, were the final words of any significance she spoke to anybody. At first I assumed she meant there was no way I could make her stay, that her decision had been made and her body then being in my bedroom was simply academic. Later I questioned whether she in fact meant that she had left herself, somehow, that the person she identified as was somewhere in the past. Finally I considered that her decision to die had been some time coming, presumably since she started to break apart, and that the meaning of her phrase was some combination of the previous interpretations.

I do not know. That is the crux of it, isn’t it? Not knowing. Important details are lost to history or memory, memory itself becomes as much a smokescreen as a window, worse: a smokescreen that appears to be a window. There are times I have wondered if it is a mirror. Or two, facing one another.

If these letters have brought you a sense of resolution amounting to even a fraction of the pain I have caused then they have served their purpose. As I mentioned in my first letter, I am writing these partly out of a belief that I will be able to die when I finish them. I do not mean this

figuratively; I do not mean “die peacefully”. I am almost one hundred and fifteen years old. Everyone I know has been dead a long time. It could be that I am alive for another reason, that the events I described here have no bearing upon my longevity. But I don’t believe that. I exist for those few months alone; my entire life has circled around those events and the people involved. You—you are central to this. I sometimes feel, when I make my way outside to sit amongst the long shadows of summer’s dusk, that the energy of your life is audible from far away, somewhere over the endless rooftops of the city, a vibration through time, an attunement.

I will not write you again. If, however, you feel the need to do so, my address will not change, and I will reply.

True apologies and regards,

Christian Ellis

*Paul*

## Just an Old Knife

The day we read Ellis' final letter I arrived home to find a package on my doorstep. I took it inside and checked the postmark: Argentina. Then I remembered. I used a pair of scissors to unwrap the packaging and set the wooden box on the kitchen counter. Two brass clasps held it shut. I unclipped them to reveal the knife, an Argentinian *facón*, a gaucho knife and one of the country's national symbols. *Facóns* vary in size but this one had a blade of just over six inches, and a polished bone handle capped with metal, maybe bronze. It was undecorated. I remembered choosing it for that reason, that it most closely resembled the actual knife a gaucho would have carried. I slid the weapon from its container. Its handle was cool, its weight reassuring. Most *facón* are single sided, and taper at the point like a butcher's knife.

I waved the knife about, as if fighting, but had never fought with a knife before and the actions felt awkward. I slipped it into my belt and looked at my reflection in the mirror. Then I took it out and held it a bit longer, alternating between holding it with the blade facing down, as if to drive it into a tabletop, and upright, as if to slice an onion or fight a rival gaucho.

For the rest of the night I kept the knife nearby. I would heft it intermittently, feel how it balanced in my hand. Whenever I put it down—on a table, on my bed, on the bathroom sink—it seemed incongruous, unable to sit in harmony with its surroundings. I wondered where that knife had been, what it had been used to do, and what it would be used to do in the future.

I dug around in my box of tapes until I found the one I wanted. A very old man and his middle-aged son, at the bar in a diner somewhere. I couldn't remember where it was, geographically, but I recalled the fans whirring overhead, the slow chatter of the clientele, the view of the dirt road outside. The man's face bore innumerable lines and his son said he had

spent most of his life as a librarian in Buenos Aires, but grew up in the pampas. He spoke in a fragmented Spanish dialect I couldn't understand, but his son translated for me.

'He says that one night when he was a young boy he went with his brothers to the house of their friends.'

The old man spoke, his voice ragged. I could see his fingers resting on the *mate* cup. I remember the way his son leant to hear him talk.

'He realised as an adult that they were successful criminals, with a large house, fine suits, expensive furniture. It is important to note that these men were not gauchos, that there were no more gauchos then, at least not in the way you imagine. These kinds of criminals used guns.

'The men drank and gambled, playing rounds of poker. A young boy amongst men carousing: he was bored. He wandered the empty rooms of the house, coming across a cabinet housing a collection of knives. All kinds: long and short, ornate and plain. He lingered, inspecting them. But when he returned to the men the room had turned silent. Two of the men—the host and a tall European—were at the poker table, locked in a stare. He remembers the huge pile of notes on the table, the cards scattered across it. There may have been an empty bottle of wine on the floor beneath the table.

'The host shouted something. Clearly offended, he stood and gestured at the European. He was challenging him to a duel. They went into the room with the knives and the host unlocked the cabinet. He says he didn't know if they were serious, if it was actually going to happen.'

The man's son translated as he spoke, so together their voices formed a single tone: the rough, quiet monotone of the father beneath his son's warm and lively voice. At this point, though, the old man stopped. A moment later his son did too. The sound of the tape recorder ran. Then he spoke again, his son picking up shortly after.

‘I didn’t know if they were serious,’ his son said, ‘but I wanted them to be. I thought about my friends, how I could brag of having seen a man killed.’ There was another pause.

‘The host picked a long, double-bladed dagger with a u-shaped crossguard. The European man took no time to decide, immediately reaching for the plainest knife in the cabinet, stubby and single-edged. Once the knives were in their hands, neither man spoke. We followed them outside. I remember not being sure if they were still actually going to fight. These were my brother’s friends, and although I learnt that night that there was more to my brother than I knew, I also knew he had never fought with a knife, and that these men hadn’t either. And the men said that, speaking in low tones as the duellists stood before each other on the grass. The murmur quietened as the men lowered themselves into position. Slowly they circled each other, throwing out the odd feint to gauge their opponent. Then the host struck, darting forwards and lunging at the European’s chest. The tall man dodged, charging the host to make up for his short blade. The host parried his thrust and ducked away. We watched in awe. These men fought as if they had lived by their knives forever – more: they fought with the passion of an honour duel, no mere gambling spat. By then there was nothing we could do. They were locked together in an intricate dance; I realised that I was about to watch a man die. And suddenly the host’s knife disappeared, driven into the other man’s chest. Everything stopped. I ran inside.’

The old man stopped talking, then moments later his son stopped too. I remember that pause, for some reason, in a way that I do not remember the others. He stared across the bar for a moment before lifting the *mate* cup to his lips. Then he spoke.

‘He says that nobody could believe the way the men fought. Later, someone suggested that it was not the men that fought, but the knives, that the weapons had belonged to rival *gauchos* and had not forgotten their grudges.’

I stopped the tape and rewound it. I listened to the man's voice describe the fight, the moment when the knife found the European's heart and everything stopped. Then that gnostic final thought: that objects could carry within them the passions of their owners. Or perhaps that wasn't it, perhaps the story was no different from that of Julieta Moreira's: once something is set in motion it has to stop; everything must conclude.

That night I dreamt of a bicycle imbued with a distinct personality. We rode together, communicating through the click of the gears and low swoops around corners at high speed. At one point, however, something shifted. It was midnight, and I was in my house. The bike was no longer friendly, was lurking outside with malevolent intent. I woke up and the room was still dark. For a moment I wasn't sure whether I was awake or asleep. I didn't own a bike.

## Synecdoche; Conflict

'I always imagined it happening over at your place,' Lana said. She was swatting at a canvas with a lead pencil, laying the foundations. Her design was incomprehensible to me. I was sitting up on her bed with my legs crossed at the ankles. 'I thought about doing a painting of your back yard, but putting a pumpkin patch in there, with Christian Ellis creeping onto Sophie.'

'I do that too,' I said, 'when I read a book. Picture the settings as places I know from my life. Can't help it.' I lit a cigarette and exhaled towards the ceiling. 'I used to think it meant I was unimaginative. Everyone does it though.'

'I don't think people understand anything if they can't relate it back to something they already know.' She kept sketching. I smoked my cigarette, felt idle. Behind her, clouds moved across the sun. A few minutes later they passed over and the room lit up. 'But there are similarities,' she said. 'Between you and Ellis.'

I felt my heart quicken. 'What do you mean?'

'You both live alone, for one. You don't seem to have much contact with the rest of the world.'

'And you're Sophie?'

She didn't reply immediately. I couldn't tell whether it was because she was focusing on the sketch or thinking about the question. When she answered her voice was light. 'No, I can't be her. I don't have a fiancée, for starters.' It wasn't the first time I'd thought about Mark and Klara and me in that context, how the structure of Ellis' world fit neatly over our own.

'I guess I'd better look out for people stealing my identity,' I said. 'They might kill me off.'

Lana smiled. Time passed and I dozed off.

‘Paul! Paul!’

I jerked upright, startled.

‘What!’

Lana was laughing, standing at the foot of her bed. ‘You were snoring. Sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out.’

I rubbed my eyes and blinked, moved over so I was sitting on the edge of the bed.

‘It’s okay. How long was I asleep?’

‘Not long. Anyway, you’ve gotta go soon. But I had an idea.’

‘What’s that?’

Lana was still clutching her pencil. ‘We visit Ellis. His address is on the envelopes.’

‘Ellis? I’m not sure that’s a good idea.’

‘It’s been bugging me. I know it’s stupid, but I want to see if he’s still there.’

I paused. The idea felt wrong, but we’d never had conflict before. The way I handled this would help determine how future conflicts would go down. More than that, though, I didn’t want to turn myself into a figure of authority. She was waiting for a response. I smoothed my hair, an automatic gesture.

‘I see what you mean,’ I said. ‘It’s interesting. But assuming it’s not a hoax—’

‘Pointless hoax if it was,’ she said.

‘Okay, assuming he’s real—which I *do*—he’s troubled as it is. He’s a sad, lonely old man, we can’t just go hassle him. We already read his confession. That’s bad enough.’

‘We wouldn’t have to hassle him. We could just go, knock on the door, whatever. Be friendly.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on. It’ll be fun. We never go anywhere, anyway.’ I thought about that for a moment.

‘That’s true actually. How long have I been coming around here?’ She shrugged. ‘A couple of months, at least.’

‘We might as well.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You keep saying that.’

‘Well I don’t.’ We sat there in silence. I just had to delay putting my foot down until I could work out how to dodge seeing Ellis without bringing maturity into it. Lana glanced at the bedside table. I looked too. A clock-radio read 4:07 in red digits.

‘Shit,’ she said. ‘You really have to go.’

‘Okay,’ I said, rising. ‘Catch you tomorrow.’ I moved towards the door. She said goodbye and I turned to climb down to the second floor.

‘This isn’t over,’ she called, from within her room. I sighed. We’d been equivalent so far, despite the age gap. But something like this had to come up eventually. I could hear the pad of her footsteps as she crossed the room to the window.

## Wrong Number II

Sometimes in memory, important events illuminate the mundane circumstances they rose out of. Sometimes they glow so brightly as to obscure them. I don't remember what I was doing when the telephone rang in the dead of night.

'Hello,' she said.

I knew who it was, even if I didn't know who she was.

I picked the phone up and moved over to the couch. The cord didn't reach, so I sat on the floor.

'How'd you know it'd be me that answered?'

Silence on the other end. I held my breath, straining to pick up any hints from the ambient noise wherever she was. There wasn't any.

'I didn't.'

'Okay.'

It seemed that periods of wordlessness were acceptable in these conversations. Then, appearing as what could have just as easily been a disturbance on the line, or a breeze tickling her phone's microphone, came something like the sound of rain falling on a rooftop.

'Where are you?'

'Inside,' she said. I pictured a clinical white room: chairs with vinyl upholstery and a television locked into a cabinet and bolted to the floor.

'The same one as last time?'

'I don't remember.'

'What do you remember?'

'These numbers. Although right now I can't remember the last one. Last time?'

'The last time you called me.'

'That seems vague now. Are you sure it happened?'

'Yes,' I said, although now I wasn't.

'Yes,' she said.

Another pause. I listened to the rain, or whatever it was, coming through the phone line. After a while it became the default, as if it were silence. I held the receiver at arm's length and real silence came back. When I put the phone to my ear again the sound was still there. That reassured me. There were differences between our worlds.

'I want to help you,' I said.

'Do I need help?'

'I don't know. Yes?' I imagined her in a wheelchair by a window, rain pelting the glass, her hair wild, clothes stretched and shapeless with age. Erratic shadows across the room.

'We fought that time, on the street, you screamed at me. We screamed at each other.'

'What?'

The speaker crackled with the intensity of her voice. 'I found your photo!'

I winced. 'What? Calm down, it's okay.'

'You'd found that photo, the one of your friend, it upset you. I understood.'

I didn't say anything. It was probably best to put the phone down.

'Where did you go?'

'What do you mean, where did I go?'

'You know you never said. You never told me.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

'I know you remember.' She spoke, but her voice was quick and vicious. I couldn't make out the words.

'I don't think you know who you're talking to,' I said, as carefully as I could.

'Was that you?'

'No. I don't think so.' I paused a moment. I didn't remember ever arguing like that. 'No, it wasn't me.'

'Oh.'

We were silent.

'I have to go.'

'I still have it,' she said.

'I have to go.'

'The photo,' she said. 'I still have it.'

I stayed on the line a minute. Neither of us spoke. I placed the receiver in its cradle and she was gone.

I lit a cigarette and sat outside beneath the jasmine and the bats. I remembered how Klara and I used to talk, running through the events of our relationship, cementing them into story. What stories would you tell if your closest people had been destroyed by other people? I stubbed the smoke out, wondering how many people did the same things.

Something came to me. I went back inside to the stereo in the living room. I hadn't used it since the last time I listened to Klara's message, at the end of the CD she burnt me. I pushed the button and listened to it again. Her voice came alive. I'd heard the message so many times that its rhythm and intonations had become embedded in my memory, like the chorus of a song. The other woman's voice lingered, but I couldn't remember well enough to connect the two. It might have been her, it might not have been. Who else, though?

## Internet Friends; A Change

It was morning. I had been awake for a while but was still in bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking about what Lana said the day before. It was absurd to think that Ellis' guilt was keeping him alive. Part of me wanted to check, though, and I knew it must have been this curiosity that drove Lana to suggest we visit him. I pulled myself out of bed and took a long drink of water. It was Friday. Lana would bring it up again because we wouldn't have a chance to do it over the weekend.

On the way to the hardware store I stopped in at a bottle shop. They had Quilmes, the Argentinean beer I drank overseas, so I bought a six-pack out of nostalgia. At the hardware store I picked up a splitting maul—a sledgehammer with an axe blade on one side. Since I was never going to use any of this equipment it didn't matter whether it was practical or not. There is something satisfying in the weight and purpose of tools; their unambiguity. I carried the maul and the beer through the suburbs and passed down the lane. I had worried that someone might've seen me wandering around with it, but I didn't notice anybody. It was overcast that day.

'You brought beer,' Lana said, when she arrived. I shrugged.

'It's Friday.'

Her room was warm, despite the cloudy day. She clicked a switch and the ceiling fan turned. She was on her bed and I was in the chair near the window. We cracked our beers open. The taste brought back the feeling of being in Argentina, sitting on ranch verandas in the long dusk, looking out over the dimming plains. We chatted amiably as we finished the six-pack.

'Do you drink much?'

I shook my head. 'Not so much anymore. I used to.'

‘Same,’ she said. ‘I mean, I’m only nineteen, so I haven’t been doing it as long as you. But I used to drink pretty often.’

‘In high school?’

‘No actually,’ she said. She drained the last of her beer and held the empty bottle. ‘After I dropped out.’

‘You must have been lonely. You didn’t see any of your friends in all that time?’

‘I didn’t see them as my friends any more. If you want to know the truth, I actually spent a lot of time talking to people online.’

‘On the internet?’

‘Yeah. I just felt like I needed to interact with someone. I used to go into chat rooms, and I met a few people I got along with and exchanged emails. I would get drunk up here and talk to them. It was fun.’

‘Huh. How long did that go on for?’

‘Until about a month before you turned up, I guess. Over time people slowly stopped replying and we fell out of touch. That’s when I sent my last email and I haven’t heard back from anyone since.’

‘Is that why you came and said hello, the first time I came around?’

She shrugged. ‘I guess so. I don’t know. I had been thinking about it a lot, you know, since I’d stopped talking to the internet people and didn’t want to go back to school or anything, how I’d go about making friends. I wouldn’t say I worried about it but it was on my mind. I guess seeing you arrive was an opportunity to just have a conversation with someone.’

I smiled at her. I sympathised with her entirely, but her unexpected candour, combined with my dulled wits, left me at a loss. I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

'It worked, I guess,' she said. 'My dad has more beer in the fridge. Want one?'

'Sure,' I said, relieved to be able to give a response.

The small desk in Lana's room was cluttered with drawing materials: notebooks and loose sheets, different kinds of pens, markers, tubes of paint, pastels. Tacked up above it were images she'd printed off a computer, photographs, sketches that were probably hers. Scattered across the desk were found objects, too: shells and colourful crystal formations, a statuette that might have been a reproduction of a famous sculpture. Some jewellery, most of it silver. And right in the centre, piled in a loose stack, were Ellis' letters. One was open on the desk. I read a few lines and deduced it to be the final one. I sat down again. Moments later Lana appeared at the doorway, a calico bag slung over one shoulder. She took two beers from it and handed one to me, then lowered the bag to the floor and dropped onto the bed.

'So,' she said, taking her first swig. 'About Ellis.'

'Come on.'

'No, no, hear me out.' She paused. 'Okay. We know Ellis did something very, very bad, obviously. But he also paid the price for this, if what he wrote was true. What *we* know, though, is that those letters never did what they were meant to. Ashby never read them, so for him, if he's alive, he never found out what happened. Basically we stole this confession and made it worthless, we kind of... neutered it.' She gesticulated with her bottle, looking into the middle distance. 'The point of the letters was that Ashby should read them.'

'How does this relate to us going to see Ellis?'

'Well we kind of owe him now, don't we?'

‘But we’re not Ashby, and we can’t find Ashby, and if we tell Ellis what really happened...’

‘He’s evil anyway.’ She took a swig of her beer.

‘Still, we shouldn’t have gotten involved at all.’

‘I know, I know,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean that. I mean, he is, but that’s not why we should do this. We got ourselves into it and we need to resolve it somehow. And besides, aren’t you just a bit curious to meet him?’

I nodded slowly, more to show I was considering it than as a sign of agreement.

‘I see what you’re saying,’ I said. ‘Because we weren’t meant to be involved we owe it to him to at least do something. But I see it the opposite: we witnessed something we weren’t meant to see, and we have to cut our involvement off here. Even if we didn’t read the letters, Ashby wouldn’t have got them anyway.’

Lana leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees, the empty bottle dangling from a finger she’d slipped into its mouth.

‘I guess I just understand how he must feel.’ Her voice was softer now, but also looser, like she’d passed from an excitable drunk into a reflective, almost maudlin intoxication. The bottle slipped from her finger and hit the floorboard. She ignored it, lighting a cigarette. ‘I think about him sitting alone in his old house, in limbo, not knowing if he’s been forgiven, not knowing if Ashby ever even read his confession. I felt the same way when people stopped responding to my emails, going from spending hours each day writing long, detailed letters to just sitting alone in my room staring at my inbox. I mean, in a way that’s what I’d been doing all along. But there was this feeling of not knowing, not knowing why they stopped responding, if it was something I said or if something happened in their life. Were they dead, did their computer

crash, did they get bored of me? Even if we don't say anything directly, something needs to come of the letters for Ellis, I think.'

She finished talking and picked the empty bottle up, pushed her cigarette butt into it. Then she sat back in the chair, pulled her knees up to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. I thought about what she'd said.

'I don't know.' I finished my beer and looked over to her. She'd fallen asleep.

### Wrong Number III

The next time the phone rang I felt no hurry to answer. She'd called before and she would call again.

'Hello?'

'I remembered something else about us,' she said. I didn't reply. I knew then that we were playing the narrative game. 'About something we did.'

Suddenly she sounded young. Her voice became animated, as if someone had sent a rush of electricity through her. 'Do you remember that time we took the train down to the port because you found a photo you took as a kid and wanted to find the spot again? You told me about it on the train ride there and you finished just as the train pulled up at the stop and when we stepped onto the platform I felt like it was my childhood too—'

I tried to speak but she pushed through.

'—you carried the photograph in the inside pocket of your jacket next to your heart. That's what you said. Next to your heart. And we walked around for ages but everything looked the same to you—familiar, that was the word you kept using—and we couldn't find it. There were places that looked like it, those tall old red brick factories with hundreds of windows and slanted roofs.'

'Wait,' I said.

'And I stopped you, you were walking so quickly, and I said *let's take a photo now, I'll take a photo of you here, next to this doorway*. And you did. I took the photo and it slid out of the camera and dark patches leaked in to reveal you standing there, like you did. And we looked at it on the train ride home. We scrutinised it. We held it next to the other one and eventually you said *you know*,

*the places look similar.* And I said they did, too. And the more we looked at them the more similar they looked. They looked back at us. We could imagine how a building might have changed over twenty years, how things were added or removed. And you didn't say it outright but I knew that by the time we got home you'd decided that the two places were the same, that you'd found the place you took the first photo, even if you hadn't.'

I let the phone hang by my side. Distantly I could feel the vibrations of her voice coursing through the plastic handset. I stared. Or didn't, because I was blank and my body did the bare minimum, nothing conscious. I could just make out her voice, gone sharp and desperate.

She stopped talking and I wasn't sure she'd spoken at all. Of course she had. But we stayed on the line a long time. Outside, bamboo swayed in the darkness.

I pulled the phone up to my ear. I could hear her exhausted breath, and the soft wash of noise that told me she was still there.

'It's you, isn't it?'

'It's always been me,' she said, as if it was obvious.

'Klara,' I said, nowhere.

That night I thought about what Klara said on the phone, before I knew it was her, about her and someone screaming at each other on the street. Of course that was Mark, I know that now, and the fight was the one I'd witnessed that day in Carlton. *I found your photo*, he'd said, the photo she said she still had, mine.

I made it to the house in a daze, through force of habit rather than willpower.

I slumped against the wall and smoked a cigarette. I wasn't trying to get Lana to come around, had completely forgotten she would. Completely forgot she existed. She turned up a few minutes later.

'I don't think I can hang out today,' I said.

'Oh, okay. Is something wrong?'

'No, I don't know. I just had a very strange conversation.'

She glanced behind her, into my house. 'On the phone? She called again?'

'Yeah.' We sat there a while, not talking. I think she expected me to explain but there was nothing I could say. At least not then. I knew I had to say something. When I looked at her she glanced away. 'I'm sorry, it's just a bit of a shock.' I stood. 'I'll see you tomorrow, though?'

She looked concerned. 'You don't want to talk about it? Maybe you should.'

'I don't know. I don't think that would help.'

'Did you find out who it is?'

I sighed, shook my head. 'No—I mean, I think so. But it's impossible.'

'Who do you think it is?'

'She couldn't be calling—whatever it is, it's not her, she's... The woman who keeps calling is crazy. She's lost it. It doesn't matter. She doesn't know who she's talking to, she thinks I'm somebody else.'

We were silent a moment. 'What if she does know?' Lana said.

'She hasn't said my name.'

‘Have you asked her to?’ She stuck her hands in her back pockets, shifted her weight. ‘Maybe she just figures you know who she is. And if she figures that, she probably thinks she can tell you all this stuff without explaining it, you know, because you understand the context, you have a point of reference. You know. So maybe what she’s saying isn’t crazy, maybe she just thinks you know something you don’t.’

I couldn’t tell her what Klara had said to me. It was insane.

‘Maybe it’s just you,’ Lana said.

‘What?’

She looked away. ‘I dunno.’

‘What do you mean, though? Maybe it’s me?’

‘I dunno, you just seem different lately. Don’t worry about it, it’s probably nothing.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ve had a lot to think about lately.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s alright. Anyway, I hope you work it out.’ We started walking through the grass towards the breezeblock wall. It was almost knee-high in the places where our treks back and forth hadn’t flattened it. I’d have to get it mowed sometime. We stood before the fence. ‘If you want to talk to me you can, you know.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘I’ll explain eventually.’ She didn’t reply, just looked at me as if appraising how damaged I was. Then she put her arms up and hugged me. I hugged her back.

Some revelations come as sudden flashes, others dawn gradually. On the train home I realised something I had known a long time: Klara was gone. Irretrievably absent. Her voice appearing in my telephone was a remainder, the distant vibrations of a sound made long ago. Christian Ellis was right, too: he’d died way back then, in 1916, and the mere fact of his body

existing was ancillary to that—vestigial was the word he'd used. And that was Klara's voice, too. A remainder, pulsing through telephone lines and memory, its source long gone, which would echo until it softened to a whisper, and stopped.

## The Creaky Bird; Distance; Closeness

The first time it happened I woke up sweating, sure I had done something terrible.

The room clarified and so did my state of mind. With gratitude I come to understand that I had not done anything at all, had been incapable of it, had been asleep. I sat up in bed, sheets damp and twisted, my skin clammy.

Lana was in my dream. A distant figure, too far off to identify, yet imbued with her essence. The sky an indefinite streak, the ocean smooth and opalescent, the light diffuse and visible somehow, like cornflour scattered in the air. In the dream I don't move but am travelling towards her. The first night I was shaken when I woke but after scrutinising the dream saw no connection between my emotion and the image of Lana on the beach. I assumed the traumatic details were immediately censored by my consciousness, leaving me with a disconnection between event and emotion, cause and effect.

I woke again, at one of those unmoored times within the night. The dream had returned and I was closer to her. Wet sand under my feet, the same ambiguous sky, the absence of anyone else. Again I stood still, just watching her meander in the shallows. Again I was moving imperceptibly towards her, and again I knew it was her. I woke in a sweat, genuinely disturbed. Something in the closing of distance upset me.

I left the room, switched on the kitchen light. I poured a glass of water and drank it, then poured another and leaned against the kitchen counter. I stared at my reflection in the window, the night a darkened mirror. It was the repetition that truly bothered me, and what that meant. I looked at my shoulders, still broad, but bonier than my self-image purported. In the repetition of the dream was the sinister implication that it would come again, that I would wake to the same ineffable fear.

The longer I stood there, the clearer it became: there was a familiarity in the image of a woman on the beach. Obviously it was a trope, common in literature and movies and advertising, but there was something else, too, something closer to my own life. And then I realised—Sophie. Ellis wrote that she drowned herself, walked out into the ocean. A momentary relief lightened my mood. That was why it disturbed me. Subconsciously, the implication of death had tinted the dream. I smiled to myself, got up to get a final glass of water and return to bed.

Lying there in the dark, the same anxiety that drove me to the kitchen nestled in my chest. At first I tried to ignore it, but was clear that the earlier explanation wasn't right, and hadn't alleviated anything. I lay awake, replaying the dream in my head, trying to capture something of the intangible sense of menace that pervaded it. Sometime before dawn, I think, I accepted the only thing that could have caused it: in the dream I was Ellis, undeniably, driving Lana towards Sophie's fate. In my mind, the face I imagined to be his gazed coolly at me, thin-lipped and wet-eyed, hair pressed like a skullcap atop his head. If I fell asleep his face was present there, too, and when morning came I knew that for reasons other than what she'd told me, Lana was right. If I didn't want to share his fate I had to see him, talk to the man who had been here before.

The next morning Lana seemed distant, avoiding eye contact and not saying much.

'It was good having a couple of beers with you the other day,' I said. She blushed.

'I can't believe I fell asleep.' I smiled at her but she didn't see. I'd actually been dreading her mentioning Ellis again. The dream still troubled me, lingering on the edges of my mind, the implication of what I might do to Lana, as if it were somehow out of my control.

I found myself inspecting her, as if by studying her body I could uncover something about myself, because the cause of last night's trauma had to be located somewhere along the vector between us.

'I've been thinking about what you said,' Lana said to me later that afternoon. We were in her kitchen. She was making dumplings, flour scattered across the bench and her fingers claggy with dough. Filling sizzled in a frying pan. Out from the smell a memory materialised, from a long time ago, eleven years: after Klara left and I got fat and ate Chinese food all the time, one night instead of getting takeaway I went and sat in a two-bit restaurant off Chapel Street, alone, lino peeling from the floor, vinyl seats that had cracked and frayed. And that smell, permeating the restaurant, hanging in the room like smog. 'The first time we met, I mean. About studying,' she said. 'I might do it.'

'That's great.' She used a wooden spoon to push the filling around the pan. The moisture hissed. Chives and mushrooms. She lowered the heat and started ripping chunks off a big ball of dough. She threw it hard onto the bench and kneaded it mercilessly.

'I don't know,' she said. 'It was just an idea.'

'You were pretty convincing when you said you didn't need school.' I leant my elbows on the bench and watched her. 'After getting to know you it's obvious you're a smart girl.'

'Whatever,' she said. After a moment she glanced at me, but quickly looked back to the dough. I watched her roll it into a circle the size of a coaster, brush it with whisked egg, and place it carefully aside. Then she started on another one. She glanced at me again. 'What do you think?'

'About going to uni?'

'Yes.' She was obviously uncomfortable revealing this idea. A desire for change implies a dissatisfaction with the way things are. Or maybe she just didn't want to look like she cared.

'I think it's a good idea. You'll meet lots of people, you'll learn a lot. I never really left,' I said.

‘Really?’ She paused with the brush poised in mid-air. A drop fell from its bristles. I nodded. ‘What do you do for money, then?’

‘I’m an academic, I mean.’ I wondered as I spoke if it were still true. ‘I did my bachelor degree, then honours, then a PhD. Now I’m a researcher.’ It had been, what, months since I’d performed research. I wasn’t even employed. For how long could I keep calling myself that? And if I wasn’t a scholar any more, what was I?

She turned the stove off and scooped a spoonful of mixture onto one of the circles of dough. Her brow knotted as she focused, folding the casing over it, creating a half-moon. Finally she creased the pastry where it sealed, making many tiny folds. Her delicate fingers moved in a practiced pattern. And then it was done, the filling sealed in its own little pouch. She placed it aside and started on another.

‘I don’t know if I’d want to spend my life doing that,’ she said.

‘No. You’re too practical to sit in an office all day, I think.’ The dumplings she lined up resembled those in the Prahran restaurant, two neat rows. They evoked the feeling of being there again, the only seated customer, people moving back and forwards past me, collecting takeaway. I knew I shouldn’t have been there, that was obvious from the moment I sat down. I felt inordinately self-conscious, the first time I’d spent any real time in public since Klara left. It seemed to me that I was committing a faux-pas, that despite the presence of the tables I was not meant to be sitting there, that their purpose was rather as a pretence for the restaurant. I remember wiping sweat from my face with my fleshy wrist, wolfing down the dumplings in a hurry to leave.

‘What would you study?’

‘Art.’

‘Of course. Have you talked to your parents about it?’

‘No.’ She folded the final dumpling, then poured a good lot of oil into a wok and turned the heat on. She turned back to me and leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Flour clung to her t-shirt. ‘I don’t want them to know about it until I decide. It’s better that way.’

I nodded, said something agreeable. We stood like that a while, waiting for the oil to heat up. After a minute it started spitting. Lana turned it down and picked up the dumplings. One by one she lowered them carefully into the hot oil.

‘But you don’t mind me knowing?’

‘You’re different,’ she said, nudging the dumplings with the wooden spoon. ‘I don’t know. Do you think it’s a good idea?’ She kept her eyes trained on the food.

‘I think if you want to do it then it’s the right thing to do.’

Double-stacked, the dumplings filled a dinner plate. She splashed soy sauce over them, then spurted chili sauce across the top in a lurid spiral. We ate them there, standing at the kitchen bench, and didn’t speak until we’d finished, and went up to her room.

We were both quiet, felt languid and lazy after eating. It was warm in her room and we sat on the floor, facing each other, resting against opposite walls. I felt as if we were inhabiting the loose space before sleep, my thoughts unravelling pleasantly. We spoke idly through the daze.

I looked for clues in the way her face moved, in the wrinkle of her brow when she questioned how much I’d been sleeping. It must have showed. She wasn’t discomforted by my attention, which that day was exaggerated. I don’t think I took my eyes off her the entire time we spoke—several hours—along the length of her arms, her slender fingers, the insides of her elbows. When we’d held eye contact too long I’d let my gaze rest somewhere, her shoulder,

ankle. I gave her that respite but couldn't bring myself to look at the subdued pattern of the couch, or, further still, out at the neutral sky. I was curious. This thing before me.

For the first time since I'd learnt of Mark's death, I felt something tiny take hold inside me.

'I've been thinking,' I said. I swallowed, took a drink of water. 'Maybe we should go visit Ellis.' She shot me a look.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Maybe you're right, maybe we do have an obligation.'

## Something That Looks Like a Person

On Monday, the day we'd planned to see Ellis, Lana was late.

I milled around in the backyard for a while. I took the splitting maul and hacked at the pallets the owners left outside. The arc of the swing was satisfying, from fighting gravity to working with it, but each hit sent a jolt through my arms, and before long they were floppy and weak.

I put the maul back and Lana appeared at the wall and crossed the lawn to me. She sat down and took a long swig from a water bottle she'd brought over. It was the first time I'd seen her drink from anything but a cup. I don't know why I noticed that. She'd also donned a deep blue scarf shot through with silver thread. It looked nice, but it was too warm out for a scarf.

'We can't tell him we've read the letters,' I said.

'I know.'

'Yep. What I think we should do is pretend we're looking for someone who used to live there. A family friend or something. Then he'll say how long he's lived there. Then—and this is the risky part but also the part that might pay off—we ask him where he moved from.'

'That's not really our business.'

'I know.'

'Paul.'

'Yeah?'

‘This is going to sound odd, but it’s been bugging me for a while. What if he doesn’t live there anymore?’

‘How could he not? He would’ve told Lynton if his address changed.’

‘I don’t know. It just feels to me like those letters are coming from a long time ago.’

I watched her. ‘I don’t understand.’

She shook it off. ‘It doesn’t matter. Let’s go.’

Christian Ellis lived in a suburb neither of us had visited before. It was wide and flat: low houses with gumtrees rising from within the blocks. Chain-link fences bordered patchy grass yards. In the middle of the day there was nobody around. We threaded through the web of side-streets, walking down the middle of the roads. It seemed unlikely that anything could happen here.

We came to his house, or at least the address printed on the backs of the envelopes. It was no different to the others. A drab fibreboard shack, no car in the driveway, cracks in its concrete so well established that their edges had softened. We knocked and looked back to the street. The house opposite his could have been the same one—I half expected to see us approach its front door.

‘Yes?’ A featureless shadow behind the screen.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘My name’s Paul. This is Lana.’

‘Hi,’ she said.

‘We’re looking for someone who used to live here,’ I said. ‘I don’t know, maybe still does.’

'I live alone.'

'Okay, well, his name's... Mark Laine. Do you know-'

'I don't know any Mark.'

'Oh. Well, could you put us in touch with who *used* to own this place, maybe? Or the real estate people you bought the house from?'

'What's your relationship?'

'What?'

'You two,' he said. 'You're too young to be her father and too old to be her lover.'

'I'm her—' I glanced at Lana. 'Uncle.'

The shadow behind the door moved slightly. He might have been nodding. It didn't seem like he was going to respond.

'I'm really sorry we disturbed you,' Lana said, her voice disarmingly sincere. 'It's just that I haven't seen my grandfather in years. I know he's still alive, but he's old now, and it's just that since Mum died I haven't—'

'You're an orphan, girl?'

Lana nodded. 'Yes.'

Ellis didn't respond. I wouldn't have been able to tell he was there if not for a faint shift in the texture of the darkness behind the screen. His voice emerged, gentler.

'Why haven't you seen your grandfather?'

'It's complicated, but I guess the short story is that I just don't know where he is.'

Ellis emitted a low groan like a great beast shifting in its sleep. Then the screen door swung open, nearly smacking Lana in the face. The open door did nothing to reveal the old man—the house was perfectly dark.

‘I can’t help you,’ he said, ‘but you’ve come here and now I feel sorry for you.’ He turned and made his way into the house. He walked with a cane.

We followed him through to a tiny room, a bare light creeping in through the curtain. Their faces took on an eerie pallor. Ellis sunk into an armchair near the window, and gestured—with no more than a twitch of his head—to the sofa opposite it. He looked distant. As did Lana, as I probably did to them. Then I realised what it was: they looked half-formed, shaded, the way faces appear in memory.

My eyes adjusted. Ellis wore a shirt and tie in dark colours, and a sagging cardigan over that. His scalp was flaking and spotted with blemishes. Strands of hair clung to his skull. His face drooped, the skin apparently having lost the means to support itself.

His chair and the sofa were the extent of the room’s furniture. In fact, they were the only things in the room at all. The upholstery on Ellis’ had faded down to bare stitching on the armrests. He sat so low in it there was no doubt the springs had given way. It seemed likely that he spent all day sitting in that very place. Lana crossed her legs. I looked at her and felt a twitch of new fondness; she seemed very serious, the awareness that we were doing something important was present in every part of her body, every motion.

‘So,’ Ellis said. ‘How does one go about losing one’s grandfather? Besides the obvious.’

‘Well, he was starting to go a bit, with age, when my parents died. You know, mentally. I was still a kid and there was no way he could have looked after me, so I got sent to a foster home. He would visit me a lot and I would visit him. As I got older I realised how senile he was.

Then one day he told me he was moving house and would give me the address when he got there. He went away, but he never gave me the address.'

Ellis emitted another groan, a variation on the first. It was more ponderous, but also more thoughtful. 'It is a terrible thing for people to disappear.'

'Yes,' Lana said.

'Something similar happened to me once, a long time ago. And once you get to my age people tend to disappear a lot more, although the explanation is always the same, and it's never mysterious.'

'You mean,' I ventured, 'they die?'

'Yes,' Ellis' voice was impatient. He turned back to Lana. 'What do you think happened to him?'

Lana paused for a moment, as if considering her response. I had no idea if she'd planned this or was improvising everything. I remembered the letters open on her desk.

'I really don't know. I always thought he just got too senile to function, forgot my address, or something. Who knows? Maybe he died and nobody knew I existed, so I never found out.'

'Maybe he did it deliberately,' Ellis said, his voice detached.

'What?'

'Sometimes people need to get away from the other people in their lives.'

'Are you saying my grandfather abandoned me?'

I stared at Lana, fixated. How much of this was true?

‘It’s not necessarily personal.’ He spoke slowly. I got the impression he was drifting away, merely verbalising his thoughts rather than trying to communicate with us. ‘It was probably about him, not you. I know. I know. I disappeared once too. Or, twice? Maybe several times. And so did others, other people I knew.’

‘Who?’

‘Yes, they all disappeared, one way or another. But not knowing is like disappearing, isn’t it? An absence?’

I glanced at Lana. She was looking at me now. We held eye contact a moment before looking back to Ellis. He seemed poised on the edge of something, his head rocking slightly, his mouth opening and closing. He spoke.

‘I had hoped when I told him what I’d done that I would be able to die. I told him, but have no way of knowing if he read them or not. I sent the last one... Some time ago now, I think. But I was wrong: I will not die. I thought I might, well, I hoped I might. I have since realised that I am already dead.’

I felt Lana turn to me, but couldn’t take my eyes off Ellis.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I thought that by releasing the truth I would be able to die, that I was being kept alive by the force of what I’d done to them. I realise now that I was almost right, but not: I am still alive but this body is vestigial. In truth, I died a long time ago; the matter of my being here is academic.’ A distracted expression crossed his face. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, rising. He left the room.

‘He’s more with it than I expected,’ Lana whispered. ‘What do you think he means by all that?’

I didn't reply immediately. Something in what Ellis said had struck me deeply. 'I'm not sure,' I said.

She reached for her scarf and started unwinding it. 'I guess he didn't get what he wanted,' she said. 'He didn't die.'

'Maybe he did,' I said. 'Maybe he's right, and what we're talking to now isn't really a person.'

A hacking sound, an urgent digestive croak. Lana looked dismayed. 'Ew,' she said. Ellis' coughing continued. 'Should we help him?' I shook my head.

It went on. When I was just about to agree with her, the noise stopped.

'He *sounds* like a person,' she said. I looked at her. That's when I saw it, resting just beneath her throat, on a fine, almost invisible silver chain—

'Sophie?' Ellis was standing at the door, eyes fixed on her. 'Is that you?'

'Christian.'

He stood there, dumbstruck, then staggered towards her, no doubt unconscious of the movement, driven by an instinctive need to close the distance between them. Lana stood. So did I. She didn't seem afraid. He stopped a few feet before her. Then he turned to me.

'And... Lynton?'

I didn't respond, couldn't. I might have made a noise. Ellis' eyes were wide and his lips had parted. His hands were raised before him, as if he'd need to steady himself at any moment. I glanced at Lana but she was focused on Ellis. He dropped to his knees and grabbed at my pant legs, wheezing and spluttering. Phlegm dribbled from his mouth. He apologised, endless variations of the same plea. I had never seen someone so debased, so violently desperate for

forgiveness. It was present as a physical radiation coming off his body, out of the sound of his apologies, through the tugging on my clothes. There were no thoughts then. Slowly his cries lessened. He slumped onto the floor.

‘Christian...’ Lana spoke. At the sound of her voice there was fire in him. He launched himself at her, arms spread, as if trying to envelope her. She shrieked, hopped back. He climbed to his feet and lunged again. He tripped, but I caught him before he fell. His body was light and he went limp in my arms. I set him back in his chair. He didn’t move. His eyes were closed. He was breathing. Lana and I stood there staring at him before I put my hand on her shoulder and led her out of the room, down the darkened corridor and out onto the street, where the house opposite still looked identical and nothing had changed.

We’d only taken a few steps out of his driveway when Lana threaded her arm through mine. I let her. When we got to the end of the block I asked her what was wrong but she didn’t answer. She didn’t speak the whole way back, letting go of my arm when we needed to walk through the train station turnstiles but taking it again as soon as she could. At the entrance to the lane she said she was going home. I watched her disappear around the corner. It was only mid-afternoon and the sun was still high.

I walked back to the train station and waited for the train that would take me to the house I slept in. I remembered the sensation of Ellis’ hands pulling at my jeans, and along with it, the sensation of being somebody else.

Lana had left her scarf at Ellis’ house. I didn’t think she’d get it back.

The next day, Tuesday, Lana seemed fine. We were in her room; she was painting and I was sitting by the window. There was a question I’d wanted to ask her but didn’t know how to. It was

after lunch and it hung over the day like an ambiguous sky, like I couldn't tell if it would rain or not.

'There was something I wanted to ask you,' I said.

'Yeah?' She looked at me, then back at her canvas.

'Why'd you wear that necklace when we went to see him?' Her hand caught in mid-air, but only for a second. She must have expected me to ask eventually.

'I don't know, really,' she said, touching paint to the canvas. 'When we were reading his letters and he mentioned that locket I remembered that I had one a bit like it. I never wore it much.' She fingered her collarbone. 'I do now though. I don't know.' She kept painting and I flipped through an art book. The fan whirred quietly, the sounds of power tools buzzed through the open window, far away.

'You seemed pretty shaken after what happened.'

'Yeah, I was,' she said. 'It was really confronting. But when I got home, after you left, I went to take it off but realised I didn't want to. This might sound ridiculous, but I felt like I had to leave it on out of loyalty to Sophie.' Lana gave a laugh, blushed.

'That doesn't sound ridiculous,' I said.

'Anyway.'

'How'd you know it'd work? How did you know you could become someone else?'

'I didn't know what would happen. But it doesn't seem crazy to me that someone could become someone else. We do it all the time, really. Ellis was so...' She turned to me, locked her fingers together. 'Meshed, interlocked, with that world. He was still living there. I knew it would work after what he said, about dying back then, not really being alive in the present. That world is

his world. That's the real world for him, the true world, the present. I knew that if we showed him just enough of that world he wouldn't be able to tell the difference.'

'Like... Clues? You put enough of them together and eventually they mean something.'

'I suppose so,' she said, turning back to her picture. 'Though I didn't think of it like that at the time.'

'Do you feel bad?'

'No. He ruined their lives.'

I watched her face but it gave me nothing, focused on her picture.

'That's really interesting. About Ellis not being able to tell where he is.'

'Nah,' she said. 'He's just a crazy old man who told a really sad story.'

## A Skateboard; A Sick Day; More Cream

The next morning, the streets were desolate as I left the train station. The place would have felt so different at eight-thirty in the morning, when everyone was taking their kids to school, or later in the evening, as they came home from work.

It was a beautiful day. A calm sky and a breeze only visible in the tips of trees. I wasn't going to the hardware store that day. Instead I dawdled towards the house, anticipating lying down in the dim room, watching daylight slip into the shadowed house, and later meeting Lana, maybe eating a sandwich at her place.

A boy, maybe eleven, twelve years old, was standing on a corner. I smiled at him as I passed but he just stared. It didn't occur to me that he probably should have been at school. In retrospect it makes sense that I wouldn't have thought this odd—I wasn't where I was supposed to be, and the only other person I spoke to was Lana, who wasn't either.

I was still a few blocks from the house when I saw the skateboard.

Sitting there on its red wheels, on a strip of grass running between the footpath and the road. Still nobody around. Far away, right down the end of the street, a dark blue sedan turned a corner. After Mark and I moved to Melbourne, when Klara was my girlfriend, I would skate from our place in South Yarra to where she lived in Richmond. I took the side streets to Toorak Road and turned left on Chapel, where the cafes and clothing stores give way to skyscrapers. From there I pushed north, along the footpath or, at night, I would hop the tram tracks and take the smoother concrete between them.

I picked the skateboard up. The illustration on the underside had been worn away by use. Fumbled board-slides across high-school steps, innumerable kick-flip attempts in driveways. I

held it in one hand and flicked the wheels with the other. They spun, fast and clean. I watched them. They kept spinning. The bearings inside, greased chrome, minimal resistance. I watched the wheels until they slowed to a stop. I dropped the board to the footpath and pushed off.

Chapel turns into Church where it crosses the river. On quiet nights it could be a while without cars, but it's an arterial road, so even late on Sundays there were a few around. Usually I would wind from the tram tracks to the side of the road, skipping the slick metal and the gaps just wide enough for a skateboard wheel to lodge inside. After Swan the road edges up, a shallow incline. I'd walk up but I always rode down. Even having skated since a young age that hill scared me, speeding down towards Bridge Road, and the first time I did it I realised, cresting the rise and dipping forward, like falling, that it was maybe too steep, that my board and myself were not suited to that kind of hill. Immediately I was going faster than I was comfortable with, wondering if I should keep standing or kind of crouch, whether that would be safer, forming a spring with my knees. The trees along the road had dropped thousands of pods, leaves, tiny hazards. The board wobbled; I tried to keep my balance centred. Things were moving too fast for me to perceive. I weaved to keep my balance, caged in by the tram tracks. My sight was twenty meters ahead of me. I was moving from the past into the future and then further into the future.

And then Bridge Road was ahead of me, rapidly approaching, and glistening in the intersection were dozens of lights and smears of light, the reflections of the streetlights on the rails embedded in the road. Crossing over the very line I was travelling down. There was no way out, I had to hit something, moving too fast to stop.

Around the corner from Lana's place, I remembered that night as I swung my left leg out ahead of me. Then, as I planted it on the footpath something went wrong, I leaned too far forward, felt my centre of gravity shift, like the tug of a magnet pulling toward steel.

As I fell, that night on Church Street flashed before me. The intersection bearing down on me, the criss-cross of rails, the speed I was travelling. I couldn't jump off, couldn't steer away, had to take it head-on. And I did, and because I was fucked anyway I tried something. Just as I thought the board would hit the first rail I kind of hopped, lifted my weight from the board. And it kept going. I did it again, and again, staying on the board as little as possible, just erratically lifting myself from it. And the wheels skimmed over the gaps, over the glossy surface of the rails. And then it was over, and I was coasting down Church, towards Klara's, alive and unharmed.

I hit the ground. My hands and elbows rung out, throbbing, but my face and head were unharmed. The skateboard went soaring back the way it had come. I lay there, breathing, and watched it. It came to a stop beneath the foot of the kid I saw standing on the corner. He stomped one lipped end, sending the board in a graceful flick to his waiting hand.

He stared a moment longer, then turned, dropped the skateboard, and pushed off, the rattle of the wheels dying as he disappeared into the empty suburbs.

The streets were still again, everything as it had been. Except the grazes on my hands. They were the only proof.

I decided to skip lying around in the house that morning, instead hopping the breezeblocks and lighting a smoke as I passed the sundial. Before I'd finished smoking Lana appeared at the wall, within the space of two drags she was standing before me.

'Hey,' she said.

'Hey.' It was an expression I'd used a lot when I was younger but which died when I started working professionally. Spending time with Lana had brought it back into my vocabulary. I was happy for it. It suggested a fundamental casualness.

'I fell off a skateboard,' I said, showing her the wounds. A timely drag on my cigarette made me feel more masculine than I had in ages. She laughed at me.

'What were you doing riding a skateboard?'

I looked at my wounded hands, tried to remember how I came to ride it.

'I found it.'

'That's no reason.' Because of our age gap, I often caught myself thinking of Lana as being younger than she actually was. As such there were times when the fact of her being an adult was brought into relief. Her disdain of another adult doing something like skateboarding was one of them.

'Yeah, well, it seemed like a good idea. Maybe I could have gotten around on that instead of walking.' Her expression had gone from unimpressed to incredulous. 'I used to ride one,' I said, defensively.

'Whatever.' We were silent. 'Well, it looks painful, want me to get some cream for it?'

'That'd be great.'

'Okay, go wash it off, I'll be back in a minute. She turned, moving off towards the wall. I caught up with her.

'Wait.'

'What?'

'I don't have the water connected yet.'

'Well,' she paused. 'Come on.'

She had me rinse the blood and dirt off my hands in the bathroom sink. A leather jacket hung on a hook behind the door. I remembered Klara, then my dream. She gestured for me to extend my hands for her. I resisted.

‘Don’t be stupid.’ She patted the wounds dry with a hand-towel, then tossed it into a wicker laundry basket. ‘Sit down.’ She gestured towards the toilet. I sat on the closed lid, held my hands awkwardly in front of me.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ I said.

‘I want to.’

She dabbed antiseptic on my exposed flesh. It stung. She dropped the pad into a waste bin. She didn’t talk while cleaning me, just focused. I smiled when I saw how deeply she was concentrating. I couldn’t help it. It was such a simple task, something I could have done myself, and she was taking it as seriously as if my life were in danger. A simple affection overcame me.

And with it, the same sensation from the dream: that despite doing nothing at all, I was doing something terrible.

She finished, and turned to the sink to clean up. She let the water pool in her cupped hands, then bent over and splashed her face. Her shirt lifted to reveal a flare of colour on her lower back.

‘You have a tattoo?’

She pulled her shirt up, revealing a maze of colour interlocking across her back. It was an impossibly intricate pattern, a kind of infinite regress leading from the outside to the centre, ablaze in red, orange and yellow. It stunned me; it was so assured, nothing like the tiny butterflies or lovehearts some girls will have tattooed in an act of teenage rebellion. This was mature and considered and took commitment. It made me feel younger than her.

After a moment she dropped her shirt and the image disappeared. Just like that.

She pulled out the tube of cream she'd used to treat my reaction to the poison ivy. She uncapped it and squirted a dollop into her palm. A careful thumb halved the quantity between her hands. I wasn't sure I needed the cream after she'd applied the other antiseptic, but I couldn't see how I'd stop her.

She held my left hand, her thumb massaging the cream into my palm, while she took my right palm-to-palm, rubbing the cream in directly. I watched her face twitch and focus during this. She glanced at me and held my gaze for a moment, then looked back at our hands.

'This is familiar,' she murmured.

'Yeah,' I said. 'We've done this before.'

She looked up from my hands, then back to them. She looked back and forth while rubbing in the cream, eventually maintaining eye contact for good. My stomach twisted, felt cavernous. I remembered how she'd said I was like Ellis, and knew then what she meant, even if she hadn't herself. I saw her as Sophie then, saw myself worming into her, dirtying her, making her shadowed.

I saw the way her lips twitched.

'How do you hurt yourself so much?'

'I don't know.'

'You're lucky you have me.'

She looked down then, stopped rubbing the cream. The fine muscles in her fingers contracted, her tiny bones; her grip tightened. She looked back to me. And at the moment I overcame my hesitation, overrode my rational faculties and decided, idiotically, that I would kiss

her, the menace of my dream finally banished, she decided the pretext of applying cream to my insignificant wounds was in danger of collapsing and withdrew her hands. Or maybe that wasn't it—maybe she felt the same things I did, or could see that I felt them. Or maybe she was oblivious and innocent.

She stood abruptly and rinsed her hands off in the sink. Then she left the room.

'Thanks,' I called, although she'd already vanished into the house. 'It feels a lot better.'

Later, we were sitting out the back and I was thinking about her tattoo. How it couldn't have been real but so clearly was, how it implied depths, hidden facets of a complex character she'd been developing the entirety of her short life. There was no way she had ever questioned herself or her place in the world. Whatever was inside Lana had been there forever, and life was the time it took for her to create it outside herself, in the world she inhabited. She knew where and who she was, firmly and precisely. She spoke.

'Why did you do that?'

'What?'

'Ride the skateboard.'

'I don't know, I wanted to. I used to ride one when I was younger.'

'How long ago was that?'

'Like, ten years or so.'

She was quiet.

'Where is it?'

‘I lost it. When I fell it flew away and a kid took it.’

She was quiet again.

‘A kid took it?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

A wattle tree swayed in the breeze, its red blossoms bursting against the leaves.

‘I’m worried about you,’ she said, and stood up. She started moving inside.

‘Why?’

‘What,’ she paused on the threshold, facing the house. ‘I didn’t say anything.’

## Wrong Number IV

I woke up sweating, the dream still vivid. For a minute I couldn't breathe, stuck between sleep and consciousness. I was sure that if I opened my front door I could step out onto the sand. It reminded me of leaving Argentina, how for the week afterward it felt like Buenos Aires and the pampas were close at hand, just a few hours away, that my sense of time hadn't caught up to the distance by body had travelled. In some dreams you will march towards an object that recedes before you; in this one the pier was simply unattainable. I awoke feeling caught in a kind of dual-movement, pulled towards Lana while willing myself towards the pier.

I sat up and switched the bedside lamp on. The image of the dream dissipated when exposed to the light, like negatives in the sun. Still, parts lingered: the grit of sand in my sheets, the chill of seawater across my feet. I got up and drank a glass of water. The clock on the microwave said it was almost five-thirty. So the sun would rise soon. I poured another glass and sat down at the kitchen table. I tried to think about Lana but Klara kept pushing her way in. I couldn't help but feel that things were coming to a head and that the calls would stop soon. Either because she had fallen forever into the abyss of the past or because I would somehow manage to pull her out and steady her, tether her to the present. I was unconvinced by the idea of myself as a stalwart point. An anxious feeling churned in my stomach. I thought about the dream, my daily life, what I was doing with myself. I couldn't help anyone like this.

I splashed whiskey into a tumbler and diluted it with water. It was warm inside. I opened the front door and sat on the porch, lit a cigarette, sipped my drink. I felt neither alert nor fogged, just blank. I couldn't avoid it any more: Klara thought she was calling Mark. And I hadn't contradicted her. Not yet—I would, of course. She'd already told me things she never would have shared with anyone else.

But hours later, after sunrise, when the phone rang and she started speaking—happily—apparently retaining the memory of our other conversations, and with them my perceived identity, I couldn't stop her. Couldn't cut her off and say,

'Wait, Klara. It's not me, uh—it's not Mark. It's Paul.'

And whether that was because I wanted to hear what they'd shared, or because this was a kind of intimacy I'd never get from Klara, I can't say. What is harder to admit is that it was probably neither of those things; it was that I didn't want to hear what she would actually say, didn't want to hear her say *who?*

I could never say with certainty how many of our stories actually happened, but sometimes what she said crossed with memories of my own and I remembered my own life during those times. Like turning my head to examine something in my periphery. Klara would tell the story, running through the events of her and Mark's relationship in detail, recreating them. And I would see myself in the corners of these, living out the things that turned to memories of my own. But I learnt the inside life of their relationship, what people make when they join together, that thing that is both independent of them and completely reliant upon them at the same time.

I was there with her, walking the buzzing streets between house parties on New Year's Eve; stuck in an airport lounge; watching bands, my arms around her, fingers linked across her stomach; or skating down Victoria Street, past the Vietnamese grocers and the fresh fish on ice, spotting her from a distance and grinning helplessly—but at the same time I was deep in my own recollections of what Klara and I *actually* did together: our first date at the port, and after I came back, when Mark and Maria and Jacob were drinking on the floor with Klara and I bent down and kissed her as if I'd never been away, and things were sweet again. I weighed what we did against what she described, found parallels, contrasts, attempted to assign values that could

differentiate one from the other. I remembered our narrative game and the doomed consequences of it. At the same time, I wondered if by letting her play it all out this time, playing it out with her, we could somehow excise her from the past, open her to the present and save her. Break her out of wherever she was. I would lose her, as I had before, but I survived that and could survive again. While it went on I compared myself to Mark and both of us to her, felt the thing I used to call myself disperse. And as the stories piled up against one another, everything converged, and in trying to hold one up against the other I found I was merely holding one; a shifting presence of pasts in which mine was indiscernible from Mark's. I couldn't tell them apart, so I had to take them both.

## A Last-ditch Effort

Way back, eleven years ago, when Klara and I were alone together we would sometimes run through the events leading up to our relationship, as if plotting a screenplay. Only permitted were events so deep in the past that they had been transformed into images. At first we remembered differently. But as one memory illuminated another, like a row of streetlights coming to life, we subsumed each other's pasts into our own. In a way we formed a kind of agreed subjectivity, made a myth of our shared time.

We did this for almost two years, adding to it in pieces. Holding hands in the back of a taxi or on the phone late at night, when she was walking home and wanted company. Then, on one of those grey days when rain drips from leaves in great globules, when anything green is incandescent, we were running through the story and we hit upon the first time we'd set out to construct our history. Even our history-making had been consumed by the narrative. We were lying on my bed with the curtains drawn back, my arms around her belly, staring out the window. It came to me as a flash: we had fallen into a kind of loop. The story could not continue without constant retellings of its own origin, and the retellings of those retellings. And so on forever.

Most would cite coincidence, but we had our first real fight exactly a week later, a stupid tiff that blew up bigger than it should have: I'd gone out and forgot I was meant to meet her later that night. When I finally got in touch she was furious; I apologised, but it all went on longer than it should have. She pretended to accept my apology but stayed mad, a long time, weeks, and I got angry about that, made snide comments, became moody. In the last months our behaviour was untypical of us, and more, almost completely unfounded. I knew it was because the story had come to tell itself out of necessity, that there was nothing external to propel it anymore, and in a last-ditch effort for survival it had turned to self-cannibalism.

It was another overcast day when Klara left my house. I followed her to the front door, trying to make her stay, but gave up when she made it to the gate. I dropped into a chair on the porch in front of my bedroom window. Her bleached hair was the brightest thing in the yard until she disappeared onto the street. I sat and smoked, trying to remember if that was how the garden looked from just inside the window, lying on the bed with my arms around her belly.

## *Oracle Night*; Something to Communicate

I was at home reading a Paul Auster novel, *Oracle Night*. I remember being struck by some thought and looking up from the page. Some cross-germination of the novel and my thoughts about Ellis. He'd been consuming my thoughts since we'd gone and seen him. It occurred to me then that I hadn't unpacked a thing since moving back into my house. The white dust covers still enveloped my furniture; the couches and armchairs looked like ghosts, ill-defined. That was when I knew, looking up from the page, the lamp forming a small island of light, that somewhere in the house was a typewriter.

I put the paperback down and moved through the rooms, checking cupboards, drawers, under my bed. I could picture the machine but had no recollection of ever using it. I knew I owned it, though. Eventually I found it, shoved at the back of a high shelf in my built-in wardrobe. I pulled it down and sat it on my bed. Its shape evoked vague emotions. It looked like it belonged to another time. Which I guess it did.

When I got to the house, I sat the typewriter on top of the breezeblock wall and hoisted myself over it. It was an old, worn model with metal casing and circular keys. It looked like it belonged there, amongst the concrete and ivy, the corrugated iron fence and the backs of sheds behind it. I picked it up and started towards the house.

'Paul.'

Lana was already at the wall. Unusual. I waved to her. She looked at the typewriter and frowned, then looked at me, her arms crossed over her chest. I couldn't tell if she was trying to stop something getting in or keep something from getting out.

'What's that?'

‘A typewriter,’ I said, dumb.

‘I know that. I mean, what’s it for?’

‘I’m not sure.’ I tried a smile. ‘I found it at my old place. I thought I might as well bring it down.’

Lana looked at the typewriter. I watched her a moment then looked up at the sky. It was mostly overcast but the sun had broken through an errant clear patch, dousing the yard in light. I started to feel warm. Up above, the lilypilly rustled in a breeze I couldn’t feel.

‘It’s old,’ she said, finally.

‘Yeah. I think it was my grandfather’s, maybe.’

‘Can I see it?’

I held it towards her. She bent forwards a little but didn’t take it.

‘Surprised to see you come down so early today,’ I said.

‘Surprised to see you with this.’

I wasn’t sure how that changed anything. ‘You can touch it if you want.’

‘No thanks,’ she said. Then, a moment later: ‘It’s a Royal. Wasn’t that... That was the brand Mr. Ellis used.’ The logo was printed in big letters on the front of the typewriter, and I could see it from where I stood, the elongated leg of the R swooping beneath the word.

‘Yeah, I think so. Common brand, probably.’

Lana inspected it a moment longer then turned away and lit a cigarette, looking out over the yard. I told her I’d be back in a minute and went inside to put the typewriter down. I placed it

away from the pile of construction materials, about where the daylight ran out. Lana was looking at her house, idly kicking her sneakers on the dusty ground.

The typewriter seemed to emit some field, a force I could feel as a vibration in the air. It was probably just because Lana viewed it suspiciously, as if it signified something. I felt translucent, like if I were to turn and look behind me I would not see a shadow, but the light passing unhindered through my body.

Later we were still sitting out there. We didn't talk much that day. I thought a lot about my dream and what it meant. Several times I almost told her about it, but it seemed pointless when I didn't even know where it was going, like telling someone a story you didn't know the ending to. She was wearing the necklace she'd worn to Ellis' house and fiddled with it now and then, tapping it, letting it swing. I wondered if she'd put a photo inside.

The sun moved behind the house. Her parents would be home soon. We hadn't really said anything to each other, but she made no sign of leaving and nor did I. The afternoon wore on. Other times, when we'd spoken more, we'd also parted earlier. There must have been something keeping her, something she wanted to say. But whenever I spoke it was as if she accepted the topic simply because there was nothing else to talk about.

'Sometimes I kind of miss Christian Ellis.'

'I know,' Lana replied. 'You've mentioned it before.'

'I have?' I did not remember. 'Sorry.'

'I feel sorry for him. I know I shouldn't. He was a terrible person.' It was an unusually quiet afternoon. Her voice broke through the silence then as soon as she stopped it was as if there'd never been sound at all. 'You know that, don't you?'

‘What? Of course.’

‘Sometimes it seems like you, I don’t know, think he was justified.’

‘I don’t think that,’ I said. ‘I don’t remember saying that.’

‘You did. Well, not in that many words.’

‘I think the most I would have said was that he got what he paid for.’

‘I think he was right.’

‘To do what he did?’

‘No, no.’ She’d slipped her sneakers off at some point and was sitting cross-legged on the sun-warmed slate, massaging her feet. She looked up at me, squinting in the light. ‘About not being able to die.’

I laughed, incredulous. ‘You think?’ She didn’t reply. ‘Sorry.’

‘I don’t think it’s that crazy,’ she said, softly.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I thought about my phone calls with Klara, wondered where she was. Then I thought about Sophie and Christian Ellis and Lynton Ashby and Mark. I could see patterns in the world. Clouds passed over the sun and the light got soft again.

Time must have passed, but when she spoke it was as if none had passed at all.

‘Why’d you bring the typewriter,’ she said.

‘I have... Something to communicate.’

‘With who?’

I didn't answer, didn't know.

'Why can't you talk to me?'

'I can talk to you,' I said, and meant it sincerely. She looked back at her feet. After a while she stood up, canvas sneakers dangling from two fingers. I stood up too.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' she said. 'I feel like you're doing something and you don't know what's happening and it's not going to be good for you.'

'I'm fine,' I said, smiling. I touched her arm in an attempt to reassure her. She didn't react to it. I forced a laugh. 'I'm not Christian, after all.'

Lana just brought her arms around my neck and pressed her face into my chest. I hugged her, felt her birdlike body, the rhythm of her breath. Gradually the vision of my dream became lucid, attained weight. The world shrunk to a very small size. She squeezed me. It felt like she was squeezing as tightly as she could, as if to prove she was right there. Then she left.

I thought of the tattoo, burning on her back. How it told me she was grounded.

I stepped into the middle of the yard and looked at the house. Down the side, along the driveway, a dark tree was fluffy with white blossom. Something had changed between Lana and me. Irrationally I placed my dream at the centre of this transformation. Now that she had returned home, her image seemed insubstantial. I felt like there was something she expected of me, some duty I had to perform, a statement she needed me to utter—an assurance, perhaps. I thought about what Maria had told me, that Klara disappeared, and couldn't help but think that she was trapped somewhere, that her phone calls to me were a way of reaching out to the world. The world expands and contracts: Lana and Sophie and Klara—it seemed that these women were somehow connected, but I couldn't decide how.

I looked up at Lana's window, but saw nothing.

## A Room of Light; Perspective

When I arrived at the house the next day I half expected Lana to come over early, like she did the day before. She didn't, though, and I resisted the urge to glance back at her window while pretending to unlock the door. The air inside the house was cool and dry. I tossed a packet of galvanised nails onto the pile. It was getting big.

I'd also brought a thick stack of blank paper to the house. I slipped my index finger into the fold of the packaging and broke the seal, then sat down, cross-legged in front of the typewriter. I slipped a sheet out and loaded it into the machine. In the darkness my reflection did the same. Further back the yard was reflected in the mirror's surface. Experimentally, I struck a key. The sound resounded, heavy and final in the empty space.

Later, when I went out to smoke, Lana came over like she always did. She waved from the lane, then scaled the wall. She was smiling. Whatever she was worried about the day before seemed to have evaporated.

'How've you been,' she asked, lighting a cigarette. She swung a backpack off and left it by her feet, then sat down.

'Good,' I said.

'Renovations coming along?'

'Oh, you know.' I looked back at the house. 'It's a long process.'

'Must be hard doing it alone.'

I nodded. 'It takes a while.'

‘I’m sure it’ll be great,’ she said, smiling. I nodded again. We didn’t talk for a while. Every so often she said something but I couldn’t think of much to say beyond a word or two in response. She smoked a lot. I thought a lot about Christian Ellis and Klara, how they unwittingly inserted their mysteries into my life. Lana reached for the bag.

‘I brought something for you,’ she said, offering the bag. Inside was a tin box with swirling colours printed on top. I opened it. Rows of paints in tiny tubes. Salmon, pink, apricot. So many kinds of the same thing. Two brushes clipped into little clasps. She was looking at me expectantly.

‘Thanks,’ I said, and smiled at her. ‘This is great.’

‘I remembered that you said you wanted to start painting, when we first met. I’ll teach you.’

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘I was thinking about it. You know how I always paint at the window of my bedroom? You need a place like that, too. And I thought about it for a long time, because I only ever see you out here, or at my place. And then I remembered—you’ve got a place like that, too.’

I looked up from the paints, made a face. ‘I do?’

‘You’ve got that attic,’ she said. ‘Remember?’

‘Oh, yeah. Yeah! I do. Of course I remember.’

She beamed. ‘What’s it like up there? We can go get you set up today. I’ve got an extra easel at my place, it was just too awkward to bring over.’

The pile of equipment bristled in my mind. That hulking trash heap, something I could never let her see. The blank destitution of the building itself. What it would tell her about me, and the things I did here. She was looking at me. She knew I would ruin this.

‘Let’s go up and get you set up,’ she said, when the silence had extended too long. ‘The windows face each other. That way you can see me and I can see you. We’ll prove to each other that we’re there, we’re always there across from each other, right?’

We held eye contact. We were on a sort of brink.

‘That sounds great,’ I said. ‘But not right now, is that okay? I just need to fix a few things up first.’ I lit a cigarette, sucked deeply on it. ‘Why don’t you go have something to eat or something, I won’t be long.’

Lana was still looking at me but her expression had flattened. She sat there nodding to herself.

‘Okay,’ she said. I took another drag of my cigarette.

‘Hey, don’t be upset. I love it,’ I said, holding the case up. ‘I just need to do—’

‘It’s fine.’ She gave a brief smile, stood up. ‘I’ll see you later.’ And with that she was gone.

I spread the building materials throughout the house, then took the work pick and hacked away at one of the partitions, chipping into the dense brick, but careful to do only cosmetic damage. I drew the curtains, scattered dust masks and work gloves, tore power tools from their boxes and plugged them in. I sketched the outlines of windows and doorways in pencil on the walls. I set the ladder up beneath the manhole that led to the attic, then climbed up and tugged at the trapdoor, just to make sure we could get in. The door fell open and a pile of debris toppled out over me. I retched, spitting and coughing, the taste of dirt, my mouth soiled. When I could see

again I went around to Lana's place, and was still spitting out bits when I knocked on her back door.

'You came back,' she said, standing in the doorway.

'I said I would, didn't I?'

'I wasn't sure whether to expect you.' Behind her the house was dim, calm. I wasn't sure why she'd want to leave it. I shifted on my feet.

'Well, here I am. Just like I said.' She looked me up and down, wrinkled her nose.

'You're filthy.'

'Ah, yeah. I wanted to make sure we could get into the attic.'

'I guess we can then.' Another silence. We spent more time not talking than we did saying anything to each other.

'You want a hand with the easel?'

She shook her head, looked away. 'Are you sure you want to do this? I don't want to waste my time. I've got stuff to do, you know.'

'Definitely.' It felt earnest. It was. 'I'm sure.' She eyed me carefully. I held eye contact with her, and soon detected a softening of her expression: her face marked the moment at which doubt turned to belief. She took a deep breath.

'Okay. Let's go.'

With the curtains drawn, the space was ambiguous enough not to arouse suspicion. The scattered tools added an element of realism; I was pleased by how convincing the effect was. I told Lana to

climb up first and that I'd pass the easel to her, that it'd be easier that way. She stepped onto the ladder and I held it steady. The muscles in her legs flexed as she climbed, and I was struck by a vision from the past: following Klara up the fire escape and onto the roof of Maria's apartment, the implied sensuality of the action, later, the babbling intoxication that overcame me up there, looking out onto the city, the lights blurring, what happened—

'Paul!' Lana's cry brought me back to the present. 'You coming up or not?' I didn't think I could, anymore, not after the last time I followed a woman up a ladder. But that didn't mean anything, there was no connection—that was then and this was now. The same thing couldn't happen with Lana by virtue solely of it having happened with Klara.

Could it?

'Hold on.' I thought I heard her sigh but it could have been the house shifting. I didn't know what kind of space I'd be moving into, had never been up there before. The potential intimacy worried me; something invisible and enormous rose from the memory of my dream and lodged itself in my chest, I felt betrayed by my body.

'I don't think the easel will fit,' I said. I removed the chunky wooden screws that held it together. 'I'm going to unpack it.' Lana didn't reply. I could hear her sliding things around up there. Boxes or old furniture, I supposed. I flattened the easel out so it was long and compact, then stuck the screws in my pocket and called for Lana to hold the ladder steady. With the easel jammed under my arm I made my way up. Halfway there she reached for the easel and I held it for her. She pulled it through the manhole. I got the canvas and passed that to her, too. Then she helped me up.

It was not so much an attic as a small room atop the house, with four windows, one on each wall. And because the entrance was in the floor, not the wall, it was symmetrical, and each window was the same size and shape, so that wherever you looked it was like you were floating

up above the house, as if the room existed not in the world but as a plane comprising pure air and sunlight.

Lana was by a window, looking back towards her house.

The room was empty. The blinds were gathered in dense bundles above their windows. That must have been what I heard from below, Lana letting the light in. She had put her backpack on the floor and was setting up the easel. Her assured motions suggested expertise. Dust motes drifted in dense clouds. For the first time I could see straight through to Lana's window; we were on equal levels. The lillypilly tree no longer loomed over the yard. I could finally see, standing up there, that over the past months things had bled into each other: the house and the yards, the lane and Lana's room, the phone calls and the letters and the presence of the past. Seeing my yard neatly cordoned off by the strict marks of fences brought this home in a resounding moment of awareness. The yards beyond mine, and the ones beyond those: the spaces separate and whole. Lana was rifling through her backpack, pulling out more paints and compounds, tubes and tins and metal tools.

'Come over here,' she murmured. The easel was to the side of the window facing her house. She'd set a canvas on it and held a red and black pencil out to me. She had an identical one in her other hand. 'Take this.' She never looked directly at me, instead from the canvas to the scene before us.

'Before you learn anything I need to teach you about perspective,' she said. 'She gestured to the canvas, her hand describing a loose rectangle around its border. 'This is always you. This is where you're looking from, this is how you see the world.'

I nodded, made an agreeable sound. She didn't react, stayed focused.

'If you look up at the corner of a room you can see how the lines meet there. If you stand somewhere else the angles change. Perspective is about showing someone else how things look

from where you are. It's harder if that thing is on an angle, if it's skewed. It's easier to get it right if it's directly in front of you.'

She pointed out across the yard. The four square panels that made up her window echoed the bigger square of the window we were looking from. Disappearing down the neck of her t-shirt I could see the fine silver chain of the locket. She must have worn it all the time. I remembered the infinite refractions of the tattoo covering her back. 'Perspective is really about size,' she said. 'The closer things are the bigger they are.'

'Like with everything,' I said. 'The closer something is to you the more important it is, the bigger it is.'

'I think about that a lot when I paint,' she said.

We stood there looking at her window out across the yard. Beneath it I could see the shabby beauty of her backyard, the deck chairs we sat together on the day I fell in the ivy.

'This is a beautiful room,' she said softly. A brush of hairs ran across her cheek, almost translucent in the light. She turned and they disappeared. She was still facing the window but was angled towards me. She blinked slowly; I became aware of the delicate folds of skin that made up her eyelids, the impossibly fine structure of her lashes.

I moved slightly and for once things didn't change, she looked the same, was still herself.

She breathed in. A short sharp sound. 'So the canvas is you,' she said, her voice firm. 'And this is me.' She sketched a rough square an inch or two diagonally up and to the right of the centre. She explained how the edges were a guide, a frame, for where she should place the window. She explained how a single object just floated in space, was anywhere, untethered, and needed another object to define its location. It could only be in one place if there was another place it absolutely couldn't be—namely the space inhabited by the other object. 'You would

know that when Europeans settled in Australia they needed to make maps,' she said. 'And they used the stars to guide them, since they didn't know the land. And using the stars they could work out where something else was, which was really them working out where *they* were. They needed something, in their case the stars, to actually be anywhere. Otherwise they were just floating in space.'

She gestured towards the canvas, the small square it contained.

'So this is the first point, my window, that tells you where you are. It pulls you back from oblivion and tethers you to the world. I think about it like something hurtling through space. It's just going to keep going until it falls into orbit, and then it's stable, it's good, it's going to be there forever because it's connected to something else.

'So remember this,' she said, tapping on the square that represented her window. 'This is what pulls you into orbit, anchors you. You can always come back to this.' Her finger rested on the square. 'This won't change.'

I nodded. 'You know a lot about painting.'

'It's the only thing,' she said. 'I don't know about anything else.'

At some point her digital watch beeped. Her parents would be arriving home soon and she had to get back. I slid the latch off the trapdoor and steadied her as she found her footing on the ladder. I climbed down after her. A column of light cut through from the trapdoor, stark in the gloomy space. My eyes took time to adjust.

We found our way to the back yard and said goodbye. It was a Thursday and I said we could paint more the next day, she could teach me more. And I felt good about it. She smiled the way she had before things started to change, and it was only then that I realised they had. We

hugged and I held her tight. It felt like everything was going back to normal, the way it was in the beginning, even if I hadn't known that then.

And that's when I saw it, as she was walking back to the fence. Throughout her body, invisible yet undeniably present—something I hadn't seen in a long, long time, but recognised immediately. I called out. She didn't reply. I called out again, then again. She noticed, turned, but didn't come over.

'Paul?' She was in the lane, looking at me over the wall. I started towards her.

'I thought you'd gone,' I said. 'I didn't expect to see you.' She didn't reply. I kept on towards her.

'I've got to go,' she said, and pushed herself back from the wall. I stopped. She disappeared down the lane, the curve still visible in the movement of her shoulders, tucked in the dip of her shoulder blades.

That night I avoided sleep. The thought of it lurked, dark and dripping. My stomach felt weightless with the prospect of another dream. I wondered if I would sleep, if I'd find myself on the street again. I felt like I had narrowly escaped some grim fate, that Lana had wrested me back into the world, but only just, that I could slip back at any time. I wondered if she had succeeded, or if the day with Lana was just a brief respite in a perpetual movement downward, a momentary pause in a melody.

## You Can Always Come Back

We were standing side by side, the water lapping at my stomach, her chest. She turned from the ocean to look at me, and explicit in her face was an invitation I had only ever seen subtly, or inferred. Our hands met and I pulled her towards me, her body made buoyant by the water. She put her arms around my neck and I held her waist, struck by the heat and solidity of her body. Her legs curled around my waist.

I woke up with a stickiness in my sheets and took a shower in the middle of the night. I remembered the compact firmness of her torso, the slick of her wet skin. I tried to shake the memory loose, dislodge it. Outside the bathroom window a wind cooled the night, broad leaves flapping against the glass. I hadn't wanted to think of Lana like that. As if we had actually had sex, I found myself revisiting the landmarks of our relationship: the lotion she rubbed on my skin, the time spent talking, sitting in her bedroom, the eagerness to see each other. With our union as the terminus, everything else became a step in a progressing narrative. Without sex they were disconnected events and intimations, irrelevant to each other. Once it happened they lined neatly into an obvious trajectory.

From within the rush of water I could hear the phone ringing.

'Hi, babe.'

'Hey,' I said. 'Babe.' The pet name appeared insurmountably awkward until I said it, when the word fell easily out of my mouth. Klara started talking and the room fell away. Taking its place, a series of images rose and fell in and out of one another, obscuring the reality before me. I saw things I had never seen in my own reality: the inside of her and Mark's bed, together; a quick, private kiss in the hallway at a party. I was there, in those moments, viewing them from Mark's eyes, or my own.

Distantly I could hear Lana telling me about perspective, remembered her fingertip, resting on the window: *You can always come back to this. This won't change.* But Klara's voice drowned it out, her voice and the echo of the rain hammering on her rooftop. And her voice summoned images so vibrant we were there, Klara and I, joined together in places I took to be from someone else's past. Mark and Klara's bedroom in North Melbourne, boxes strewn about, falling onto a mattress with her; an airfield, Klara's colourless hair swept against her face, the wind stinging my eyes, then hugging her, and climbing into the cockpit of a tiny plane, alone; seeing Paul turn and smile, traces of old fat clinging to his throat, watching him walk down the front path and out onto the street, then turning away from the gate and seeing Klara next to him, in his arms, watching him with her big eyes; and finally, inevitably, the gradual materialisation of water lapping at the docks, the concrete and the warehouses, the skeletal cranes and cables like tendons, the port, where we'd started from, and I am looking out from under an awning and the bricks are powdery beneath my fingers and Klara is standing on the footpath pointing a camera at me, and everything is tangible, right there.

We finished talking but when the room was silent I couldn't tell how long anything had been going on for. There was the sound of rushing water. Klara? I was still naked from the shower. No, I realised. No Klara. I wandered back to the bathroom and turned the shower off, which had run cold.

I dressed myself in a daze. I wasn't quite there yet, back in my room, was still somewhere between places. I put on the army jacket I used to wear, but hadn't seen in years. I could see how the past circled, how it ate itself. I knew Klara would not call again and that she was free, in the same way as how we worked ourselves free eleven years ago, when the story of ourselves circled its way back and made the future impossible. And just like back then, when the phone call ended I was struck by the impression that she'd gotten out while I remained behind.

I left the house.

## Never Would Have Worked

For weeks after Klara left me, all that time ago, I only went outside to buy food. The breakup happened during a six-month period where it had been more convenient for Mark and me to take separate places, because of work and other commitments. I was unemployed, living alone in a terrace house I was renting with savings that dwindled quickly.

I spent most of my free time eating. I must have put ten kilos on. More. My body got round and doughy, I became aware of how it rubbed against clothes, against itself, was always where I didn't expect it to be. I would look in the mirror and think that if I shaved all my hair off I'd resemble a giant baby.

Because I didn't go out I had more money to spend on food. I ate pizzas and fried chicken and lots of Chinese and Indian delivery. Curries, stir-fries, noodles, naan, roti, fried rice, dumplings. I ordered family meals as if I had a family.

If the phone rang I'd answer it, but I had a list of excuses ready in case someone asked me to come have dinner, or to drink, or see a play or a band or something else. One excuse, that I had come down with a terrible gastritis, often came true by virtue of my diet, but most were simple lies I'd practised until I could say them convincingly. I had to get out of the house, but the longer I stayed in the harder it was to leave. My anxiety took on a life of its own, was self-sufficient, no longer reliant upon Klara having left.

One evening, Mark arrived on my doorstep. I didn't usually answer the door unless I was expecting food. I guess the days blurred together, because I answered thinking I'd ordered something. The sky was a faded purple above the tin roofs, which shimmered orange in the last rays of sunset. The night air was still warm. Sweat lay in a thin sheen across his forehead; a wheel on his skateboard was still spinning. He said we had to take a walk. I said I'd get some shoes on.

Cobwebs had formed across the openings in my sneakers. I brushed them off and tipped the shoes over the kitchen sink, banging the soles. A desiccated spider carcass toppled out, its crumpled body coming to rest in a takeaway container that looked like it may have once contained pad thai. I wore thongs or slippers to the shops, always after nightfall, and went barefoot at home. The biggest jacket I owned was still loose on me, but wasn't comically baggy as it had been a couple of months ago. I pulled it on and stepped out onto the porch. Mark grinned. I tried a smile on.

'Hey, man,' he said, slapping me on the arm. 'Haven't seen you around lately.'

'I haven't been around lately,' I said. Neither of us spoke as we moved through the small front yard and out onto the footpath. The streetlights were coming on but the remnants of sunlight still lit the area.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I haven't been feeling right.' We strolled through the suburbs, Mark's skateboard under his arm, the night sobered by a breeze carrying the promise of winter. He smiled as he looked around. He seemed content. He was the only person I was comfortable being with. I could talk candidly. He didn't have any experiential advice but was sensitive and tactful enough for me to release what I had to, without feeling like I was burdening him or embarrassing myself. At one point he turned to me as we stood on a curb waiting for the lights to change, eyes blinking behind his glasses, curly hair dark and wild in the wind.

'Thing about someone leaving you,' he said, out of nowhere, 'is that it hurts, right, hurts a lot. It consumes you. And it consumes you so much that you feel like nobody else in the world has ever felt like you before. Then you take a step back and realise that hold on, everybody in the world has felt like you do before. Exactly like you do. People have been feeling like this in one way or another since there were people around to feel. So on one hand it diminishes how unique your experience is. I'm sorry, but this feeling isn't yours alone. On the other hand it's validated by

the attention it gets from art, music, culture, literally every other person on the fucking planet—you feel part of something big when you have these emotions. That it is important, that maybe it's not unique but that other people feel it bad enough to tell everyone else about it. And they know they'll get it.'

Mark lit a cigarette and stared into the passing traffic. I didn't say anything. A tram rolled past, so he wouldn't have heard me even if I'd spoken. The noise cleared and suddenly it was calm, the cars slowing down to stop. Mark took a drag from his cigarette and turned to me. 'You should enrol in a PhD or something. Go back to uni, meet some people, get out of the house. Do something.'

The cars stopped and the lights changed green and the rattle of the walk signal erupted. Mark dropped his board and kicked and sailed across the road. He seemed to float above the concrete. I looked down at the bulges beneath my t-shirt. The rattle of his skateboard merged with that of an approaching tram. As the train's noise subsided Mark turned down a side street, the grate of his wheels on the rough bitumen lingering, then disappearing. I didn't know where he was going, but knew I'd just received a kind of ultimatum.

I didn't go straight home. Instead I walked to the supermarket and picked up a few things. Capsicums and onions, zucchini, eggplant, mushrooms and kale and baby potatoes, which I will forever remember a poet describing as resembling the ball of a baby's foot. I bought a big bottle of orange juice and a low-fat, high-fibre cereal. I bought skim milk. I carried it all home and my arms hurt when I got there but it was worth it. I chopped the vegetables up, fried them in a splash of oil then scattered herbs on them and put the pan in the oven. When it came out it was multi-coloured and the skin on the tomatoes had wrinkled and broken, the mushrooms spongy and wet, every part suffused into the others. I poured a glass of juice and took my dinner out to the back yard. Bats swooped above, their wings flapping leathery and physical. The glow from the

city killed the stars; I could smell jasmine. I smoked a cigarette after eating and felt calm and diffuse.

Christmas I spent alone but on New Year's Eve I met up with everyone. Klara was interstate visiting family, and although I probably could have seen her, it was better that I didn't. I told everyone I was going back to uni in a couple of months. Someone toasted me. The night was suffused with an unusual gaiety. I'd become a dark patch in their lives, and my sudden, successful reappearance released a lot of tension. So I saw them more frequently after that, never forgetting Klara but developing a tough protective layer over the sensitive areas her memory would probe. When the time finally came for me to return to uni I'd lost the weight I'd put on, was seeing people, reading more—it was like the breakup never happened. That we were separate but like that's how it had always been, and that I got to this point by passing through the body of a fat, lazy, friendless man who disappeared forever the moment I was fixed.

## Taman Shud; Someone Singing; More Dreams

The last time I'd walked the streets at night I'd been confused about everything. The whole world had seemed strange, I'd been alone. This time I was no less alone but was only confused about one thing.

The taste of saltwater still in my mouth, the phantom pressure of her lips.

The streetlamps glowed. The suburbs slept. I was unable to rid myself of the memory of my dream. Unnervingly, it had the same properties of every other sexual memory I had, as if it were no less real than anything in the past. The same ghostlike touch of her flesh, the intangible softness. Her body visible but fragmented, full of gaps. My surroundings passed without my noticing, until someone's voice shocked me from my reverie.

I looked up. A man stood before me. He was familiar but I couldn't place him. About the same height as myself, dressed in a dark-green military jacket. One brass button caught the light. 'I saw you here a few weeks ago,' he said. Immediately I recognised him. He was right, we'd crossed paths the last time I went walking. That seemed so long ago. I didn't know what time it was. He smiled awkwardly.

'Yes, yeah, I remember,' I said. 'Can't sleep.'

'Me neither.' He had dark hair that could have been black, sharp features and deep-set eyes. 'Seems to happen a lot lately.'

'I know the feeling.' I smiled at him. It didn't seem that there was much more we could say to each other.

'Well,' I started. 'I should probably get -'

‘You want to get a coffee? I know a cafe.’

‘I don’t think anywhere would be open.’

‘I know a place.’ He seemed genuine enough. And besides, what was he going to do? If I wanted to run away he couldn’t have stopped me.

‘Alright. Let’s do it.’

He beamed at me, then gave my hand a hearty shake. ‘Paul,’ he said, introducing himself.

‘Same,’ I said. He didn’t comment on the coincidence.

Paul spoke constantly as we walked, following no logical train of thought, rather freewheeling from one topic to the next, taking incidental details as ways to connect otherwise unrelated topics. He told me about the Taman Shud case in post-war Adelaide, the mysterious story of a corpse found on Somerton beach, a line from an obscure poet sewn into his jacket, a series of apparently unlinked clues on his person and in a city train station locker. This led him on to Simo Hayha, a Finnish farmer who, completely alone, terrorised Russian troops during the obscure Winter War, racking up several hundred confirmed sniper kills. He traced bizarre connections between World War Two, Australian colonial history and local urban legend, before somehow arriving back at Somerton beach, where the Taman Shud mystery originated, to talk about the daylight abduction of the Beaumont Children, another unsolved mystery.

‘It’s fascinating,’ he said. ‘The Taman Shud case was never solved, in part because the police wouldn’t question the victim’s mistress. That would have meant making her admit to sleeping with a married man which, if you can believe it, they wouldn’t do. Etiquette! She’s been dead some time now, so the secret to this case was lost because of social niceties. We know where it was but we can never find it.’

Paul finished his sentence the precise moment we stopped in front of a bluestone cottage. A light burnt above the front porch.

A young woman wearing a white blouse and a black skirt with an apron smiled as we entered and led us through the house. Large rooms had been partitioned with wood and frosted glass panelling, forming a series of sheltered booths. The place smelled of smoke and cinnamon; piano jazz tinkled through hidden speakers. Each booth was closed off by a sliding door; the only evidence of other patrons was the muted conversation and cigarette smoke hanging in loose clouds. The waitress opened a booth and gestured for us to sit down. The environment seemed to close in around us. It was difficult to remember what the cafe was like on the other side of the glass. Paul ordered a coffee; I opted for tea. I thought about the stories he told me. Few resolved in any appreciable way, and all seemed to hinge on missing or unknown persons. It made me think of the way so many things in our lives occur because of forces we can't fathom. Chains of cause and effect set off in origins so far removed from us as to be untraceable. The waitress, having concluded our orders, smiled again and vanished behind the sliding door. I was alone with a man I'd met on the street, late at night.

'That's weird,' he said. 'New waitress.'

'Why's that weird?'

'I've been coming a couple of times a week for close to ten years now and I've had the same waitress every night.'

'I guess she got sick of it or something.'

'Probably,' he said. 'Eleven years though.'

A tapping on the door interrupted the silence. Paul called to come in and the door opened, revealing the waitress carrying our food and drinks on a tray. I'd forgotten what I

ordered. I lit a cigarette and sat back in the booth. The waitress leaned over the table to pour our drinks. I watched her face, made abstract by the dull light of the wall-lamps, the shadows of her nose and cheekbones flickering as she moved.

Paul spoke. 'You're new here, aren't you?'

'It's my first night shift,' the girl said. She might have been twenty-three. 'I usually do days.'

'What happened? Is the regular girl sick?'

'I don't know. Maybe. She just didn't come in to work.' Until this point I'd only been listening because there was no avoiding it, but what she said caught my attention.

'That's unusual,' Paul said. He seemed distant, as if considering something. 'I've been coming here a long time and she's always been here.'

'She didn't answer her phone. It was disconnected or something, I don't know. They couldn't even get a dial tone.' The waitress crossed her arms. 'Sounds like she came to her senses and got the hell out of here.'

'What's her name,' I said.

The girl looked at me. 'Cara, or Lara, or something. I don't know her. We never worked together.'

'Klara?'

She shrugged. I glanced at Paul. He was watching me. 'Maybe. Is that all? If you need anything, open the door a bit.' After she left we sat in silence a moment.

'A friend of mine used to work in a café like this,' I said.

‘Me too,’ Paul said. I eyed him. ‘But I guess she doesn’t anymore.’

‘They got free,’ I said, unsure exactly what I meant. We sat without talking a while, sipped our drinks. It was impossible for me not to connect the phone call with Paul’s missing waitress, as irrational as it was. And looming behind everything, colouring the events, Lana, and the dream she’d appeared in. I could still feel the curve of her body in my hands, see her hair drift in the water. I squeezed my eyes shut as if to force the memory out.

At one point Paul spoke. ‘So, if you don’t mind my asking, why can’t you sleep?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, glad to be relieved of my thoughts. ‘I’ve been having a lot of trouble the last few months. Now and then it gets too bad and I have to get out into the street.’

‘I know the feeling. Lying there in the dark, not sure whether you’ve slept or not. Thoughts become disturbingly lucid. It all just seems a bit too real.’

‘That’s right. And getting out into the world is a way of getting away from that.’

He nodded, stroking his chin, staring deep into the table. He made a wordless noise of agreement. ‘But it never quite seems to work, does it?’

Just then I heard something. Almost noiselessly, a reedy, feminine voice singing a song I thought I recognised. I couldn’t say when it had started. Paul was staring at me.

‘Sometimes it works,’ I said.

‘No it doesn’t.’

‘Then why do you come out?’

He looked at me. ‘Who said I have the same problem?’

‘Do you?’

‘Sometimes,’ he said, and paused so long I thought that was his answer. ‘Sometimes I’m not sure what’s real and what isn’t. And then, like you said, you get out into the rest of the world and you’re not quite sure leaving made any difference at all.’

I didn’t think that was what I’d said, but couldn’t remember exactly. I poured milk into my tea and blew on the liquid, its opaque surface rippling.

‘Then,’ he said, continuing. ‘You figure: this doesn’t seem right. I feel awake, but I was in bed just before, wasn’t I? Maybe I’m dreaming. And that comes as a relief, because you might wake up, and everything might go back to normal.’ The woman was still singing.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I never doubt whether I’m dreaming or awake.’

‘What about when you’re asleep? You always know you’re dreaming then?’

‘Well, no. Of course not.’

Paul sat looking at me, the trace of a smile playing on his lips.

‘Funny how we turn to talk of dreams,’ he said. ‘I suppose it makes sense: two insomniacs, obsessing over what they want the most.’

‘Oh, I sleep,’ I said. ‘That’s what brought me here. A dream I had.’

‘I’m jealous.’

‘Don’t be. I wish I hadn’t dreamt at all.’ I foresaw meeting Lana the next day, foresaw my awkwardness, the way I couldn’t help but act as if we’d slept together, my obvious discomfort. She wouldn’t have any idea why, would probably assume something had changed, that I didn’t like her. At the same time, she was my only friend, and I longed to see her.

‘I’ve been an insomniac for the last ten years,’ he said, sighing. ‘I sleep, but fitfully, never deeply. I walk the streets at night as a kind of meditation. I always take the same route. The

rhythm of my footsteps lulls me. I've seen the houses so many times I don't really see them at all anymore. The silence, the stillness. I've done it so many times it feels like rest. It isn't, though. I know it isn't.'

For the first time I noticed the bruise-like darkness under Paul's eyes, which were so densely bloodshot the whites were barely visible.

His hand shook as he drew the mug to his lips. 'It was dreams that kept me up too, to begin with. Either dreams or the fear of dreams, and after that, once sleep was impossible, the thoughts that come alone in bed. There is a phrase I may have read in a book long ago: "with terrible clarity". I don't remember now if that was an original phrase or one used by many writers. However it came about, it's the only term that properly describes the quality of the thoughts I have when trying to sleep. "Visions of the past rise with terrible clarity". It must be from somewhere, mustn't it?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Neither do I.' Paul took another sip of coffee. His shaking hadn't lessened, but he seemed to have adapted to the problem.

'What thoughts keep you up?' I asked.

He released a long sigh upon hearing my question. 'I don't even know any more. I mean, I know what keeps me up, the images, the emotions, the sensations. But I don't know where they come from. Like I said, I haven't slept properly in ten years. Things get confused. Memories merge. I believe things are true, then chance across a photograph, or a letter, and my ideas about the past are proven wrong. This undermines everything. As fervently as I believe what I remember to be true, as long as one part is disproved the rest is thrown into doubt. But to answer your question: bad things from my past rise again and again, things I've done to other people. As if they're actually happening, right there in front of me. Their faces when they realise

what I'm doing. The force, the smells, the heady intoxication of it rises in me. Sometimes I vomit from the force of it. Sometimes what I see is so dreadful I can't believe I was capable of it. But then I can't not believe it, either. Anything could be true.'

Paul had finished his coffee. I'd only noticed him take a couple of sips; I didn't see how the mug could be empty. But it was. The singing continued, an old melody I still couldn't place. Paul didn't seem to notice. There was something familiar in the way he slumped in the booth. He was gazing down at the table. I finished my tea, which had grown lukewarm.

'Sort it out,' Paul said. He was looking at me. 'If you still can, fix it before it's in you forever.' He fished some money out and left it on the table. I glanced from the money to his face, realising I didn't bring my wallet. He nodded, understanding.

We left the booth. Passing between the others, the cafe was silent—everyone else must have gone home. The singing had stopped and there was no conversation. Nor was the waitress at the entrance. Paul held the door for me. The night air had turned brisk. The sky lightened, barely perceptible, in the east, which meant it was only a few minutes from dawn. I followed Paul down the street and around a corner. Suddenly I knew where we were. I looked back, but the street with the cafe was unfamiliar. I didn't think I'd be able to find it the next day, although I knew the streets well. I must have been more tired than I thought. I bade Paul farewell and we shook hands. I wished him all the best, that he might be able to find sleep. He just nodded, then turned, walking off the opposite way to my place. I watched him go, receding into the half-light of dawn. Once he disappeared, I made my way home, and slept.

## The First Day Nothing Happened

I woke up late the next morning.

I ate the last of my cereal sitting at the kitchen table, looking out at the roofs of my neighbours' houses and the patch of cloudy sky beyond them. A sheen lay across the backyard, raindrops clung in bunches to the windows. Every now and then one would break and run down the pane. Mazes shifting. It was only then that I remembered the previous night. The dream, my sheets, Klara's call, the late-night meeting with Paul. Things converging and diverging, endings and beginnings.

I pulled the sheets from my bed and threw them in the washing machine. Then, naked, I stood in front of the mirror and inspected my body. Nothing. I made eye contact with myself, followed the dips and curves of my torso, lingered over the dark nest of pubic hair, took in my own body. The dream should have left a mark somewhere: a scratch across my shoulder blade, a bite-mark on my chest, an unexplained bruise on the inside of my forearm. I remembered it as I remember what has happened in real life. I showered and got dressed, then sat back down at the kitchen table. The house, as usual, was hushed. A clock ticked in the living room. I wouldn't be going to Lana's house that day. I couldn't face her. The events of the night had made me too vulnerable: the memory of her body was still solid and fully-formed. Not only that, but the conversation with Klara had left a hole in me, like a chasm opened up within my chest. Finally, too, there was Paul. Something about him disturbed me deeply, although I didn't know why.

I turned on the computer to check the date. It was a Friday. So I wouldn't see her until Monday.

I kept expecting the phone to ring although I knew it never would.

Friday I went to the art gallery. I wanted to find some new artists to show Lana, and spent a few hours wandering the hushed rooms. She would have been expecting me that day, since I'd seen her every weekday for over a month, and I wanted to have something to make up for my unexplained lapse. I left the gallery with a book on Goya and another on the Brazilian painter Almedia Junior.

By Sunday I was ready to see Lana again. The weekend had extended out to what felt like an unbelievable length; the change made me realise how seamlessly I had woven myself into my new routine. I thought of Lana frequently over the weekend, and by the time it came for me to go back to the house the memory of the dream had dulled, lost most of its power. I knew I wouldn't hurt her, knew that ultimately the choice was my own. I thought of how she had tried to help and smiled to myself, my appreciation forming as a blossoming affection inside me.

I was smiling as I entered the house by the back door and, settling down in the shadows, was content to flip through the books until it was time to have my cigarette and wait for her to arrive. What felt like an hour passed. Outside the day was still nice. There was no sign of the sky darkening, although I knew from years in the city that it could happen within minutes. I lit a cigarette and sat down against the back of the house, looking out over the backyard, waiting for Lana to appear.

She didn't. I finished my smoke and sat there for five minutes before lighting another. By the time I'd finished that one she still hadn't arrived. This was unusual. I spent the rest of the morning in the backyard, occasionally moving from one spot to another. At one point I even stood up, moved to the middle of the lawn, in direct view of her window, and waved for at least a minute. If she was up there she must have been avoiding me. Maybe she felt stood-up when I didn't arrive on Friday. That was probably it, I decided, sitting back down against the house.

It occurred to me, although it probably should have occurred earlier, that Lana might have developed something of a crush on me. Maybe she was embarrassed by waiting on Friday, and wanted to pay me back. Or maybe her family had moved without her mentioning it; maybe she was back at school; maybe was on holiday; in hospital; dead, or, as I gradually came to have less trouble believing, a creature of my own creation, someone who never really existed at all and disappeared as illogically as she'd come about.

At one point I walked over to the back door and knocked. No answer. I knocked again, and again the sound of my knuckles on the wood hung in the air, uninterrupted. I looked around the backyard. Nothing suggested anything. The colourful garden, the empty driveway, the absence of presence. All I knew was that nobody was there. There was no why.

For the first time, I left the house by the front gate, walking down the driveway and out onto the footpath.

Maybe I was worried about Lana, or maybe, without her there, some kind of spell had been broken, and the ritual of leaving by the lane was irrelevant. I didn't realise I hadn't left by the lane until I was lying on my bed later that night, nearing the end of Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries*. I tried to recall whether I'd entered by the lane or the front gate, but couldn't find any memory to support either. The notion that I had entered by the driveway played on my mind, and I wondered whether she had refused to reveal herself because I hadn't played by our unspoken set of rules. I'd only ever walked down there with Lana, and then only to get Ellis' letters. It occurred to me that together, we'd used the driveway as a kind of entrance into Ellis' world, but alone I used it as an exit.

As the night deepened and neared the early hours of the morning, it seemed plausible that entering by the lane actually made her appear, and that because I missed that vital step she

couldn't materialise. I got up and poured an inch of rum, intending to sip it as I finished the book, but it was empty by the time I made it to the bedroom.

## Fewer Dreams; Both of Us

I had trouble sleeping again that night. I watched the digital clock until it was two in the morning. The warmth and fragrance of the cafe lingered somewhere beyond my senses. I dressed, intending to find the place myself. It couldn't take long, even if I had to circle a few blocks. The night air was soft, the moon hung fat and heavy.

When we left the cafe the other night I didn't recognise anything until we turned onto a specific street, at which point everything fell into place and I could find my way home.

I found the street. Smaller ones branched off it, many more than I remembered. The café could have been down any of them. Everything looked the same: neat brick townhouses, blue-black cobblestones, trees lining the footpaths, filigree. It took ten minutes to get to the end of the street, another ten minutes to get back to where I'd started, down the other side. Nothing jumped out at me. I decided I would start from one end, walk to the end of every street that branched off, then do the other side. It'd take a while but it was the best chance I had. Besides, the cafe would be open all night.

Emerging from one of the lanes I almost knocked into someone. Apologising, we turned to each other.

'Paul,' I said.

'Paul,' he replied. 'I wasn't sure whether to expect you.'

'I'm looking for the cafe... For some reason I can't remember where it is.'

'It's tricky. But you're nearly there. Follow me.' He led me down the next street I would have searched had I not run into him. Another branched off it, and just a few houses down we came to the cafe, porch light glowing as if it had never been turned off. Being greeted by the

waitress, moving through the smoky, murmuring room and finally being let into a booth, I realised what had fascinated me about the cafe. It was indistinguishable, in atmosphere and layout, from the Waterlight Café Mark and I used to frequent, where we got stoned and talked, where he asked Klara out.

Paul and I waited for our drinks and I tried to invoke the details of the other cafe, but every memory was usurped by the environment around me. Either that or the two places were genuinely identical. I remembered Mark, red-eyed and laughing, but in my memory he was seated across from where I sat then, older, in a different part of Melbourne.

Paul reached into his pocket, pulled out a plastic bag. From that he pulled something wrapped in white paper. He put it on the table and unfolded it, revealing a handful of biscuits. ‘Try one,’ he said. ‘They’ve got pot in them.’ I looked at him, then laughed, unsurprised. I took one. It dissolved in my mouth, forming a sweet paste. I ate another. Then he ate one, then another. He broke the final one and put half in his mouth. I ate the other. He scrunched the paper up into a tiny ball and returned it to the plastic bag, which he then folded and returned to his pocket.

‘So the phone calls stopped,’ he said.

‘Huh?’ I didn’t remember telling him about them.

‘The woman, who kept calling you. They stopped, didn’t they?’ I didn’t answer, just held eye contact as I raised my mug to my lips and drank. ‘Klara,’ he said.

‘What the fuck? How do you know about Klara?’ We were staring at each other. He had blue eyes, like mine. Neither of us moved.

‘Come on.’ He whispered it, as if embarrassed.

‘What? Come on, what?’

'You know.'

'No, I don't.'

He tugged hard on his fingers, glared at them. He looked up, straight at me, his gaze forceful.

'I'm you,' he said.

I watched him for a second, then laughed in his face. I tried to laugh again, to sound incredulous, but it was forced, and sounded so. 'What?'

'When you get to my age you'll meet yourself on the street.'

'Bullshit. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.'

'You met Klara. Again.'

I was silent.

'You've met Lana before, too.'

'What? How do you know about Lana?'

He eyed me levelly.

'Okay, okay,' I said. 'When did I meet her?'

'Think about it,' he said. I tried, but couldn't. Too many things. I was up against the towering irrationality of the situation. I felt nauseous, hot in the face. 'Where do you think you are?'

'What? You know where we are.'

‘Sure do. Where do you think you are?’ I looked around. No clues. The partitions stopped a foot or two above our heads. I could see the wood-panelled ceiling and the wall adjacent to us. That was about it. Then I saw it. The mirror. And within it, from the street outside, manifested now inside the café, was a brass whale. Hanging from thin chains, rocking on the breeze. The realisation dawned on me; I felt dizzy. I looked at Paul, who nodded.

‘Which one of us is real,’ I said.

‘Which one do you think is real?’

‘I feel real.’

‘So do I.’

‘But you’re older than me,’ I said.

‘Yep. Which means you’re my past.’

‘But the past isn’t real.’

‘It’s part of the present. It’s present in the present.’

‘Is there an older you, me, us, somewhere?’

‘I would assume so.’

‘Why haven’t I seen him? Why don’t I see yesterday me walking around my house? Why don’t I run into versions of myself every day? Every second?’ I lowered my voice, incredulous, and fixed Paul with my stare. ‘Why don’t we form a snake, one me after another?’

Paul shrugged. I lowered my forehead to the table, thinking, not thinking. I looked up at him again. ‘If you’re here that means I’m your past. You being here means I can’t be.’

He shrugged again. ‘I guess not.’

Time passed.

‘Where’s Lana,’ I said. ‘Where’d she go?’

‘She didn’t go anywhere,’ Paul said. He didn’t seem smug any more, probably never had been. Instead his head drooped, barely supported by his neck, as if the revelation had sapped what little strength he had. For the first time I noticed the moth-chewed edges of his clothing, the ragged ends of his beard, the way his hair separated into greasy strands. His fingernails were chipped and dirty. Most of all, though, the very nature of his being looked frail, insubstantial, as if at any moment he would flicker, and vanish.

‘I—you,’ he said, ‘went, or keep, going back, each day. And you, or we, we, we won’t see her again. I said that. No. I haven’t seen her since and neither will you. But that is not to say that she left. Not really, no. I think now that it is, was: it was us who left, we left her.’ Paul kept speaking in his stuttering manner, his voice gradually quietening until I could no longer make out the words. I eased myself out of the booth and stood at the doorway. He was fiddling with his fingers again. I thought of Christian Ellis, collapsed in his chair, breathing like a clogged drain. His delirium. I watched the way Paul’s fingers moved, straining against each other, as if fighting. Crescent shapes where his nails dug in. He was glaring at his hands. They grappled with each other like he was trying to rip his own fingers off. I stood transfixed, saw in him the pain of someone who could not escape what they had done. He picked at his fingertips, as if trying to remove a splinter. Blood appeared around his fingernails, tiny jewels. I saw my future in him; maybe that was when I came to believe what he’d told me. He was not picking at his fingertips, no, he’d worked a nail into the skin bordering the nail, was digging into that, pulling it away. My face twisted involuntarily. I left.

## Penance

I woke at six in the morning, and it was still dark. I lifted the curtain and could see the clouds lit up by the sun against the rich blue of the sky. They were tinted gold. The morning passed and I spent it lying in bed, staring at the light bordering the curtain. I felt slow and lazy, the feeling after a night getting stoned.

I thought about what Paul said. It didn't make any sense. I was able to write it off as my mistake, believing him. Undoubtedly I'd mentioned Lana at some point, probably while stoned, and he was able to play off that.

For a while I'd thought that Paul might be crazy. The image of him picking at his fingers certainly supported that but somehow, beneath it, was the possibility that I was, in fact, the one going mad. Of course I didn't believe that. As the day passed I wondered if it was wise to keep meeting Paul. True, I'd played along, gone as far as to accept what he'd said – at the time. Alone, during the day, though, it was obvious he was mad, and that I was only encouraging him, going along with his madness out of loneliness and boredom.

I stayed in bed slipping in and out of sleep, until I woke clammy after a dream I couldn't remember. Dream: Lana. Whether or not Paul was right about her, I felt some burden had been lifted. Maybe it wasn't happiness or affection that I'd felt unfolding inside myself, but the knowledge that in some way I would be able to escape my fate. It was probably idle speculation but in Paul and Ellis I saw the way people could be brought down by the things they'd done, cursed to remain indefinitely as nothing more than a residue in the world, as the trace of something since vanished.

I made toast and spread my last skerrick of butter onto it. Then I filled the bathroom sink with water, squirted some washing liquid in there, and left my socks and underwear to soak. I had

a washing machine but was trying to save money. I hadn't checked my account since receiving my last pay, but the numbers themselves were irrelevant. Money and time were linked in a direct relationship, one dragged down by the other.

I got off the train a stop early because ticket inspectors got on, then walked the rest of the way to the house.

Lana wasn't making herself visible that day, either. Riding the train home—an uncomfortable sensation in the middle of the day—I decided I would visit as I always had, until she acknowledged me, or I somehow discovered she had left. I foresaw, in a vision that left me cold and vertiginous, the owners of my adopted house suddenly taking a renewed interest in it, cutting me out of the picture, my connection to Lana irreparably severed. I stared out the window, not seeing, absorbed by the grim possibility of loneliness, the people who had left me. There was no-one left.

By the time the train stopped I decided what I would do. Every morning I would return to the house and wait for Lana. I never worried about her. She would not abandon me. What I had done was worthy of punishment: we had an unspoken commitment to each other, and my breaking it was worse precisely because it was unspoken. Our agreement gestured to a level of understanding deep enough to bypass the need for words. I realised then that she had been trying to make it clear for some time: when she rubbed the cream on, showing me how to paint. She was offering herself as a point of reference for me, something I could hold onto.

I still believed she was up there, punishing me for missing that day. I brought more building supplies, the same two art books that had started to go ragged at the edges. I moved the tools I'd scattered back onto the pile: paints, timber, hammers, nails, saws, fittings, tiles—all that grew out from the wall, metastasising through the guts of my house. It became a personal symbol

of my commitment to Lana, gaining power as it grew in size. I would perform my penance dutifully. Until she saw that I was sorry, and came down.

For all I knew she was working on a series of paintings. Me in my backyard, different times of day. Different seasons. I grew to feel that my waiting for her there was not only a kind of posing, something she needed for her work, but also a continuation of our interactions, a deeper, subtler way of being together. These kinds of thoughts preoccupied me. Reasons for her absence, what she must have been thinking of, up there in her room.

One afternoon I left the house and walked down the driveway. I thought to check the mailbox but knew there would be no letters. I stepped out onto the footpath. Because of the route I took from the station, I hadn't actually seen the street my house faced for a long time. Gum trees towered above the houses, bushy native plants in front yards. The neighbourhood had somehow escaped Melbourne's ubiquitous filigree decorations. Instead, broad, squat bungalows lined the street. It reminded me of Adelaide. Someone spoke.

'Good day, isn't it?' An unidentifiable European accent, weakened by decades in Australia. An old man standing by the front gate of his house. My neighbour. He wore a light, short sleeve button-up and a white bucket hat.

'Lovely,' I said. He took a step towards me but no more. We had to talk quite loudly to make ourselves heard.

'Just move in, did you?'

'A while ago.' He nodded a few times.

'Good area, we have been here a long time.' He laughed. 'Longer than you've been alive!'

I smiled at him.

‘You are married? Family?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Just me.’

Lana’s image appeared, already growing vague in memory. Distantly I recalled a conversation we had about these neighbours. I guess I’d been right.

‘A pity. I’m sure you will meet someone soon, fill up that big house.’

‘Did you know the previous owners?’

He shook his head. ‘No, not very well. We did not even know they had left until you arrived.’

‘You said you’d been here longer than I’m alive? How long exactly?’

‘Oh...’ He removed his hat and wiped his brow with it. Looking around the suburb, as if the answer would be held somewhere within it. ‘Since we were married. Fifty years?’

I nodded.

‘Do you remember someone living here, a Mr Ashby? He’d have been in his 50s or 60s when you moved in.’

The man’s eyes seemed to glaze over. Then the life came back to them.

‘Yes, maybe. An old man, when my wife and I moved here. Met him when we moved in, introduce ourselves to the neighbours. Might have been him. Saw him watering the garden every night. Then, no more.’ He shrugged. ‘Pass away, I suppose.’

We spoke a bit longer. After a few minutes I excused myself and went back inside. He stayed out there, watching nothing happen. I wondered if he stood out there every day, and if he did, whether we ever would have met if Lana hadn’t left, had kept me tethered to her world.

## Each Day; Every Night

The next time I met Paul there was no obvious sign of his injuries—no bandages, no blood. I assumed they were too subtle to see.

By that point the ability to sleep had almost completely deserted me. I found snatches of it in the moments before dawn, or in the middle of the day in the depths of my new half-house, curled up next to the enormous mirror that lined the back wall. Paul and I would meet, anywhere between midnight and three AM, and he would take me to the cafe. I could never find it on my own, and stopped trying. We would sit in the booth and talk about the short dreams we had, or wanted to have. Every night the woman would sing, her voice tentative and weightless. Every night there would be chatter from the booths as we entered, smoke clouds gathering near the ceiling. But every night, when we left, the room was still.

Paul never asked any questions about my life and I never asked about his. Nothing seemed relevant. We were friends on the terms of our insomnia, the surreal midnight encounters, the weirdness of the world when sleep has been evasive. Of course, I had Lana, and Paul must have had something he returned to, but when night has come and the only thing you want is sleep, proportions change. Things shift weight, values swell and deflate. We spoke of nothing but our sleeplessness, our dreams, our longing for what seemed real to be revealed as the fantasy of someone in a truly deep sleep. Somehow this made it better. No, not better. But it was manageable like that. And, in those rare moments where Paul said exactly how I felt, or I described an experience that perfectly fit one of his, we could forget, if only for a moment, the torment of the night, and relax.

The night after he hurt himself we met as usual, somewhere between my house and the café, and sat together until nearly dawn. We didn't say much to each other. But sitting across

from me it returned in a flash, like something I'd forgotten I owned then found lying in a box at the back of a cupboard—my research, my time abroad, the interviews I'd conducted.

'Did you ever find out about Diego Juarez,' I said.

Paul looked up at me. He recognised the name but was straining to place it.

'The gaucho.'

'Yes,' he said, slowly. 'I remember.'

'I thought, maybe, if we've had... similar... lives, then maybe you would have learnt something I didn't. I haven't thought about it in months, I can't remember how long.'

He smiled. There was something mean in it. 'You forgot all about it?'

'No, well, I still have the tapes—'

'The tapes!' He snorted. 'Those tapes are worthless.'

'Maybe yours are. I have lots of material at home.'

'I know exactly what you have.'

'Right,' I said. We were silent a moment.

'That part of your life is over.'

I didn't reply.

'You know that now, don't you? You've moved too far from it. It all finished when you got back. You abandoned your work then and there's no going back; you'll never go back to it. You don't even want to find out anymore.'

'That's not true,' I said.

‘Then how did you forget all about it?’ He paused, although he must have known I wouldn’t answer. ‘You’re better off just letting it all go. Throw the tapes in the bin. Throw the knife into the river.’

‘The knife,’ I said.

He pulled his face into what I assumed was a smile. His hands were on the table. The ends of his fingers were bloody and raw, and he’d picked the nails back to reveal the tender flesh beneath them.

‘You forgot the knife too? Don’t forget the knife,’ he said. ‘What if you need it one day?’

‘Is that a threat?’

He raised his hands in mock defence. ‘Just a suggestion,’ he said. ‘After all, I know what you’re going through.’

‘Whatever,’ I said, unwilling to believe him but unable not to. For a minute we sat there, not talking, before I got up and left without a word.

There was no whiskey left at my place, but in the back of the pantry I found a dusty bottle of cooking sherry. I poured half an inch of it into a glass and threw it back. I grimaced, then took another shot and stood staring at the kitchen bench, breathing hard. I’d been replaying the interaction with Paul since leaving the café, trying to understand his antagonism. In the end I couldn’t, and got angrier as the night went on. I almost went back out to find him with the intention of confronting him, but instead drank sherry until I was too drunk to be mad anymore, sitting on the lounge room floor.

In my stupor, Paul’s behaviour disappeared and I found myself thinking about how I managed to forget the last two years of my life. For months it had been as if my research didn’t exist. It felt, having remembered, that there had been a wide gap in my life that I hadn’t even

noticed was there, that a distance had opened up between who I was and who I had become. I ran over the research questions I'd asked myself, the facts of that strange history—and felt utterly indifferent to it all. The subject just didn't interest me anymore. Whether Juarez had been one person or a hundred now seemed irrelevant, a lump of rock at the bottom of the ocean that nobody would ever see or need or think about.

In the morning I reflected on what Paul had said to me. I struggled to recall the turns of the conversation, but was reasonably sure I'd given him all the information he needed to pretend to know me and my life. He never suggested anything, only went off what I said, like one of those television psychics. Was he just playing with me, and was I playing along, or did I believe he truly was my double?

One day I found myself unusually alert. I'd only slept for an hour, maybe an hour and a half. There was no food in the kitchen. I don't think there had been any for a few days by that point, although it was impossible to tell. I left the house, as usual, books under my arm. Arriving in Mitcham I went to the hardware store, but my card was declined. Entering the lane, I felt a sensation not unlike what had happened the first time I passed into it: a buzzing beneath my skin. Not painful, though, like the first time, instead almost pleasant. I strolled down the lane, and it was as if I had returned after a long time away: somehow I saw it anew. The same debris lying in the same places, the same fruit trees hanging over the same corrugated iron fencing. Even the radio was still audible, tuned to the same station, as if that one person had never stopped talking. Instead of hooking my toe into one of the breezeblocks and hopping the fence, I walked straight past the house. I took the next right and came to Lana's gate. It was unlocked, as I'd expected. I opened it and stepped into her backyard.

A few small weeds had grown up through the white quartz path. I walked towards the back of the house, unconcerned. I'd come to think of myself as practically invisible. Could Lana see the lane from her room, or was it too close to the house? If she didn't want to see me there wasn't much she could do; if she didn't want me inside the house she'd have to come down and talk to me.

I couldn't hear anything from behind her door, though that didn't mean anything. I glanced out a window to my right. Down below I could see the fruit trees that lined my back fence, but I wasn't high enough to see over them and into the yard. I listened to the silence in the house. The only perfect quiet I remember hearing. So the only one I ever heard.

I shifted my weight; the carpet crunched. My hand rested on the doorknob. Until this point I had intended to climb the next set of stairs and talk to Lana in her room. It had been so long. But then, standing there, I was struck by the knowledge that any revelation would have destroyed it all. Knowing is mundane. If it was all left ambiguous then she was there and not, occupied two places at once, a magical creature. I knew that if I opened the door she wouldn't be there, and never would have been. Because I broke the rules. But if I left it, our dance continued. She kept painting me and I kept a vigil, every day, in the backyard across the lane. We were still together, still in contact every day. I imagined her in the room, frozen, brush against the canvas, staring horrified at the door. I couldn't disturb her. It was like after I'd met Klara the first time, and that girl, the one who could have been her, came into work the next day. But my memory wouldn't tell me. I decided, in the end, not to confirm whether it had been her or not. Having seen her, spoken to her, the girl I was obsessed with, and not even know it was her. To have waited all day, then talk to her, and still not be sure. That was the same, with Lana.

I let my fingers drop from the doorknob and walked back down the steps. I poured a glass of water and drank it, then took two apples from the fruit bowl.

Back out the gate, down the lane, and over the fence into the backyard of my house. I walked into the middle of the lawn and stood by the sundial that would never work, turned to face her window.

I raised my right hand in greeting, or salute.

## Back Where it Started

Again I woke from a dream in which my bicycle had once been my friend but since become foe. In the dream I crouched by the front window, and from outside could hear the freewheel click as the bike prowled the front yard, its lamp crossing the garden like a searchlight before silently clicking off. Every now and then I would hear it creak, as if some phantom rider were applying pressure to the cranks. Then it would go silent before the clicking began again.

I was reluctant to get dressed and go outside; the thought of seeing Paul unnerved me. At the same time he was my only friend, the only person I spoke to in the world. During the day, the thought that he was actually an older version of me seemed absurd, laughable. But at night, with the presence of the sentient bicycle only moments behind me, the thought took on a disturbing reality. I was reminded of Dostoevsky's story, the rivalry between two identical men. I was also reminded of its ending.

I will admit that I was surprised to find the *facón* where I had left it, at the back of a desk drawer. Sometimes when you leave something for a long time it will disappear when forgotten. Even if you don't remember moving it, sometimes it's just not where you left it. I pulled the knife out and tested its edge against my fingernail. It was still sharp. I had expected the knife to disappear of its own accord, to slip away, drawn by whatever purpose fate had ordained it.

I felt a sense of gratitude, as if the knife had deemed me worthy of possessing it. Or, I thought, reflecting on the story the old man's son had translated, perhaps it deemed me worthy of itself possessing. I got dressed and went to slip the knife into the back of my belt, but paused before doing so. Why was I taking it, anyway? I left the house.

When I lowered myself into the booth, the handle of the knife dug into my back. I crossed my legs and leaned forward to relieve the pressure. Neither of us had spoken since meeting in the street; I wondered why we continued to see each other at night.

The waitress brought us our drinks. Later, she brought more. The café was quiet that night. There was no music, but occasionally the sound of people talking would arise, too low to properly make out. What did the two of us have to say to each other, anyway? I did nothing with my life and Paul was doing no more with his.

‘A while ago,’ I said, ‘you told me you were kept awake at night by the memory of terrible things you’d done. If what you say is true, that we’re the same person, then I’m having trouble believing that’s the reason you stay up. Because I know I haven’t done anything that bad.’

‘Not yet,’ he replied.

I thought of Lana. ‘I don’t see how I could. I don’t see what there is that I could even do.’

He drained his cup. It was then I noticed he was drinking *mate*. He hadn’t ordered that, had he? The incongruity didn’t trouble me. It seemed logical that something could come from nothing.

‘I’m older than you,’ he said. ‘I’ve done more things.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Things I’ll do.’

He looked at me. ‘Yes.’

I watched him. He was leaning forward too.

‘What did you do?’

He glanced down and cleared his throat. Then he looked straight at me. 'I killed someone,' he said.

'That's bullshit.'

He pretended to sip from his empty cup, then sniffed. 'It's true.'

'I suppose you outsmarted the police?'

'They never came for me. I don't know why not.'

'Right,' I said. 'I think you did something else.'

'And what's that?'

'Something with Lana,' I said. Lana had stopped coming out after the series of dreams had been completed. Sitting there, talking to Paul, having accepted as real the fact of talking to an older version of myself, it seemed perfectly logical that what happened in my dream may have happened ten years earlier, with Paul, that somehow these things connected. 'That's why she's stopped turning up. Because of what you did.'

'If you're feeling guilty about her,' he said, 'that's your problem.'

'You won't deny it, will you?'

We sat in tense silence. At one point he let out a frustrated sigh and pushed his cup away. I thought he was going to get up but he didn't. I leant back, and felt the handle of the knife press against my back. I'd forgotten about it. I shifted, but didn't lean forwards again. The muddy dregs of *mate* grounds were congealing at the bottom of his cup. They suggested something; they were a kind of clue. Then I looked at him. He was still leaning forward, his brow furrowed, his expression dark. The knife pressed against my back. He was leaning forward. Of course.

We stood up in unison.

'I'm leaving,' I said.

'So am I.'

After a moment he turned and slid the door open. The sound of people talking was still audible; it was the first time we'd finished up before the rest of the patrons had cleared out. He left the booth. I waited a second, then followed him to the entrance and out onto the street. We were heading the same way. I watched him walk. I was only a few steps behind him.

As we walked, I slid the knife out from my belt. Its handle was warm, as if someone had just put it down. I stopped.

'Paul,' I said. He turned. The blade of his knife caught the light. Yes. That made sense. It felt right, as if facing an opponent with a knife in my hand was the most natural thing in the world. 'I've decided I believe you,' I said. 'We are the same person. So it doesn't matter if I kill you or not. If you're me, then I've already done this, we both have, so anything I do now is out of my control.'

He didn't reply, just raised the knife and readied himself. I felt my body do the same. He stepped to his left. I mirrored him and we circled each other. I felt the pressure of my conscious mind dissolve, became instinctive, as if a force was guiding me through motions already enacted thousands of times. I felt myself lunge, slicing the air in front of Paul. He ducked, then charged, trying to close the distance between us. I kicked at his knee and he stumbled. I took the opportunity and aimed a thrust at his neck, but he parried. The metal clashed and sent a jolt through my wrist. Suddenly something came back to me. I felt my body twist and dodge, but mentally I had returned to the roof of Maria's apartment, the lights of the city spreading out below us, Klara crying and Jacob swinging his drunken fists around.

A burst of pain and my forehead felt hot. I retreated to the other side of the road. I heard myself panting, and seconds later felt blood collect on my eyebrow. I wiped it away. He was

coming. Shadows from the streetlights moved on his face. More blood flowed from mine but despite that I felt calm and cool. I straightened, letting the knife hang by my side. When he was a few feet away he paused. I readied myself, staring at him—at me. He jabbed low. I grabbed his wrist and pulled it in a wide circle above our heads. Simultaneously his other fist shot out. I blocked it with my knife hand. I twisted his arm, forcing him to turn and pulling him close. His back pressed against me and my knife moved in a tight arc towards his chest. I felt no resistance as the blade sunk in.

I held him, looking at his face. He stared up but I could see that he was not looking at anything. His body twitched, and a spurt of blood appeared at his lips. A graze of stubble ran across his face; his flesh was doughy. The phrase that haunted him appeared before me: ‘visions of the past rise with terrible clarity’, he’d said. I didn’t know if his lifeless face would become one of those visions for me, or if the same vision was what he’d been thinking about when he spoke.

I slid the knife from his chest and let his body drop to the bitumen. There was nobody around, no cars, or the sound of cars. I just breathed. At first his body didn’t look like a body, more like a pile of crumpled clothes. Then a glint appeared next to him on the concrete, and his death seemed real. Gradually the blood pooled. There was not much of it. Without thinking, I slipped the knife back behind my belt, and started off towards the café. I found it on my own.

I sat in the same booth. The waitress took my order without asking about Paul. He had been telling the truth, after all. In a way it was a relief; Lana was safe. She was gone now, I knew that, and wouldn’t be coming back. But that was okay. Everything was okay for her. Klara was gone, too, and I had the feeling that she was okay too, wherever she was. The waitress arrived with a pot of tea and set it on my table. I poured a cup and sipped the warm liquid. Somehow I could sense that things were closing up. The people that had occupied me were dropping off, one by one, like overripe fruit from the tree. Mark, Lana, Klara, Ellis, Paul. Drop, drop, drop, drop, drop. Nobody left. I knew what Paul had done that kept him up at night, understood his terrible

thing, because I had done it too. He said he was about a decade older than me. I went to pour another cup and was surprised to find the pot empty.

When I got home I washed the knife off and put it back in the drawer. It would stay there, I figured, for another ten years, until someone else came along and I got my chance to drop from the tree, and vanish.

## White-blonde; Red Plastic; Learning to Speak

A man without anything, for whom the basic foundations of life have evaporated, has his daily activities reduced so substantially as to barely meet the requirements for existing.

It occurred to me numerous times that for the rest of the world—the people I used to know, the billions of strangers I didn't, the people designing web sites and making coffee and writing books—I could not be said in any reasonable sense to exist at all. I affected nobody and nobody affected me. And if I disappeared, I couldn't imagine Lana doing much more than shrugging and returning to her painting. Maybe for a few days she'd wonder where I was, even going so far as to come down and wander through the garden. But I think it would make a certain kind of sense to her if I disappeared as ineffably as I arrived.

Regardless, I felt an urge to string certain incidents into a pattern, and fed a piece of paper into the typewriter. I didn't have the drive to create anything, or even provide insight or opinion, however trivial, on any topic. I felt that the longer I spent in the dark house the more drained of personal qualities I became. The one thing I had left was my past, and as long as I could remember, I could write.

When I moved over to the typewriter I noticed someone had placed a folded piece of paper propped up between its keys. My name stood starkly against the white paper. I tugged it from its place and looked at it. I knew where it had come from. There was nowhere else. I smiled in the darkness, then slipped the note into my back pocket without reading it. I didn't need to.

I set the typewriter up and lay back, staring at the ceiling. I thought about the things that had happened to me, tried to look at them as coolly as possible, letting them arouse no emotion. Of course, some did. So I went back further. Right back to childhood. I remembered embarrassment, happiness, frustration, but felt nothing. Time sapped all emotion. Standing in

front of the class, words sticky in my mouth, face red. But no emotion. I went as far back as I could—a sunny image of a four-year old me on a plastic tricycle with my mum sitting nearby, smiling. But this image is corrupted by another memory—a photograph showing the same thing. Both could be right. Neither could be. This occurred again—me, same age as on the tricycle, same white-blond hair, sitting by a low window in a wash of sunlight, petting the black cat my mother had since before I was born. Now, this was definitely a photo. I had numerous memories of it in a frame in another house, seeing it as I arrived home from school. So the photo proved it happened. But distancing my memory of the photograph from a memory of the actual event is impossible. It could be that a memory of the photo remained while a memory of the event itself disappeared. But then I can just replant myself in that position, imagine a memory. It had to have happened anyway, and all memories from that age are vague and unreliable.

I sat up and crawled over to the typewriter, lying on my stomach. I punched at the keys, slowly recreating what I thought were my first memories. It took a long time to adapt to the process of typing, so much more a physical endeavour than using a computer keyboard. I felt I was building something tangible, as if each smack on each heavy key was another nail being driven into a wooden construction. Slowly I learnt not to type so quickly, to anticipate the large gaps between keys and become used to their deep press, my fingers entering the machine. I fell into a rhythm, methodically punching each letter, began a pedant's list of my life's events, omitting insight or speculation, portraying nothing but sensory information in maximum detail. If it took the rest of my life, at least I would have proof of my past.

The sun crossed the sky and clouds crossed the sun. People moved through buildings, down streets and across oceans. Lana drifted from her bedroom to the kitchen and back again. And in my house the light didn't change, the click and thump of the typewriter filled the air, and I realised, as I performed the one action I thought could save me, that I was doing exactly what I had done with Klara years and years ago, and where that had led. Klara and I had practiced

together, and I suffered then, but I knew what I was doing, had learned how the story of a life defines the life. I smiled to myself in the darkness, the thought that I could do the impossible, become her dead husband to save her, become my best friend and finally set her free, linking the events of our lives in a chain, a web, a pattern that stretched back further than anyone could conceive. If I had not lost myself entirely in the process it was time to find out what was left.

I kept typing.

*Lana*

Lana stared at the final page of Paul's manuscript. At some point she let her fingers relax and the paper dropped onto her knee. Absently she realised she was cold, but stayed there a while longer, thinking.

Later she got up. Her legs and back were stiff and sore. She moved over to the bedside table and picked up the alarm clock: twelve-thirty. She'd been reading for about five hours. The lamp cast a glare onto the window, reflecting her room. She didn't remember turning it on. She switched it off and walked over to the window. With the glare gone she could make out Paul's backyard, gloomy in the shadow of the house. A streetlight burned above it. She could just see the whale-shaped weathervane.

*I kept typing*, he had written. Where was the rest?

From her room she could see the window of the attic, where they'd stood together and she'd taught him about perspective. Why? Why had she gone to that extent for him, a stranger? No, she thought. That was wrong. He stopped being a stranger early on.

She took a notebook from her bag and found a pen in the top drawer of the bedside table.

*Paul,*

*I hope you get this. I don't know if you'll ever come back here but there are some things I need to tell you and this is the only way I can think of doing it. Maybe this is as much for me as it is for you, maybe more.*

*First of all I want to say I'm sorry I couldn't help you. I really am. I tried so hard to get you to stay here with me but I could see you were quickly going somewhere else. What was I going to do? I'm not that strong. I knew I failed the day you called me Klara. That was when I knew you didn't know where you were any more, or who I was, or anything.*

*I guess it was a relief when you stopped coming to see me. I remember that Friday. When I woke up I stayed in bed a lot longer than usual. It just didn't seem like there was any point in getting up. These days I cringe thinking about it, up in the attic with you. I still don't know if anything I did got through to you, if you knew what was happening at all. But when you left that day I knew you weren't coming back. I still came down for you every day though. I came into your yard and knocked on your door. Every day. After that I couldn't be here anymore though. I don't know why. But I moved to Broome and that's where I've been the last year.*

*If you ever come back and read this letter I want you to know that I hope you're ok. I know I haven't met many people yet but you are the most interesting person I could imagine meeting.*

*Love,*

*Lana.*

She folded the page twice and wrote Paul's name on the front. She slipped outside, hopped the breezeblock wall and went into his house. She moved instinctively through the dark and found his typewriter, slotted the note between its keys, and sat beside it.

She sat there a long time, thinking about Paul and herself. She could see things clearly there. The thoughts she had about Paul were her own, private, but the main thing she realised was that she could not go on in Broome. In the hollow guts of the house, she saw her move for what it was, how it echoed Paul, and how that ended. She decided then that she would move back to Melbourne and do what he'd encouraged her to do: take the test, and study art. She smiled.

The next morning she would wake in her old bed and, and remember what she'd done. She'd feel stupid for writing the note, and even stupider for leaving it there. She would worry about who might find it and whether they would recognise her name, if she'd be implicated in

trespass. More profound was the worry that someone would find it at all, that it would no longer be contained, be theirs.

But none of that would happen until the next morning. Lana sat in Paul's house in the half-light, on the threshold where the streetlight stopped, and looked at the letter in between the keys of his typewriter, where it stood upright, his name sharp against the white paper.

Unconsciously she fingered the locket she still wore, then pressed her fingers against the keys, felt the pressure pushing back. Deeper in the darkness her reflection did the same. She touched the same keys, and remembered him, and wondered where he went.

# Critical exegesis—Remembering is a form of forgetting: episodic memory as simulacrum

## Introduction

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This thesis comprises two parts: a novel, *I'm You*, and an exegesis, *Remembering is a Form of Forgetting*. As a whole, the thesis attempts to ascertain whether episodic memory can be conceived of as a simulacrum, and what consequences this would have for the personal identity of the subject. The thesis identifies several consequences, most notably that memory cannot be termed an autonomous process, as it works with and through the imagination, narratives of self, and other acts of self-creation, to ultimately constitute a form of forgetting. This has uncanny consequences, and also leads to a possible alienation of the self from its own past.

The thesis builds on the work of the French postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, whose 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation* postulates that Western civilisation has been overrun by inauthentic copies, and that they are so prevalent, and convincing, that we are incapable of determining where reality lies. Western subjects' abilities to access reality is not just hindered, but completely negated since there is no standard by which to assess the truth of a particular reality. The purpose of this thesis is to apply the same theoretical framework to episodic memory, and to examine the problematic processes by which individuals construct a sense of identity out of unverifiable images and narratives. This introduction will begin with a brief overview of the history of the simulacrum in Western philosophy and literature, before providing a similar overview of relevant enquiries into human memory; specifically, into what is now called episodic memory, or consciously-accessed memories of concrete things.

The distinction between appearance and reality has been an enduring one, and varies according to era. Plato's analogy of the cave (Plato, 2008)<sup>1</sup> is the most famous classical example from Western culture (380 BCE), while the Hindu *Vedas* and *Puranas* (Griffith, 1896; Wilson, 1840), dating from 17,000-11,000 BCE, frequently refer to knowledge of reality as a dream (Schopenhauer, 1969). The theme also appears in ancient Greece's tales of shape shifting, as well as in the Arabian folk tales collected in *The Thousand and One Nights* (Anonymous, 2010), circa 900 AD, and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1358). Gothic literature has also explored notions of appearance and reality in its use of the supernatural. The earliest example of the gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), derives much dramatic suspense from the hidden identities of its characters, some of whose true identities are revealed only after their deaths. In the nineteenth century, Romantic and Victorian gothic authors engaged with the deceptive nature of appearances. Much of the tragedy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) comes from the fact that the monster is not what he resembles, being eloquent, intelligent, and kind-hearted; he is driven to murder by humanity's inability to see to the essential self beneath his hideous visage.

Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) explores the opposite dynamic—when two apparent people are 'really' one. While the novel does work as an examination of the dual nature of the self, its dramatic climax revolves around the revelation that what appeared to be the truth was in fact not—that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were the same person. James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is ambiguous in its depiction of the mysterious stranger Gil-Martin, whose ontological position the reader never learns. Hogg presents the events of the novel from two contradictory perspectives. This raises an immediate question: whose representation is more accurate? Put differently: which perspective touches more closely on the truth of the events? A reader can presume that there is a valid explanation for the events—and for Gil-Martin's identity—but there is no way to access that explanation. The limitations of both unreliable narrators, as well as the sustained ambiguity

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis uses many quotations from online sources. As such, some direct quotes will not include page numbers.

throughout both sections, make it impossible for the reader to ascertain the reality of the situation.

Questioning the difference between appearance and reality became more prominent with the advent of high modernist authors in the early twentieth century, and their precursors can be seen to have anticipated this fascination. The suspense in Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries* (1892) is evoked and sustained not only through the protagonist's extravagant appearance, but also through what this hides about the reality of his character. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (1910) maintains a diegetic tension in which the reader is uncertain whether a particular character even exists. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) hinges on an unbridgeable gap between the subject's internal reality and his apparent appearance in the world. Even if Gregor only perceives himself to be an insect, and the image is thus metaphorical, the crux is the same. The true nature of Gregor's self is inaccessible (he cannot express himself) and his appearance, or others' interpretation of his appearance, dictates his reception in the world. Since he cannot express himself to other characters, this reaction can only be caused by his appearance. The situation is similar to *Frankenstein* in that the subject is incapable of properly expressing his true internal identity, which is belied by his appearance. Despite these precursors, this theme is most prevalent as postmodern trope. And nowhere in postmodernism is the difficult nature of appearance more bewildering than in the fiction and criticism that explores the simulacrum.

Most closely associated with French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern simulacrum is a term for a system of appearances. Baudrillard grounds his description in semiotics, and outlines the simulacrum as a system of signs that appear to reference reality, but in fact do not (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 4). These appearances are utterly convincing, as they are so widely perpetrated that most would not recognise them as misrepresentations. While Baudrillard was the first to claim that all reality has been overrun by such phenomena, he is building on the work of several other philosophers, who are worth exploring here. It should be noted that this

thesis does not constitute an exploration of the broad question of appearance and reality since the topic is outside its scope. Questions of representation seep into almost every field—from theology to photography theory, to media theory, to philosophy’s explorations of idealism and aesthetics. The exegesis limits its focus to questions of representation relating specifically to the phenomena of simulacra. It will later turn to how those phenomena arise in the process of episodic memory and identity construction.

As with many concepts in Western philosophy, the simulacrum’s earliest manifestation can be found in Plato’s work, even though he did not use the term. He postulates that humans live in a corrupted version of an inaccessible Ideal world (Plato, 2008), while *The Sophist* discusses the illusory techniques utilised in art and sculpture; statues, for example, often had their proportions distorted so as to look normal from the viewer’s anticipated perspective (Plato, 2008). He describes the simulacrum in his *Republic*, when discussing pretenders to the Ideal notion of justice (Plato, 2008). While he does not use the term ‘simulacrum’, he is making the same point. The Ideal is the essential thing, or concept, and each person is ranked hierarchically depending on how much of the Ideal essence they contain—in Plato’s case, how just they are. So a legitimate pretender to the title of a just person is somebody who acts justly. It is important to note that no person can fully embody the Ideal notion of justice, as it is a theoretical abstraction rather than a concrete property (Rosen, 1995).

Plato ranks individuals in order of how closely they resemble the Ideal until we reach the simulator, who does not act justly at all, but *appears* to resemble a just person. Plato establishes the simulacrum as that which resembles the Ideal in appearance but not in essence. It is important to note that every just person, in Plato’s example, can be considered a faithful *copy* of (although not identical to) the Platonic Ideal, since they relate to the original in *essence*. The simulator, however, bears no relation to the essence, only to the appearance of a just person. He or she is a copy of a copy, or, if you like, stands in relation in essence only to copies, and in

relation to the original only in appearance. Pliny touches upon the same notion when describing the paintings of Zeuxis (Durham, 1998, p. 7). He writes of a painting that features a bunch of grapes, and is so realistic that a flock of birds descends upon the painting, expecting to be able to eat them. Of course, they cannot, because the painted grapes reproduce only the visible appearance of actual grapes—one element of the faithful copy. They are like Plato's simulators in that their relation to the original 'is not one of intrinsic and essential resemblance, but a merely external relation of similitude' (Durham, 1998, p. 7).

Immanuel Kant's 1781 'Copernican revolution' (Kant, 2013) could be said to be the starting point for postmodernism. Kant believed that objects had what he termed a 'noumena', or essential state of being that individuals cannot experience, since what they experience must conform to their own faculties of representation.<sup>2</sup> He wrote: 'We cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least to think them as things in themselves' (Kant, 2013). In other words, the act of experience is never one of pure knowledge; each act of experience reshapes the object in line with the subject's consciousness. Fundamental to this distinction is the notion that experience is vitally different from reality. Phenomena are what the subject experiences, while noumena are objects' actual states of being. This distinction neatly highlights the inaccessibility of a pure reality, and is analogous (albeit slightly different) to Plato's Ideal, in that a purely conceptual world exists alongside or beneath the phenomenal world we experience daily. Later in the thesis, this notion (and idealism more broadly) will be used to describe the relationship between the present self and the events of the past, which share a similar relationship to noumena and phenomena.

Nineteenth-century philosophers went on to develop the theory that grounds the simulacrum, and postmodern theory broadly. Responding to advancements in technology,

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<sup>2</sup> There is debate over Kant's use of the terms 'noumenon' and 'thing-in-itself' (*Ding-an-Sich*); some scholars claim the terms are synonymous while others do not. Schopenhauer's critique of Kant is useful in this regard (Schopenhauer, 1969).

particularly industrial production, communications and transport networks, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederic Nietzsche (1844-1900) all explained, in different terms, the nature of the developing obfuscation between natural and artificial experiences. In 'The Present Age' (1846), Kierkegaard describes 'the public' as an abstract concept to which individuals are reduced, a concept created by the press, individuals 'who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organisation' (Kierkegaard, 1999, p. 24). Kierkegaard's idea is relevant to the simulacrum since he construes society as a realisation of abstract thought rather than as a tangible reality. It is a realisation established and maintained by an artificial, pervasive medium that creates the illusory society it claims to speak for. In this case, 'the public' is the simulacrum, a representation of something with no origin, upon which reality is modelled.

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism is also relevant to postmodernism. He argues that a product's use value, which guaranteed objects concrete meaning, has been replaced with its exchange value. This signifies the object's absorption into a network of social relations. In Marx's terms, 'their value is realised only by exchange, that is, by means of a social process' (Marx). The object's value is determined not by any qualities it possesses but by the whims of the society it is embedded within. A good example of commodity fetishism is designer clothing, which is functionally no different (or even less functional) than everyday clothing, yet is expensive, and represents high social status. This is because it functions as a node in a network of social relations; its value does not lie in its intrinsic properties, but in the value assigned to it by the fluctuating tastes of the broader society and the media outlets that help determine those tastes. It is valuable for what it signifies—what it appears to represent—rather than what it actually is.

Of all the nineteenth-century philosophers, however, Nietzsche is the most relevant to postmodernism. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1899), he delineates a history of the distinction between the 'real' and 'apparent' worlds from Plato to his own time, arriving at the conclusion that the

‘true’ world is ‘useless and superfluous’ (Nietzsche, 1990).<sup>3</sup> Without a true world there is no apparent one, according to Nietzsche. He argues that the true world, once accessible to ‘the sage, the pious, the virtuous man’ (Nietzsche, 1990) has, since the advent of reason, become less and less tangible. According to Nietzsche, for Kant the true world was ‘a consolation ... seen through mist and skepticism’, and became unattainable and thus unknowable with ‘the cockcrow of positivism’ (Nietzsche, 1990). Nietzsche appears to conflate the idea of a ‘noumenal’ world with that of a universal moral or religious truth.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to argue that with the loss of the real world we have lost the apparent, since the latter relies on the former. The loss of universal referents for morality or reality is implicit in this; since we do, however, appear to exist within a world of some kind, the most obvious conclusion to draw is that we live in a world paradoxically both real and apparent. Nietzsche does not expand upon this in *Twilight of the Idols*, although he does call this age the ‘high point of humanity’ (Nietzsche, 1990), most likely because, in his opinion, oppressive traditional moral codes may be abandoned.

Kant describes a similar situation in his writing on idealism when he says that without an inaccessible conceptual reality beneath the phenomenal world, ‘we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears’ (Kant, 2013). The notion of appearance without anything appearing relates strongly to the concept of the postmodern simulacrum, which leads essentially to the ‘absurd conclusion’ that Kant mentions. Nietzsche’s embrace of the notion of eternal return (the idea that the world will endlessly repeat itself) has also had a significant impact upon the theorising of the simulacrum. For postmodernism, recurrence becomes a matter of difference rather than of identity, since the repetition of an ‘unhistorical moment’ (Aylesworth, 2013) is seen as integral to the notion of history. This ‘unhistorical moment’ is whatever is new about each successive age, whatever events distinguish it from previous ages. Each age sees itself as new, and this ‘unhistorical moment’ thus repeats

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Baudrillard described the successive stages of the sign throughout history.

<sup>4</sup> This makes sense as a critique of Christianity as the Christian god provides foundations for both.

itself in each age: ‘the new eternally repeats as new’ (Aylesworth, 2013). Postmodernists join the concept of eternal return with the loss of the distinction between the real and the apparent worlds. The distinction itself does not reappear and what repeats is neither real nor apparent in the traditional sense, but is a phantasm or simulacrum.

By the mid-twentieth century, scholars in media studies and social theory noticed the increasing virtualisation of Western civilisation. Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) addresses the diminished authenticity of works of art since the advent of mass reproduction (Benjamin, 1936). Daniel Boorstin’s 1962 book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, presents one of the earliest accounts of events in the United States that would later come to be termed hyperreal, and which are hallmarks of the postmodern era.<sup>5</sup> Boorstin cites advertising as the primary cause of a shift in American reality, in which an event’s reproduction or simulation becomes more important, or real, than the event itself (Boorstin, 1992). His term ‘pseudo-event’ refers to events that have no purpose other than that of their own happening, such as celebrity photo opportunities and televised political debates (his argument being that the circumstances of the latter are irrelevant to either candidate’s capacity as a politician). Likewise, Marshall McLuhan rose to prominence in the 1960s for his claims that the manner in which information is presented is of more importance than what is being presented, particularly as described in his essays collected as *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964).

Guy DeBord’s notion of the spectacle is also closely linked to Baudrillard’s simulacrum. *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) criticises Western culture from a Marxist perspective on the grounds that it has replaced authentic social life with representation, where ‘identification with mere appearance ... is intended to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity’ (Debord). In the face of diminishingly fulfilling social

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<sup>5</sup> This thesis takes the position that postmodernism began roughly at the end of World War II and continues/d to an indeterminate point. At the very least, discussion regarding what comes after postmodernism has increased since the millennium.

interaction, capitalism encourages the individual to draw their sense of self from the signs and codes that have taken the place of authentic social interaction. This is one consequence of the focus on symbolic exchange value that Marx describes, and is what DeBord terms ‘the spectacle’, arguing that it ‘is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people mediated by images’ (Debord). Baudrillard would certainly have been aware of DeBord’s work, and although they share a disdain—in the case of Baudrillard’s early work, even a fear—of the unreality of mediated interaction, DeBord’s work is explicitly rooted in Marxist discourse while Baudrillard’s early work is decidedly post-Marxist, and his later work more or less apolitical.

By the mid-late twentieth century, postmodern philosophers (notably Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* [1979]) began to question legitimising concepts such as God, freedom, a precise origin, and a final end.<sup>6</sup> These concepts, Lyotard argues, structured and directed Western civilisation, but in the postmodern era are being questioned. This is because they cannot be found satisfactorily amongst experienced objects, and become simply regulative in regards to knowledge. In other words, these concepts are no longer seen as factual, but as frameworks for organising knowledge and structuring a view of the world. This view of how we are able to apprehend and know the world has two important corollaries with the simulacrum. Firstly, it establishes our knowledge of the world as essentially mediated, with the subject incapable of experiencing it directly. Secondly, this position de-legitimises previous meta-narratives, revealing as culturally constructed what has previously been presented as natural. Concepts such as God, or freedom, are shown not to refer to some legitimising real, but merely to other human concepts. The parallel between this kind of unfounded, self-referential system and the simulacrum should be clear.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Note that Nietzsche had pre-empted this (Nietzsche, 1990) and is subsequently considered a major philosophical precursor to postmodernism.

<sup>7</sup> Since the millennium, discussion surrounding what comes after postmodernism has increased. Nealon (2012) attempts to define ‘post-postmodernism’ in his book *Post-postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Since this thesis utilises postmodern theory to describe episodic memory, which is ahistorical, no further reference will be made to post-postmodernism.

Although Baudrillard's published work has always concerned itself with virtuality (see his early post-Marxist work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* [1976]), he shifted his focus towards the cultural effects of widespread simulation in his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation*, which is the defining work on the postmodern simulacrum. Most of his work since then has engaged with the simulacrum in some way or another. This thesis takes his notion of the simulacrum as a model for explaining memory, and since *Simulacrum and Simulation* is the explication of his idea, it is thus the work I refer to most frequently.

As mentioned earlier, other philosophers had discussed the simulacrum prior to Baudrillard. Likewise, twentieth-century scholars such as DeBord and McLuhan had discussed the wide-ranging mediation and abstraction of daily life in the West. Baudrillard, however, was the first to describe the increasing virtualisation of Western culture explicitly in terms of the simulacrum. He argues that 'every differential system of meaning' (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 2) has been undermined by the fact that we can no longer differentiate between real and false. An example could be a digitally altered photograph that nobody suspects of being fake. The original scene is thus absent, and the false copy becomes the 'real'. Baudrillard argues that Western culture is infested with such examples, that it in fact functions entirely through this process. The consequences of this situation are far-ranging, including (in Baudrillard's opinion) the irrelevance of metaphysics, since distinctions between real and false are now impossible.

The exegesis links Baudrillard's description of the postmodern simulacrum to episodic memory, arguing that the process of forming and retrieving memories is an act of simulation, as is the identity constructed out of that act. The exegesis employs empirical psychological research to support these statements about memory. Frederic Bartlett's 1932 study introduced the notion of what is now termed reconstructive memory; the term refers to various descriptions of memory highlighting the fact that memory is not a static representation and need not be defined as such (Bartlett, 1920). Koriat and Goldsmith are contemporary leading experts in reconstructive

memory, and their work provides a strong scholarly base for my arguments.<sup>8</sup> Reconstructive memory stands in contrast to older conceptions of memory, which insist on memory being necessarily accurate and unchanging. Martin and Deutscher's 1966 article 'Remembering' is generally credited with being the most comprehensive philosophical account of the older position. Recent philosophers have attempted to adapt Martin and Deutscher's description of memory in light of the evidence for reconstructive memory (Michaelian, 2011), but these attempts are generally unconvincing.

The first chapter of the exegesis begins with a detailed outline of Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum, as well as some of his philosophical precursors. It touches on related issues, such as idealism and the difficulties of defining exactly what people mean when they call something real. It moves on to establish a working definition of episodic memory, before finally detailing how the simulacrum relates to episodic memory. The purpose of this chapter is to provide clear descriptions of the terms and concepts employed in the rest of the thesis, and to set a critical framework for my investigation. It also establishes my premise—that memory is, in fact, a simulacrum—and explains how I came to this conclusion.

The second chapter cites several consequences of conceiving of memory as such a system. The most radical consequence, and that which leads to the others, is that distinctions between memory and other concepts become conflated. Memory is shown in the thesis to be a form of forgetting, both because it shares aspects with the imagination, and because it is difficult or impossible to ascertain the legitimacy of memory images and narratives. An uncanny effect arises from this situation, when one sees their past in memory yet cannot know for certain whether it is accurate. This has consequences for the legitimacy of the subject's own identity, their notion of self, leading to a situation in which they may feel less real than the simulated mass of their own pasts. This chapter explores these issues, and also mounts an investigation of

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<sup>8</sup> See Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Koriat & Goldsmith, 1998; Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000.

possible means of overcoming the simulacrum of memory, including acts of ritual, photographs, and the notion of the past being temporally enclosed; that is, locked away in time.

The third chapter moves from theory to literary criticism. It focuses on three postmodern novels: Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987), Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1994), and Jan Kjaerstad's *The Seducer* (2006). Each book demonstrates elements discussed in the previous chapter, and each is shown to embody at least one consequence of conceiving of memory as a simulacrum. While none of these novels represents memory as a simulacrum, or even links these consequences to memory, they are still vivid depictions of the consequences suffered by the individual when memory is construed of as a simulacrum.

The final chapter turns to the thesis novel entitled *I'm You*. Elements of the novel I examine are the framing devices used, the figure of the double, the book's uncanny elements, and finally the mirror-like structure of the novel. Each of these is explained via its relationship to memory as a form of simulacrum, and the chapter offers a defence of my choices in representing the critical material creatively. The thesis argues that frame narratives are a means of undermining boundaries between typically separate realms, such as text/world. The double functions as a physical manifestation of the doubling of self that occurs in memory as simulacrum, when one 'I' is capable of viewing another, and also of the realisation that the self is constantly in flux, is never simply one thing at a time. The uncanny relates to many aspects of memory as simulacrum, including the dominance of the object over the subject, the sense of alienation from viewing a just-off representation, and notions of repetition and impersonation inherent in the simulacrum. Finally, the mirror-like structure of the book forms a kind of boundary through which the reader passes, moving from the world of the real and into that of the simulacrum.

## Chapter one

### Memory as simulacrum

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*The title of this book would justify the inclusion of Prince Hamlet, of the point, of the line, of the surface, of n-dimensional hyperplanes and hypervolumes, of all generic terms, and perhaps of each one of us and of the godhead.*

*In brief, the sum of all things - the universe.*

- Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1967)

This chapter outlines Jean Baudrillard's explanation of the postmodern simulacrum, then moves to define the term 'memory', and argues for how we can conceive of memory as a narrative text. It establishes the framework for the exegesis and outlines my theoretical position. I explore the notion of memory as a representational yet unverifiable system, linking it in this regard to Baudrillard's simulacrum. The final part of this chapter shows how memory and Baudrillard's simulacrum are compatible, and that this is both a viable and fruitful way of conceiving of memory. The chapter draws on a wide range of secondary sources to argue my case: primarily Baudrillard, but also his commentators, particularly Douglas Kellner, and other postmodern philosophers. One section explores idealism in relation to my thesis and draws on Kant, Berkeley and Schopenhauer. Postmodern literature, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Paul Auster's novels and others are cited for their examples of simulacra and related concepts. The section on memory draws heavily from reconstructive psychology; in this regard, Koriat and Goldsmith are my primary sources, who build on the pioneering work of Frederic Bartlett. I cite many other psychological studies into reconstructive memory, including the work of Elizabeth Loftus and Tulving and Thompson.

One of the chapter's concerns is to establish a working idea of memory as a form of simulacrum that is consistent with contemporary psychological research into the nature and function of memory. While not the focus of my investigation, it is necessary to touch on how memory functions in a more empirical sense, and in these circumstances, much contemporary empirical psychological research supports my claims. Philosophy has traditionally been the means by which Western thinkers engaged with questions of mind and memory. Twentieth-century psychology, however, developed empirical methods for examining these aspects of human experience, and current philosophical research should be consistent with those results. There is no point in constructing a theory of memory that empirical data disproves.

I would like to note early that I am fully aware that the high point of postmodern theory has probably passed, and that subsequently some of the discussion, particularly in this first section, may appear to be well-trodden territory. In his 2012 book *Post postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Jeffrey Nealon describes post-postmodernism as an 'intensification and mutation' (Nealon, 2012, p. ix) of certain postmodern tendencies. While I am reluctant to term my research 'post-postmodern', I see my investigation as fitting somewhere within or alongside this description, as an application of certain postmodern methodologies to an issue not inherently related to postmodernism. I hope that my use of these postmodern methodologies will show memory in a new light, a new context, and may not feel so worn as certain tropes of postmodernism, such as simulation in the media; overt self-consciousness in metafiction; or ironic pastiche. The most accurate way of putting it may be to say that my investigation takes tools of postmodern literature and theory to investigate something that is not postmodern. Fragmented narratives, radically unreliable narrators, and the simulacrum as a structural device are all typically postmodern narrative techniques that I am using to address individual memory, which is not in itself postmodern. Why use postmodernism then? This chapter attempts to answer that question.

## Baudrillard's simulacrum

Baudrillard outlines his conception of the postmodern simulacrum in his seminal 1981 essay, 'The Precession of Simulacra', from *Simulacra and Simulation*. He describes a 'hyperreality' in which the signs society uses to represent reality in fact end up comprising it. A good example can be taken from William Gibson's 2002 novel *Pattern Recognition*. He describes a mid-century American military jacket, reproductions of which have since become popular fashion items, recognisable by their unique brass buttons. In reality however, that jacket never had brass buttons, and as such this is an example of the kind of simulacral event that occurs in hyperreality: what society considers to be the authentic version of the jacket is in fact inauthentic. The prevalence of the unfaithful copy has rendered the original as marginal, less authentic than its copy. Most broadly, Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum should be seen as what Michael Seats describes as a means to 'enable the richest possible array of readings of specific cultural forms' (Seats, 2006, p. 107). These 'cultural forms'—anything from novels to advertising to economics—are shot through with the essential logic demonstrated by the jacket example, a logic best apprehended by means of the simulacrum. Regardless of the example, the dominant logic is that of an abstraction of an abstraction, a situation in which the representations and conceptualisations of an object, person, or thing come to precede the thing itself. The continued production of reality is then modelled on these copies, rather than on a stable and grounded referent. From this point, Baudrillard claims, the original reality is lost, irrelevant to or indiscernible amongst a sea of copies. Once the representations are, as such, unmoored from their original reality, or referent, they become equivalent and interchangeable. This interplay of signifiers is what Baudrillard calls the simulacrum. This state, in his words, is brought about by 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 1).

This essential logic of the simulacrum is vital to the thesis. Baudrillard argues that the model (as copy, or imitation) is also the model (as original, or model). Since the noun ‘model’ can mean both a representation of a person or thing, and a thing used as an example to follow or imitate, this thesis will eschew the (presumably deliberate) ambiguity of Baudrillard’s terminology and use the terms ‘original’ and ‘copy’ where possible. In some cases ‘model’ is impossible to avoid, but I have made every effort to ensure that the meaning is clear. Baudrillard’s choice of term is probably stylistic, since the duality of the term echoes that of his concept—that things are both originals and copies, true and false, and therefore embody the term ‘model’ in both its senses.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, other philosophers have discussed simulacra prior to Baudrillard. One differentiating aspect of Baudrillard’s thought, however, is that he is talking about proliferation, where flawed copies of a supposed reality perpetuate copies of themselves. He postulates two types of models that perpetuate copies:

- a) copies of objects or images that do not exist, or have no grounds in reality (such as digitally-rendered images), and/or
- b) those that have become such successful copies that their legitimacy eclipses that of the original (such as Gibson’s jacket).

The original is also a copy. These copies become models for reality, so that the reality based upon them is even further from an authentic source. It is worth noting that Baudrillard does believe in the existence of normal, non-simulacral copies. *Simulacra and Simulation* posits four orders, or phases, of sign (Baudrillard, 1999). The first is the faithful copy, which in its ideal state is the ‘reflection of a profound reality’ (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 1). The second is an unfaithful copy, while the third order is an unfaithful copy that belies the fact that there is no reality beneath it. This order of sign implies the presence of a reality that does not exist, while the fourth order is

that of 'pure simulation' (Baudillard, 1999, p. 1), in which signs bear no relationship to any reality at all, instead referring solely to other signs.

Baudrillard asserts that the fourth order of signs is what dominates postmodernity. These simulacra proliferate, accumulating until reality is indiscernible from them, at which point they are indiscernible from reality and the truth status of reality is undermined. Arguing that within the simulacrum, difference implodes, Baudrillard continues:

Strictly, this is what implosion signifies. The absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning, the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and of the real—thus the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other.

Circularity of all media effects. (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 2)

This 'implosion' of meaning is peculiarly postmodern and is what differentiates Baudrillard's thought from previous discussion of simulacra. *Simulacra and Simulation* mentions three types of simulacra, positing each within a different historical period. The first is associated with the premodern era, and refers to representation as an obvious placeholder for reality. The second is associated with modernity, particularly with the mass-reproduction as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, and refers to objects that threaten the reality status of the original due to their verisimilitude and mass proliferation. The 50s and 60s Pop Art movement engaged with this form of simulacra, most famously in Andy Warhol's series of mass-produced photographs and paintings. This second type of simulacra exists alongside and threatens the real. The final type of simulacra is the postmodern, which is primarily what I discuss in this thesis, and refers to a copy that refers to no original reality, that completely obfuscates its model, and that, most importantly, destroys any distinction between reality and representation. This is the state referred to in

Baudrillard's discussion of 'implosion', since the boundaries between these categories have dissipated and reality is impossible to determine.

The notion of 'implosion' here refers to a total collapse of referential meaning. If the real-world referent is lost, there is no way to ascertain the reality of images. In this sense, a true image and a false one are equivalent, as there are no means by which to validate either. Indeed, the notion of something being 'true' loses meaning: without access to the real, or a legitimising force, how is one to tell if something is true or false, authentic or inauthentic, moral or immoral? The telling phrase in the above excerpt is 'the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions' (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 2). All signs are equivalent in the simulacrum, an imploded state in which conceptual oppositions—form and content, for example—are so undifferentiated as to be indiscernible from each other. Form and content may appear to be of a different order of things from jackets, but the logic describing their absorption into one another is identical. This is perhaps best illustrated by Baudrillard's writing itself, which incorporates contradiction, exaggeration, science-fiction style metaphors, and profound ambiguity. These formal elements echo his content, and are all aspects of the simulacrum itself. In this way, Baudrillard makes his own writing into an example of the consequences of implosion. When the real and the false are interchangeable, all designations—form/content, male/female, mind/world—become unstable. The content of his work is embedded in its form, and vice-versa. Implosion constitutes a kind of flattening, where difference dissipates and being and appearance meld into each other. It is a 'question of substituting the signs of the real for the real ... an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double' (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 2). Since the precession of simulacra constitutes an interplay of signifiers, which do not refer to the real itself but instead to other signifiers, the real loses its ability to produce itself. The real has been bypassed in the process of signification. He argues that we look not to the real itself but to representations of the real.

In his book *Phantom Communities* (1998), Scott Durham describes the simulacrum as ‘the image which, having internalised its own repetition, calls into question the authority and legitimacy of its model’ (Durham, 1998, p. 1). This is how previous philosophers—Plato, Nietzsche, Foucault—understood the function of simulacra, and upon which Baudrillard builds his theory of a grand web of simulacra. Durham aligns himself with Baudrillard by differentiating simulacra from normal copies in that they actively undermine the original. The simulacrum becomes more real, more legitimate, than what it is a copy of—the copy proliferates in the world while the original lies forgotten. Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra, then, results in a culture overrun by copies that have destabilised the legitimacy of their models, of reality. The original has become irrelevant because the copy has greater semiotic power—it is more legitimate. Television is an example of how simulacra can influence people to change the world. TV sports, news, sitcoms and dramas are simulated forms that can provide experiences more intense and involving than the mundane events of everyday life, while also ‘providing the codes and models that structure everyday life’ (Kellner, 2002, p. 53). The viewer is immersed in simulacra, is provided with models by which to live, and continues out into the world to implement these. For example, a widely-broadcast yet inaccurate historical documentary may engender widespread misunderstanding throughout the public. As this misunderstanding propagates, it becomes more accessible than the truth of the historical issue, eventually obscuring the truth altogether. At a certain point, to refer to that historical event may be to refer to that misunderstanding of it, since the original, truthful version is so thoroughly obfuscated. In this way, the presence of simulacra shapes reality through the medium of the individual, and is an example of the copy’s greater semiotic power.

Andreas Huyssen’s *Present Pasts* (2003) provides further illustration of the effects of the simulacrum. Huyssen argues that an accelerating influx of images has led the Western individual to desire an ‘anchoring history’ (Katz, 2010, p. 816), while simultaneously rendering historical

representations ephemeral (Huysen, 2003). In this situation, the difference between the historical reality of the past and its representation through media has been effaced. It is impossible for the subject to differentiate between the two, so the history itself has become its representation, a series of fleeting, oft-repeated and interchangeable tropes. The images perpetuated by the means of its representation have preceded any reality of the past, indeed, by the means of representation itself.

Baudrillard's notion is remarkably versatile and can help when interpreting texts in a range of cultural mediums —be they art, literature, advertising, or any other. Two examples will serve to demonstrate the breadth of the concept, the first from Baudrillard himself in 'The Precession of Simulacra', the second from Joseph Heller's 1961 novel *Catch-22*. One purpose of these examples is to show that despite developing out of media studies, the notion of the simulacrum is applicable to other fields. In 'The Precession of Simulacra', Baudrillard describes the Lascaux Caves in France. Lascaux is the site of ancient (10-15,000 BCE (Valladas, et al., 2001)), sophisticated cave paintings cordoned off from the public. A replica cave sits several hundred meters from the original. Baudrillard argues that the original Lascaux Caves have become artificial since the creation of the copy. When tourists travel to Lascaux, they go not to see the original caves but to see a copy of them. They take photos of the copy, discuss the copy, tell family and friends about the copy. Guide books describe the experience of visiting the copy, not the original. The signifier 'Lascaux Caves' loses its authenticity because it no longer refers to the original cave, but the copy. Furthermore, as Frow notes, the acts of both knowing about and visualising the space precede the actual experiencing of it (Frow, 1997). It is conceptualised before it is experienced.

The concept operates similarly within *Catch-22*, but concerns the validity of categorisations of madness and sanity. The real being eclipsed by the artificial is partly significant in that it becomes difficult or impossible to determine between them. Categories are blurred. The

novel is set during World War II, on a military base in Italy, from which American troops fly ever-increasing numbers of bombing raids. Doc Daneeka, the squadron's physician, explains the contradictory logic of the 'Catch-22' with reference to Orr, a pilot deemed mad by his fellow pilots:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask, and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he were sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to (Heller, 1980, p. 54).

Beyond the circular paradox for which *Catch-22* is renowned, this explanation also presents an irrational system of logic that mirrors the function of the simulacrum. While the passage may not appear to address issues of originals and copies, the effect is similar enough to provide a vivid depiction of the obfuscating nature of the simulacrum. It is not a matter of copies, as such, it is a matter of categories of true and false, to which copies relate.

In the example from *Catch-22*, the real is represented by somebody who is actually mad or actually sane, while the false is thus someone illegitimately deemed mad by an irrational system. The system undermines the distinction between the two: we cannot know whether Orr is truly sane or truly crazy, since the terms themselves have lost any valid meaning. The terms 'mad' and 'sane' no longer refer to an anchoring real, a stable definition of madness from which they can draw legitimacy. Certainly, despite generally being considered insane, Orr is also the only character to successfully escape the war through his own efforts. The confusion of the terms 'mad' and 'sane' is heightened in the novel by having the concept elucidated by a physician—the

one person who should be able to provide an objective framework for addressing and categorising mental illness. Instead of referring to any reliable definition, the terms ‘crazy’ and ‘sane’ gain their meaning only from their relation to one another, forming a self-referential cycle in which they never come into contact with the real, only with inauthentic representations of it.<sup>9</sup> Both terms imply madness, both terms imply sanity. There is no significant difference between them. While Orr’s madness is not a copy of legitimate insanity, the circumstances of *Catch-22* create a system in which legitimate states are no more real than illegitimate ones. Whether Orr’s intentions are rational or not, the system renders all states equivalent in their (un)reality.

The logic demonstrated above is of both/and rather than either/or—categories meld into one another, and nothing is clearly defined. I offer these examples to demonstrate how the logic of Baudrillard’s simulacrum occurs in many different forms. It is my hope to show how widely the concept can be applied. Regardless of the form in which it arises, the simulacrum functions in terms of a basic logic: that copies undermine the reality status of a model, leading to a diminishment of difference.

Ultimately we have a system in which signifiers—be they images, video, phrases, clothes, places—refer to signifieds that no longer exist, or never did. As a result of this, the difference between them is indiscernible. These unmoored signifiers then refer to one another, effectively uprooting themselves from a stable referent (or real), and begin to proliferate: an action that influences the models by which we live. We enact those models in reality until the logic of the simulacrum overrides, becomes more dominant than, traditional reality. This is the well-known logic of the postmodern age: a play of signifiers without anchor in reality, in which difference

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<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard himself would probably claim that we cannot in faith call anything ‘inauthentic’ anyway, since we have lost the ability to differentiate.

dissipates, where traditional relations such as signifier/signified, appearance/reality, form/content and concept/object are shattered.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that this aspect of postmodernism will not be unique to the postmodern era. Given that the simulacrum is inherent in media, communications and all kinds of image-based technologies, as these become more significant, Baudrillard's description of their cultural effect could become more apt.

## Real?

Since the concerns of this thesis revolve around whether or not we can call a memory real, it is important to try to define what I mean when I use the terms ‘real’, or ‘reality’. The American science-fiction novelist Philip K. Dick claimed that his impetus for writing was to understand what constituted reality. Eventually he defined the term as that which ‘when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away’ (Dick, 1978). Certainly, the term has different meanings to different people. I suspect it may not be a concept with a universal definition. A positivist will see no reality other than that which is demonstrably provable through empirical means and, that truth, or reality, inheres in the knowledge gained through these means. Theorists of psychoanalysis or anthropology will see various human conceptualisations (religions, institutions, belief structures, narratives, myths and values) as differing realities no less legitimate than positivism’s physical reality. For the purposes of this thesis, I conceive of reality in two senses—idealistically, in the sense of Immanuel Kant’s thing-in-itself (*Ding-An-Sich* or noumenon (Kant, 2013)); and practically, as a generally accepted human conceptualisation (the legal system, for example—laws are not intrinsic to the universe yet exist for the people that create, comply and break them). I will outline both senses of the term in some detail.

In the idealistic sense, I use ‘reality’ to refer to the thing-in-itself, a theoretical object which can only be thought, as opposed to known, without the use of the senses; i.e., through thought alone. These theoretical objects, or noumena, as Kant calls them, correlate to the physical objects we are capable of apprehending through our senses, or phenomena. A simple way of regarding noumena is as the ideal essence of the object; in other words, how it exists prior to its being mediated by our senses. Despite the impossibility of apprehending these noumena through our senses, Kant seems to believe that they exist:

... though we cannot know these objects as things-in-themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things-in-themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears. (Kant, 2013)

The latter part of this excerpt is of most use here. Kant implies that without noumena as foundations for phenomena, there would be ‘appearance without anything that appears’. This situation is obviously irrational and impossible.<sup>11</sup> I find it most useful to regard noumena, or things-in-themselves, as the essential essence of objects. It may be easy to think of this as how an object exists when not mediated through an individual’s perception of it. This thesis sometimes employs the term ‘reality’ in this way, as an inaccessible primary essence.

If one accepts that things-in-themselves are inaccessible, it becomes a matter of practicality to set a new standard for reality and designate it as something with consequences, despite its apparently incomplete nature. Human conceptualisations, while often unprovable objectively, relativistic and to some degree arbitrary, do influence behaviour and have consequences of their own. For example, memory narratives are constructed out of disparate and unprovable images, for the most part. They also represent one interpretation of events, rather than accounting for all possible interpretations. So one cannot, from a positivist perspective, say they are true, or real. Regardless, memory narratives are vital in the construction of self, in creating a linear and stable trajectory for an individual from past to present. They are real in the sense that they provide meaning to an individual and inform identity, behaviour, and values. This is the second sense in which I use the term ‘reality’: human conceptualisations (linguistic, mental, cultural etc.) that grant meaning and structure personal, social, economic, political (etc.) worlds. Individuals inhabit multiple systems, or conceptualisations. What it means to be an individual differs depending on the context in which their existence or contribution to the system is

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<sup>11</sup> It is, however, the circumstance that Baudrillard asserts.

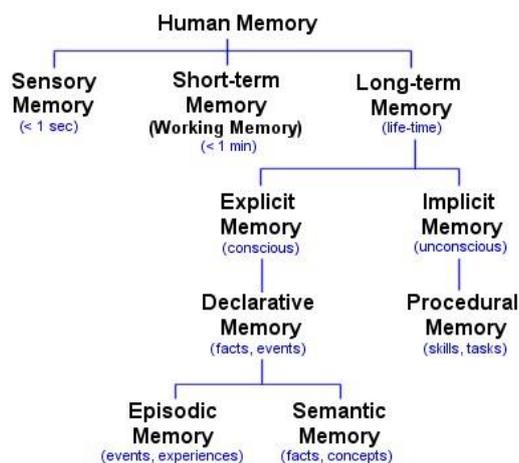
measured. For example, a person is a biological system for the purposes of anatomy or medicine. At the same time, they represent certain statistics in a survey of social health. People are consumers, who enact and are affected by various economic elements; they exist in a multitude of social roles: as partners, advisors, siblings, authorities, and in each of those they perform decidedly different roles by enacting different functions. These various modes of personhood are no less real than one another, yet represent distinct enactments of what it means to be a person. They are, in effect, different realities in which a person exists, and which exist alongside purely empirical, positivist reality.

As an attempt to bridge these two definitions of reality, it may be best to describe reality as, foremost, that which precedes and lies beneath our experience and interpretation of phenomena, but secondly as the meaning-granting structures we create in the absence of noumenal reality. The second version accepts a degree of falsification, of human construction, which a positivist would not allow in their definition of reality. Reality, by the first definition, however, is uncontactable and essentially theoretical. This thesis will at times acknowledge the first definition but generally the word 'reality' will refer to the second, allowing for the multiplicity and constructed nature of subjective human realities.

## Defining memory

Memory is an extremely broad topic, partly since most disciplines have different ways of conceptualising it. Anthropologists often focus on cultural memory, which explores how a given culture's identity is constructed through methods of remembrance, such as oral traditions, myths, or historical narratives. Psychologists, on the other hand, attempt to construct controlled experiments through which to observe the phenomena of remembering and forgetting. While my investigation is certainly more philosophical than psychological, this section will draw on contemporary psychology's understanding of reconstructive memory. It is important not only to precisely define the sense in which I use the term memory, but to align my usage with contemporary empirical evidence in the form of psychological research.

Every usage of the term 'memory' henceforth will refer to the process by which an individual interprets their personal past, which is the focus of this investigation. The following chart provides an overview, according to Mastin, of different categories of memory as psychology categorises them.



(Mastin, memory\_types, 2010)

Episodic memory refers to memories of specific, concrete personal experiences that are consciously accessed. For example, I can recall knowledge of the layout of a childhood home at

will and that knowledge relates to general facts—it is therefore semantic memory, and its reliability does not challenge my argument. Remembering the texture of the carpet, or the pattern of the wallpaper, however, is to recall specific experiences, and is thus episodic memory.

I draw my understanding of memory from what psychological discourse describes as constructive memory, which is to do with changes in memory content occurring at the time of encoding; or reconstructive memory, to do with changes occurring at the time of recall (Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000).<sup>12</sup> Encoding is the term given to the process by which a memory image is formed, when experience is turned into memory. The time of recall is when the individual accesses the memory. Contemporary understandings of memory often incorporate both these elements (Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000). When we think of memory in such a way, multiple factors of the individual's subjectivity influence the act of remembering, including their imagination, self-image, beliefs, and so forth. That there is no single location in the brain where a complete memory trace is stored could suggest a biological basis to the observation that subjectivity helps construct memory (Squire, 1992). It is interesting to note that it took science until the twentieth century to say what philosophers had observed for centuries. In his 1689 work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, philosopher John Locke wrote that memory is to 'revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional perception annexed to them, that it has had before' (Locke, 1975, p. 150).

While individuals tend to see their memories as coherent and truthful (a fact Locke also observed (Locke, 1975)), studies demonstrate that this is not necessarily so, since memories are influenced by other cognitive processes and contexts (Bartlett, 1995). Social and cultural characteristics also appear to play a significant role in the manner in which an individual reconstructs their memories. Frederick Bartlett demonstrated this in a series of pioneering

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<sup>12</sup> Reconstructive memory is currently under-recognised in the broader discourse surrounding the philosophy of memory. Martin & Deutcher's seminal 1966 work 'Remembering' argues for a 'causal' memory which to this point has been generally accepted by philosophers but which has become problematic in light of psychological research. Kourken (2011) investigates the implications of reconstructive theories of memory on Martin & Deutcher's work, but still attempts to salvage their theory regardless.

studies, in which he provided groups of participants with folk tales to which they had no previous exposure. They were then asked to summarise the tales. Generally, subjects removed unfamiliar or challenging aspects of the stories, or replaced them with more culturally familiar ones. Furthermore, after repeated recounts of the story, successive groups of participants embellished particular parts of the stories to more closely align with their cultural and historical perspectives (Bartlett, 1920). This study was a foundation for later research into the unreliability of episodic memory and its status as reconstructed, rather than reproductive.

There is significant evidence to suggest that the circumstances of remembering also affect what is recalled, particularly in relation to the language used to describe the object of memory (Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Gibson, 1929). One example of this is that it is easier to remember a word from a list if the subject is shown other words from that list at the time of recall. Tulving & Thomson's 'encoding specificity principle' states that recollection is most effective when the information present at the time of encoding is also there at the time of recall—that the contexts of encoding and recalling influence what is stored in memory. At the recall end of the process, they state that 'what is stored determines what retrieval cues are effective in providing access to what is stored' (Tulving & Thomson, 1973, p. 353). These studies suggest a view of memory as a working process rather than as a storehouse of past events, and also as a system in which the processes of encoding and recall affect one another. In this way, the past is conceived of as a product of present experiences, rather than as something that still exists in some pristine state, represented by reliable memories. Constructive memory is a matter of debate between psychologists, but has garnered significant support. Newby and Ross' argument represents the reconstructive position within psychological discourse:

... researchers should evaluate memory against an individual's initial representation of the event, rather than against the supposed objective stimulus. After all, we cannot ask more of memory than that the

recollections reflect the person's original reality; otherwise, we confuse differences in memory with differences in perception. (Newby & Ross, 1996, p. 206)

The phrase 'original reality' suggests a privileging of the subjective elements that go towards constituting a reality, and that these subjectivities determine the nature of the subject's memories and thus their pasts. This occurs both at the point of encoding (when the event is experienced), and at recall. Various psychological theories argue that changes occurring during the initial encoding of a memory are an intrinsic part of memory itself (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Koriat & Goldsmith, 1998a; Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000). What we see, therefore, is a conception of memory that does not tie the process to a necessarily accurate, or objective version of reality. This is important because it goes towards dissociating memory from a definition that necessarily links it to an objective past.

## Memory as text

I previously implied that memory and the past were essentially related, perhaps even interchangeable. This could well strike one as blatantly incorrect, but it leads us to an important point: that memory is the primary route of access to the past and, since we cannot access the past directly (that is, we cannot re-experience it), memory becomes a stand-in for the past itself. In Baudrillard's terms, the form has become the content. One could see the past as an idea, rather than as a temporally enclosed thing external to the subject: in this case, memory is the medium through which this idea is created. The means of representation, for all intents and purposes, becomes the thing represented. Memory's form, medium, or means of representation, however you like to put it, can be convincingly argued to be textual.

There is no reason we cannot approach memory as another text amongst many, since 'the concept of a 'text', particularly within semiotics, is a meaningful structure, understood as being composed of signs' (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999, p. 415). If we can broaden our definition of the term 'text' to include items as diverse as mass-produced consumer goods (Barthes, 2013), music video clips (Vernallis, 1998), tarot (Gad, 1994) and even the piano (Code, 1991), it is not a stretch to include memory in that definition as well. It even begins to seem closer to traditional texts—it is made of language, images, sensations, as well as people, places, dates, and times. The individual structures memory to serve a purpose, to perform a function. It has all the components necessary for narrative, and when considering memory in this context we find ourselves close to the traditional definition of the term 'text'. Even if one rejects the argument and evidence for reconstructive memory, instead seeing memory as a static representation of an objectively verifiable past, one cannot reject the way memory appears to the individual experiencing it—as images, as feelings, as a flawed and vaguely linear trajectory from the distant past to the present.

If memory is a text, it is worth deciding what kind of text it is. Anthropologists Ochs & Capps write extensively on the interrelation between narrative and identity in their 1996 paper 'Narrating the Self'; this section builds upon that research. They observe and analyse different ways in which narrative can construct a sense of self, and in light of this, I believe memory is a form of narrative. Many philosophers and scholars have recognised narrative as comprising two basic dimensions: temporality and point of view (Aristotle, 1962; Burke, 1962; Burke, 1973; Goffman, 1974; Propp, 1968; Ricoeur, 1988; Sacks, 1992), and memory includes both. Paul Ricoeur calls temporality the depiction of a temporal transition from one state of affairs to another (Ricoeur, 1988). This chronology provides comfort for narrators and listeners, and is a means of establishing order amongst events that may otherwise appear disconnected. Robert Musil describes the comforting properties of narrativisation in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*:

It struck him that when one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one's life ... the law one longs for is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: 'First this happened and then that happened...' Lucky the man who can say 'when', 'before', and 'after'! Terrible things may have happened to him, he may have writhed in pain, but as soon as he can tell what happened in chronological order he feels as contented as if the sun were warming his belly. (Musil, 1995, p. 709)

Indeed, as Musil writes, arranging events into the shape of a narrative is a means of shaping an individual's personal reality. 'Terrible things' may have happened, but narrative order allows one to feel 'contented' regardless. The power of narrative allows one to shape a new response to a given situation, and thus control the situation, or one's behaviour, essentially creating a new set of circumstances: a new reality. Ochs and Capps explicitly link narrative and self, broadly defining self as 'an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one's past

and future' (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21). Very important to note here is the term 'unfolding' in their definition of self, since it designates the self as a process rather than as a static object.

Narrative is the tool with which we seize and understand experience. It is an essential way of making sense of the world, if a flawed one. If our sense of the world is the outcome of our subjective experiencing of it, then narrative mediates this experience, shapes how we revisit, represent and respond to the world. Narratives are 'versions of reality' (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21) that allow us to apprehend and understand the events of life, and that bring coherence to a shifting state of self. Certainly, this coherence is of prime importance in Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), often used to treat sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ebert & Schauer, 2002). NET works by exposing the patient to the object of trauma through narrative recollection. Its goal is to reduce trauma by allowing the patient to incorporate the fragmented memories of the traumatic act into a coherent narrative in order to construct a new, healthy sense of personal identity (Robjant & Fazel, 2010).

While temporality is essential to narrative, it need be neither linear nor stable. Novels such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), Alfred Chester's *Exquisite Corpse* (1967), Jan Kjaerstad's *The Seducer* (2006), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), among many others, all successfully incorporate non-linear temporalities. *Naked Lunch* and *Finnegans Wake* have no fixed temporality whatsoever—these novels actually achieve their purposes through their disregard for linear temporality. Famously, Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch* utilising a technique of literally cutting up and rearranging the text (Burroughs, 2003). It is jarring and deeply fragmented, with no concern for continuity or coherence. Similarly, *Finnegans Wake*'s final line is completed by the first:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay,  
brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle  
and Environs ... A way a lone a last a loved a long the<sup>13</sup> (Joyce, 2011)

Given the book's focus on cycles and eternal recurrences, Joyce presumably intended the book to be a cyclical product itself, one without beginning or end. It is difficult, then, to see the so-called first line of the book ('riverrun, past Eve and Adam's...' (Joyce, 2011)), as much more than an arbitrary place to begin, forced by the limitations of the printing press. Anthropologists have also identified non-linear narrative structures in examples of personal narrative, such as oral anecdotes, narrated without prior thought or planning (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Despite these deviations from linearity and stability, these texts still fit Ricoeur's criteria, and depict a change.

The second requirement for narrative, point of view, is certainly present in memory as well. This barely need be explored since memory is, by definition, something created and experienced by a subject; the subject's perspective is inherent in the very nature of the concept. While it may not be necessary to prove, as such, that memory includes perspective, it is worth exploring the relationship between perspective and the products of memory.

Goffman writes that every narrator has a specific position and tells their tales from that position (Goffman, 1974). This is also a view inherent in many discourses from the postmodern era—post-structuralism, feminist theory, post-colonial theory, reader response theory, among others, all recognise the impact of perspective, or speaking position. Implicit in Goffman's point is that an ordering consciousness needs to be present to align disparate events into a coherent framework. Ricoeur describes narrative as a process that 'construes significant wholes out of scattered events' (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 174). This phrasing neatly incorporates both requirements of narrative, but is particularly useful for understanding the necessity of including point of view in

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<sup>13</sup> Note the uncapitalised 'riverrun', and the fact that the novel ends mid-sentence. Also telling is the word 'back', appearing in the first sentence of the book, indicating that we have already been to 'Howth Castle and Environs' before. Which, of course we would have, if we had just read the book.

the definition. Narrative is not merely a series of events—it is a series of events arranged in a certain way, for a certain purpose. ‘Point of view ... is implicitly realised through the structuring of narrative plots’ (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 26), write Ochs & Capps. It is the combination of ‘human conditions, conduct, beliefs, intentions and emotions’ (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 26) with which events are narrated that turns a sequence of events into narrative. The manner in which a teller describes events has as much bearing upon the meaning of the narrative as the events they describe, as demonstrated by Bartlett’s early study into what is now termed reconstructive memory.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one may go as far as to say that the manner in which events are structures realises or creates point of view; a perspective becomes clear to us because of how the narrative is structured. Certainly this is evident in the literary convention of the unreliable narrator, when any reading of such a narrative must account for an ignorant, insane, deceptive, or otherwise limited narrator. What the teller omits or emphasises, for example, gives an insight into the perspective of the teller. In the sense of memory narratives, structure is self.

This thesis takes the position that memory functions similarly to other human narrative, no differently than any other system of ordering images, people, events and concepts. Memory is a kind of text, perpetually interpreted, constructed and reconstructed by the individual in order to create different narratives of self. The individual performing the act of remembrance orders these images (consciously or unconsciously) so they are thus incapable of being entirely true representations. Rather than storing the past, memory is a way of actively (re)creating the personal reality of the subject. It is important to stress here that this conception of memory is fundamentally different from the ‘storehouse’ theory, or from the kind of strict, positivist definition prescribed by much twentieth century philosophy of memory (most notably Martin & Deutscher’s 1966 article ‘Remembering’). Memory is not static, nor inherently correct. It may be tempting to say that if a memory is wrong then it is not a memory, but this is not the case.

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<sup>14</sup> Note the similarity here between this aspect of narrative—and memory—and Baudrillard, McLuhan and DeBord’s explanations of meaning in the media.

Memory in fact incorporates falsehood, is just as much 'memory' if it includes errors. It may be that there is no such thing as perfect episodic memory (and how would one test for it?).

Classifying and ordering, inherent in memory, are human tendencies, methods of structuring reality in order to derive meaning from it. With any ordering there is exclusion and privileging, and thus a degree of bias and falsity. I take the viewpoint that any ordering necessarily depletes the system's claim to truth.

## Idealism

In this thesis, the past is conceived of not as a set of inaccessible objects and events ontologically outside the grasp of the individual, but as an idea of how things once were, a present construction existing entirely within the mind. Certainly, what is traditionally referred to as ‘the past’ is considered to be temporally enclosed and outside of the reach of the individual. A term I have devised is ‘past presents’, which I use to differentiate from ‘the past’. If ‘the past’ is a present conceptualisation, ‘past presents’ are moments that were once present but have since passed. This conception of the past as existing within the mind of the subject relates to the philosophical notion of idealism. It is a term used to describe several related means of viewing the external world and the individual’s position within it. Broadly, idealism purports that external reality is vitally connected with our perception of it, that an object in reality does not exist in an independent ontological state, but is in fact linked to the fact of it being experienced. For Simon Blackburn, idealism is ‘Any doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental in nature’ (Blackburn, 1996, p. 184). The opposite position to this is realism, which argues that physical objects exist independently of our perceptions. Baudrillard argues that distinctions between realist and idealist are irrelevant in times of the simulacrum (Baudrillard J. , 2010, p. 159). since such distinctions have been effaced. Since this thesis takes Baudrillard’s idea as a framework, without committing to his claim that all reality is overrun by simulacra, this difference does not pose a contradiction. Elaborating the idealist viewpoint brings several relevant concepts into relief.

George Berkeley (1685-1723) is broadly credited with introducing idealism to Western philosophy. In his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), he argues that individuals do not perceive objects but ideas (Berkeley, 2009), meaning that our experience is not of, say, a table but of our perception of a table—the visual and tactile sensations of experiencing it. Berkeley’s idealist universe is mediated in that we do not experience objects directly, instead

creating them through our minds and senses. He argues that objects have no objective status in the world, that individuals create them in the moment of perception. Berkeley does, however, cite the Christian god as a means of explaining how objects outside of our perception continue to affect us. Berkeley's god is a legitimising force underlining the existence of things, similar to Kant's noumena or the real-world referent of semiotics. It may be worth mentioning that Kant contradicts Berkeley; while Kant writes that appearance without essence leads to an 'absurd' situation in which things can appear without existing, Berkeley writes that '...it is possible we might be affected with all the ideas we have now, though there were no bodies existing without, resembling them' (Berkeley, 2009, p.191).

David Hume (1711-1776) takes idealism further than Berkeley, most significantly in that he abandons the notion of an omniscient Christian god legitimising the parts of the universe that people cannot experience directly. Hume describes people as a 'bundle of perceptions' (Hume, 2012), across which sensations pass. This construction of the subject is incapable of reliably witnessing anything outside itself, or, to put it differently, cannot see without seeing. That is, it cannot experience the world without engaging in its own method of representation.

An idealist viewpoint would hold that any experience of space, events or objects is not a direct experience of those things but of our perception of them, and that they do not exist without our perception of them to validate their existence. Our senses and consciousness mediate our experience of the world. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/1819), Schopenhauer describes idealism in language useful for our purposes:

The world is my idea: this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows, though man alone can bring it into reflective and abstract consciousness ... It then becomes clear and certain to him what he knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth (Schopenhauer, 2011).

Schopenhauer explicitly outlines our experience of the world as mediated—we do not experience the object itself, rather the instrument of its representation. According to Schopenhauer, then, the sensations passed through an individual’s hands or eyes are less illusory than the actual earth or sun. The connection between Schopenhauer’s idealism and Baudrillard should become clear, as Schopenhauer does not experience the sun or the earth themselves, but the instruments of their representation. Similarly, Baudrillard argues that we do not experience the real but the preceding representations of it. Baudrillard takes the idealist principle further, however, in arguing that the means of representation distort the represented to the point where it has been overridden, where there is no longer any way to differentiate (or indeed any differentiation) between reality and perception. Berkeley’s idealism is more radical than Schopenhauer’s, denying the existence of primary qualities—the solidity and extension of things—and of absolute space, relegating all matter to the status of a creation of perception. It is worth noting, though, that Baudrillard does away with the distinctions that govern Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer’s thinking. Despite how radical Berkeley was, his work still takes for granted an inherent capacity in things to be either real or unreal, to exist or to not exist, and he founds his idealism upon the possibility of these distinctions. Baudrillard’s is not, however, which is one reason why he sees his work as being beyond metaphysics:

With it [the simulacrum] goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept; no more imaginary coextensivity ... [the real] no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance ... In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all (Baudrillard, 2010, p.2).

I have established the idealist position here because it is a founding principle in future arguments that relate to the impossibility of revisiting spaces or experiencing something as it once was. If we

regard the reality status of all things as intimately tied with our perception of them, and the moods and inclinations that dictate our perceptions change, it becomes impossible to argue that the revisiting of spaces constitutes a legitimate re-experiencing of an object, event or space lost to memory.

Both psychological research and philosophy problematise the notion of memory as a reliable storehouse of past events. If one accepts the reconstructive theory of memory, or one similar, one must also acknowledge that the nature of an object changes depending on the subjectivity of the viewer, so all objects are, in some sense, lost the moment we stop perceiving them, or if our subjectivity changes while viewing. In this way, memory is a means of shaping the subject's personal reality, in fact their identity. It brings coherence and linearity to a fluid, non-cohesive self: 'I exist ... as the tension between all my 'versions,' for that tension, too (and perhaps that above all), is me' (Havel, 1983, p. 155). Narrative is a means by which an individual can construct a bridge linking a self that existed in the past to one presently experiencing life, and to an imagined future self—any one of which may be alienated from the other' (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 29). Our understandings of the world, and our placement within it, are affected by the terms with which we classify, order and interpret it.

## Memory as Baudrillardian simulacrum

When someone perceives an object, they form impressions about it. Our mood, particular thoughts we might have been entertaining at that time, and our general world view at that point in our lives all inform this initial impression. The perception of the object is also informed by more stable factors—cultural conditioning, values and ideologies, and so on. I use the term ‘subjectivity’ to refer to the internal factors that influence our perceptions and interpretations of objects and events. So our initial experience of the new object is immediately filtered through our subjectivity, the comprising factors of which are either more-or-less stable (e.g. ideology) or temporary (e.g. mood or inclinations). These influences account for changes at the time of memory encoding, as discussed in the last chapter. Hume describes the rapidity of some subjective change in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738):

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity (Hume, 2012).

The tenuous condition of our current perception is the first step in the process of turning experience to memory, and a vital one to acknowledge because it is a foundation of the claim that we cannot return to objects from the past. If we accept the idealist argument that the object’s essence is at least in part created by the present subjectivity of the viewer, then that essence changes if the subjectivity of the viewer changes. Certainly this is implied in Ochs & Capps’ definition of the self as an ‘unfolding reflective process’ (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21), but it is

also noted by Hume. Elsewhere in his *Treatise*, Hume describes the self as a ‘bundle’ of perceptions in ‘perpetual flux’ (Hume, 2012). This is also remarkably similar to the psychological notion of the working self, a shifting collection of active goals, motivations and associated self-images which drives the compilation of autobiographical memories (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). So if the meaning of the object is simultaneously contained within its noumenon, but also subjectively within the perception of a consciousness in ‘perpetual flux’, then the meaning, or essence, of that object must in some sense also be in flux. When returning to the object, our subjectivity will have shifted, if only slightly, but shifted enough to leave the object of memory inaccessible, since its past form is innately tied to the nature of the original subjectivity that perceived it. An important corollary point is that our memory’s attempts to preserve the objects of the past actually serve to further sever us from them. The first experience of anything is, of course, exceptional—our existing knowledge of the object will always affect repeated viewings or experiences of it. Things cannot happen twice by virtue of their already having happened once. Not only will our subjectivity have changed, however slightly, when we view something again, but our experience of the object is different entirely because we have already witnessed it once, and are forever comparing future experiences to that lost primary model.

Contemporary English philosopher Dylan Trigg discusses the unattainability of past places in his 2006 book *The Aesthetics of Decay*, and some of his points are useful here. He writes that ‘a temporal loss, unlike a spatial loss, can never be returned to nor regained’ (Trigg, 2006, p.54). This is perhaps a grander means of explaining the isolated nature of the past, suggesting that because the time of the experience has passed, it is forever enclosed within that time. The notion here is that the site of memory is temporal and spatial in equal measure. One can certainly revisit the site of a memory, but it is impossible to return to the time or temporal space—of that memory. It is an important point to make: memory of the kind I am discussing does not only refer to specific places or people, but to those places or people at specific times, all of which are

in the past. What is more, the individual changes as time passes, and memory images refer to those objects as they were experienced in the past. The memory image is not of an object as it currently exists, rather as it once existed, in a state intimately tied to the individual as he or she once was, which also no longer exists. In Baudrillard's terms, the copy is that of a model that no longer exists, or never did. One does not remember the past, one remembers experiencing the past. Furthermore, the subject recalls this earlier experience from a different—present—subjective position, i.e. the time of recall. I wish to clarify this issue carefully because it may seem tempting for some readers to cite their capability to revisit, say, their childhood home, as evidence that the limitations of memory are less severe than I suggest. One can revisit the site to which a memory refers, but not the actual space of that memory, the experience of that site at a specific time, from within a specific subjectivity.

The second step in the process of experience becoming memory is turning away from the object of experience: leaving the room, unwittingly leaving a book on a bus, saying goodbye to a friend. It is irrelevant whether we revisit the object, since the original object—the object tied to our immediate subjective experience of it—is irretrievably absent. This is where the idealist element of my argument becomes apparent: the very nature of the object is tied to the circumstances in which it is or was experienced. Borges addresses this in his story 'Funes, His Memory', when describing Ireneo Funes, who has a perfect memory: 'It bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)' (Borges, 1998, p. 136). The significant issue is that the object leaves our primary field of perception, and thus leaves the world forever: it can no longer be the same object because nobody can experience it under the same circumstances.

The best recourse we have to that object is memory. What remains is an image, a representation, of a lost model. Because the temporal element is inherent to experience, and thus to memory, a memory is a copy of something that no longer exists. As memories alter over time

(Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000) they veer yet further from the lost object of their genesis. The image has become artificial, false; it refers to something irretrievable and which thus has no status by which to assert its reality, apart, that is, from the very process that brings its status into question—memory itself. We are left with a flattened (in the Baudrillardian sense of the term) landscape where memory, imagination, identity and the past merge together in an indefinable haze. One cannot privilege memory over imagination since memory's claims to reality are unverifiable.<sup>15</sup> Our links with the past are questioned, the past itself is questioned, and our status as individuals constructed out of our experiences of the past becomes less stable than previously thought. It is in this situation that memory starts to seem a lot like forgetting. A memory may diverge sufficiently from its source so as to no longer represent the original object, and thus obscure the nature of the original. We will not even realise this change—this loss—has occurred. We will have, in effect, forgotten.

Baudrillard argues that the simulacrum is a system of copies with no stable referent, copies of copies that never refer to anything verifiable. If a legitimate referent is lost, all signifiers are interchangeable, and nothing is differentiable. The proliferation of unmoored signifiers effaces difference. If we take episodic memory to be a process of producing such copies we can see how boundaries between various connected elements of memory—the self, the past, imagination and memory images themselves—become harder to establish. One cannot simply draw lines between the idea of the past, memory and imagination to cleanly determine how they interact to construct the individual, since none is more legitimate than another. This is a central notion, one that permeates the study of simulacra and, subsequently, this thesis. The imagination's relation to memory is worth discussing further here, in order to convincingly demonstrate their relation before investigating it more thoroughly.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Confabulation' is the term given to distorted, fabricated or misinterpreted memories—a confluence of memory and imagination.

In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume writes on the manner in which we differentiate imagination and memory:

Thus it appears, that the belief or assent, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination (Hume, 2012).

Hume argues that it is our subjective experience of the memory or imagination that determines their classification. If an image appears with a particular vividness or aura then we will label it as a memory without any evidence either way. In his ‘Symposium on Memory’ (2009), Oliver Sacks recounts a childhood experience that his older brother revealed, much later, to have happened when he was not there. Sacks concludes the anecdote by addressing the aura of recognition surrounding two ‘memory’ images, one of which was false:

I know now, intellectually, that this memory was ‘false’, secondary, appropriated, translated, it still seems to me as real, as intensely my own, as before. Had it, I wondered, become as real ... as if it had been a genuine primary memory? (Sacks, 2009, p. 366)

Sacks implicitly agrees with Hume on this point, and goes on to question whether psychoanalysis—or brain imaging—would be capable of discerning a difference between the false image and the true. What becomes clear is that individuals themselves cannot always identify and label what is a ‘true’ memory and what is not (Loftus, 2008). As discussed earlier, tendencies towards defining memory as the reliable act of linking a present image to a past event are unnecessary and erroneous, since a more accurate—and fruitful—conception of episodic memory is to see it as a means of situating the self amongst the shifting elements of the world.

Since the evidence for memory is temporally enclosed, we cannot check our memories against a reliable past—the only reason we have for relying upon the accuracy of memories is our own belief in them. We sense a certain aura about them that does not accompany the imagination; we then cite that as sufficient evidence to decide which is which. Psychology accepts that we are capable of mislabelling true memories as false, and false ones as true (Roediger & McDermott, 1995). Because of this, another worrying proposition faces us, described here by Elizabeth Loftus:

... uncritical acceptance of every claim of sexual abuse, no matter how dubious, is bound to have another chilling consequence: it will make trivial the true and ruthless cases of abuse and increase the suffering of genuine victims (Loftus E. , 2008, p. 355).

Loftus provides a compelling argument for how the function of the simulacrum can have great moral consequences (although she is clearly not speaking in those terms, the logic is identical). While the moral implications of the problem are important, that is not the context in which I quote her, but rather to show that a falsity represented as a truth undermines the validity of true cases. This is vitally relevant to Hume's point about the categorisation of memories. If one is to falsely categorise an untrue memory as true, the presence of that false memory calls into question the validity of every other memory, simply by demonstrating that the system itself is capable of flaws. In a different system, one could check every instance against its original, but memory is not a system with such originals. For the vast majority of memories, there is nothing to check them against. The subject holds dear their collection of presumed memories, powerless against the undetectable falseness permeating it. One acknowledged false memory is enough to undermine the validity of the system. What is more, the lines between memory and imagination are already indistinct. This can easily lead us to mislabelling true as false or false as true—and once that is done, they are as good as each other.

An awareness of the constant potential for inauthenticity is essential to bring to an investigation of episodic memory's effects on the subject. In evaluating the way narratives are constructed out of our ideas of the past, we have to remain cognisant of the fact that every image is tenuous, that just because they feel real they are not necessarily so, and that the discovery of one rotten image throws into doubt the purity of those alongside it.

The authenticity the Ripley's Museums advertise is not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed (Eco, 1990, p. 16).

To paraphrase Eco: the false memory feels real, and therefore it is real; in any case the fact that the false memory seems like a true memory is real, and the image is real even if it never existed. The compatibility of Eco's observations on the nature of traditional simulacra with episodic memory suggests a link between the two. It becomes clear that we can speak of episodic memory using the same terms with which we discuss the postmodern simulacrum. And, if we accept one conception of Baudrillard's simulacrum, that it functions as a grand metaphor for the entirety of the postmodern condition, then it may well be that the identities constructed through episodic memory suffer the same consequences as those of the postmodern subject.

## Chapter two

### Consequences of the memory simulacrum

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Having demonstrated that the simulacrum model for memory is coherent, and does not contradict contemporary psychology's understanding of memory, I turn in this chapter to identifying the consequences of such a conception. This is important firstly because there is no point in conceptualising something in a new way unless there are implications in doing so; and secondly, because these consequences are, in part, shared by other fields and further support my thesis. More broadly, these consequences have implications for how one might theorise memory and identity.

I will attempt to identify hidden binary oppositions present in the traditional storehouse view of memory and then demonstrate how they are in fact problematic. These oppositions could include distinctions such as memory/imagination, self/other, text/world, memory/dream, real/artificial or even remembering/forgetting. I will then go on to elucidate how the privileging of certain terms or concepts has problems for construing both memory and identity accurately, and how, when these unprivileged terms are recognised, they radically undermine certain notions of personal identity. The second part of this chapter will assess the effect of these on the status of the subject. Finally, I will examine acts of ritual, the revisiting of meaningful spaces, and photographs as means of accessing the past. Photographs and the act of revisiting spaces are fairly obvious means of attempting to engage with the past and with memory. It seems pertinent to examine whether they constitute legitimate means of accessing the past or if they in fact serve more to reconstruct the past in the present. I explore acts of ritual since they are non-representative but are defined by their relationship with past and future acts.

## The destabilisation of memory/past/real

Conceiving of memory as a form of simulacrum means accepting that boundaries between certain interconnected elements are not neatly delineated. Indeed, this is the defining feature of the simulacrum—the real intertwines with the false, and our attempts to distinguish between the two become futile. The false becomes the real. This apparently gnomic claim is actually the result of a fairly simple equation. In a system of simulacra, things usually designated as false (in this case, images, narratives—all representation) are in fact the examples that reality (in this case, identity) is modelled from. The ‘site’ of the self orders the flawed images of memory, and they proliferate throughout it. In Baudrillard’s terms, ‘the whole system becomes weightless ... [it is] never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference’ (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 6). The ‘reference’, in the context of this thesis, is the so-called objective reality of past presents, the lost object. When there is no legitimising referent, true and false become equivalent. There is no standard by which to say that something is real or unreal.

Following this, we may acknowledge that these representations are flawed, and that what they refer to is irretrievably absent. We model our realities, in this case our identities, our sense of self, upon these narrative representations. The stories we tell ourselves about the past, the images we construct and reconstruct, the entire shifting conglomeration of sensation, emotion, inference, image and linearity—these are our pasts, they are the truth<sup>16</sup> of what has happened and how we see ourselves. Likewise, the absent past presents are inaccessible to us directly. Moments that were once immediate and tangible are temporally enclosed, locked within time. The only way we can access them is through narrative, image, in short, through representation—through falsehood. In this way, the real of the past has become false.

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<sup>16</sup> I use the term ‘truth’ to mean ‘an accepted untruth’, or a matter of consensus: we know the construction is flawed yet have nothing else; it is truth by default of nothing being ‘truer’. And, regardless of its connection to an objective reality, it is the ‘truth’ of how an individual sees him or herself.

In the context of this thesis, the past, imagination, and memory itself draw their essences<sup>17</sup> from one another, and contain parts of each other within their very functions. They are not stable, independent systems operating independently of one another, instead as various nodes in a network. This view of memory is analogous to postmodernism's relentless deconstructing and rebuilding of categories, boundaries and limits. This tendency of postmodernism has been described by Linda Hutcheon as 'the interrogating of the notion of consensus' (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 7), and is visible in the work of all major postmodern theorists and writers, as well as the philosophers who inspired them (Hutcheon, 1988). Hutcheon cites postmodern literature as a fertile site of boundary-crossing and raises a vital point regarding its consequences:

... who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection ... the novel and the long poem ... the novel and autobiography ... the novel and history ... the novel and biography? But, in any of these examples, the conventions of the two genres are played off against each other; there is no simple, unproblematic merging (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 9).

Likewise with memory: we cannot simply recognise the cross-contamination of memory and imagination, or past and present, without problematising each term. Their meaning inheres in what differentiates them from other concepts. When these concepts merge, when difference is effaced, this clear meaning is lost. Subsequently, memory is not a privileged, meaning-generating entity. Rather it is a process of narrativisation, subjectivity, interpretation. In their highly influential yet essentially flawed 1966 paper, 'Remembering', Martin and Deutscher argue that one fundamental trait of memory is that it 'represent[s] the past within certain limits of accuracy' (Martin & Deutscher, 1966, p. 166). Martin & Deutscher's privileging of 'accuracy' in memory

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<sup>17</sup> Essences in the Platonic sense, i.e., the fundamental aspect of their being, their ideal manifestation.

suppresses the marginalised elements that contribute to the phenomenon of memory (imagination, interpretation, omission, selection etc.), but are revived when considering memory from the position I advocate. Or, indeed, as anthropology, sociology, cultural theory, etc., advocate. Linda Hutcheon argues that for postmodernists, ‘the “marginal” take[s] on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that culture is not really the homogenous monolith ... we might have assumed’ (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 12). A championing of the marginal can be seen in the work of many postmodern thinkers, from Derrida’s focus on repressed linguistic meanings (Derrida, 1976) to Edward Said’s work on the interactions between centre and margin cultures (Said, 1985), or Hélène Cixous’ feminism (Cixous, 1993).

It is tempting to describe memory as our link to a past that has disappeared forever. To describe it simply as a ‘link’, however, is to obscure the acts of selection, omission and interpretation that occur during the act of remembering. Furthermore, Ross (1989, 2003) identifies memory as having a bidirectional relationship with self-conception. How the subject remembers past object or events depends on how they think of themselves; memories change as the sense of self changes (Ross, 1989). In turn, what people remember about their personal pasts influences their world views (Wilson & Ross, 2003). It is difficult to check episodic memory against the reality it is modelled upon. In this instance, favoured metaphors in the conventional discourse of memory, such as memory as a storehouse or room, obscure the true nature of its function. Implicitly privileging the idea that memory images constitute a direct connection to a non-existent past, through use of the term ‘link’, represses the lack of provable connection between memory trace and past present, and obfuscates the bidirectional nature of memory’s relation with self-identity. In fact, there is no way to return to past presents, so to imply that memory functions as a means of access, rather than as an imaginative process of reconstruction, is to further an understanding of memory that is not only inaccurate, but through which important consequences are repressed. The conventional notion of memory as a bridge to the

past obfuscates the extent of its failures in this capacity. If those failures are hidden, it does not occur to ask questions about the reconstructive nature of memory, nor how identity is formed, maintained or changed by it.

The stable real, or referent—the present moment—disappears as soon as it is experienced. Its representation, however, begins in the moment of the original's disappearance, and is remade again and again throughout the life of the individual. This is memory, and these representations are all that remain of a momentarily stable past. They draw their meaning and authenticity from the very fact that what they represent no longer exists. They are the only representation of past presents,<sup>18</sup> the only means of accessing them, but are also ontologically inferior. They are copies, they are not the past itself, but they are simultaneously the truth of the past, the only evidence for what might have happened. They are both false and true at the same time.

What is the essence of the past except that it has already happened? Memories change and develop, degrade and reform. They may, in a sense, remain with us throughout our lives. To borrow from Plato, they do not represent the original faithfully—by virtue of their consistent (if shifting) presence, they only represent the past in appearance, not in its vital essence. They are simulators. Furthermore, they create an invisible presence of absence. When we forget something, we lose all connection to it. We forget that we have even forgotten it, so far is it from our consciousness. If memory is a simulacrum, memory images perform the same function, except that they serve to obscure this loss through a false presence. The tragedy of forgetting is that the past disappears forever; the tragedy of remembering is that we do not realise it is gone.

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<sup>18</sup> Other purported means of accessing the past, such as photographs, will be touched on later in the chapter.

## Effects on subject

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.

- Luis Bunuel, Memoirs

As Bunuel writes, it is difficult, even impossible, to imagine a self without a memory. Whether conceived of as a storehouse or a method of reconstruction, memory is essential to a sense of self. It is the running story of who we are, and we draw on it to decide how we will act in the future and how we will react to the present. We define our present self alongside and against how we remember acting in the past. We can reprimand ourselves for our past actions and diverge from them, or recall them positively and enact similar actions in the present. When getting to know others we talk of our pasts.

If we are to accept Bunuel's assertion that memory is the material out of which we construct our identities, what are we to say about ourselves in the context of simulated memory? If we look to memory to look for ourselves, to learn who we are, what happens to our idea of ourselves when we cannot find comfort in the stable, referential nature of memory signs? Discussing Magritte's painting *Les deux mystères* (1966), Scott Durham notes that 'suspended between its repetitions, the simulacrum of a pipe is at once the pipe we recognize and not a pipe at all' (Durham, 1998, p. 30). Replace 'pipe' with 'past' and we have the same point. Memory resembles the past presents it represents, and could be said to nearly be those past presents—in as far as they no longer exist—but it is not quite something we can view and be comforted by.

We cannot safely look at memory and say *that is how things happened at the time; that is me*. This imperfect resemblance also evokes the uncanny. Other scholars (Beville, 2013; Rubenstein, 1998) have noted links between the postmodern simulacrum and the uncanny; this section will also explore these links in the specific context of memory as simulacrum.

So we have a situation in which the only thing that gives our identity meaning in the context of a temporally-continuous self is in fact groundless, a resemblance of something without its fundamental essence to ensure legitimacy. When I remember something I am remembering sensory images of it, images that have been embellished, ordered, tailored (if you like—structured) by many repeated viewings. I remember remembering; I do not have a direct line of access to the object I want to remember. Jonathan Lethem's 2009 novel *Chronic City* touches upon this idea. As New York City reveals itself as layer of illusion upon illusion, a distraught Perkus Tooth—a neurotic and conflicted genius—bemoans that this unreality has seeped into the fabric of the characters' very identities:

Each memory is only a photocopy of the previous, rather than referring back to some stored 'original.' ... We have no sugar mountain to journey backward toward, Chase! Glance back and the mountain is gone. Better not to glance, and imagine you feel its weight at your back. All we've got is our working draft, no more final than the last, just as ready to be discarded. Memory is a rehearsal for a show that never goes on! (Lethem, 2009, p. 388)

Perkus' 'sugar mountain' is the idea of a contactable or reliable past, a personal history the subject accesses through memory. When he urges his friend Chase 'not to glance,' to 'imagine ... its weight at your back', he is warning him against looking too deeply into the structures that provide us with meaning. Interrogating memory will reveal it as no more stable or reliable than the other

illusions that have misled them throughout the novel. Better, in Perkus' opinion, to remain in wilful ignorance of the instability of the self, the unfounded nature of our identities.

An awareness of the unfounded nature of memory renders our pasts truly remote invokes a feeling of alienation from one's own past and self. The idea of the past, and thus of self-identity, becomes othered from the subject, external to the self. In this sense, self-identity becomes an external object. This becomes disturbing when the object is also part of the subject, as memory narratives are. This is a disturbance of the subject/object dichotomy by which the subject can define itself: *I am me because I am not that*. This gives rise to an uncanny effect that occurs when part of the self is seen in the object, and vice-versa, when the object is seen as part of the self.<sup>19</sup> As Freud notes, this leads to a kind of revulsion (Freud, 1955). In this case, since the object is simultaneously both internal and external to the self, the subject is revolted by part of the self, further complicating the process of fragmentation. This is an example of how the simulacrum of self can produce an uncanny effect within itself, enacting an infinite regress of splitting and thus self-othering.

If the uncanny is one of the possible psychological responses to doubling or a disturbing resemblance, such as that of a mannequin or doll, or the revisiting of old spaces, then it may also be an effect of the individual's engagement with the simulacrum. As a system of faithless resemblances, the simulacrum has been described by critic Maria Beville as a circumstance which creates an uncanny reaction in the observer (Beville, 2013). She claims that in postmodern literature 'the city is uncanny, it is a simulacrum made up of simulacra, at once familiar but also strange and unknowable' (Beville, 2013, p. 604). Repetition, central to both the uncanny and the simulacrum, links the concepts. Repetition occupies an important position in the seminal texts of both concepts: Baudrillard's 'The Precession of Simulacra', and Freud's 'The Uncanny', respectively.

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<sup>19</sup> A similar effect occurs within the postmodern simulacrum; this will be examined later in the chapter.

If repetition inherent to both the uncanny and the simulacrum links the concepts, it follows that a notion that ties repetition and simulation to human consciousness would evoke the uncanny. Certainly, the uncanny and postmodernism share tropes of doubling and repetition, but they are also located precisely within the consciousness of the subject in my conception. Multiple temporal images of the self in memory lead to an alienation from one's past—both the uncanny and the postmodern simulacrum evoke the double as a motif. Both imply a split from oneself and a dispersal of identity, both problematise the relationship between subject and object through a diminishment of difference, and both suggest a dominance of the object.

This distance from, or splitting of self could conceivably engender a sense of disbelief in the reality of one's past life and experiences. If the reality of the past is seen as a construction, a present idea of the way things were rather than as an objectively verifiable certainty, then the self and the life of the self have to be acknowledged as artificial creations, rather than a natural occurrence rising from something external to the subject's own psychological reconstructions. Our pasts are no longer firm referents by which we may understand ourselves; they are what we tell ourselves about ourselves. This relates back to the uncanny nature of the self simulacrum, but is more disturbing, because the subject actually creates the object, or other, that leads to the uncanny effect. Indeed, in this instance, the object or other *is* the subject itself. Guy Faurholt identifies a sense of irresolution in tales of split personalities and doppelgangers, which he claims create similar uncanny effects (Faurholt, 2009). Revulsion, alienation, aggression: these, according to Faurholt, arise in response to the threat posed by the fragmentation of individual identity implied by the intimate presence of the other. Such stories almost always end in tragedy (Faurholt, 2009; Dolar, 1991), with the death or disappearance of either the self or the threatening object/other. This tendency in literature suggests that the self cannot sustain the threat of such fundamental ontological fragmentation, cannot bear the correlative presence of the other within itself. What, then, is the consequence of this? Perhaps Perkus' 'sugar mountain' is

the answer: an imaginary, but unified, fantasy by which we may ignore the essential fragmentation essential to the uncanny simulacrum of memory.

Recognising the flattening of difference compounds the unfounded nature of the memory narrative, of the self—the simulacrum is right there, contactable. It comes before the object it claims to represent; it is dominant, while past presents are not. Past presents are ‘real’ but it is memory that shows them to us, it is memory we and touch and see, memory that we take comfort in. Memory’s presence has eclipsed that of the ‘real’ past, has dissolved its claim to truth. Ironically, memory is our only means of viewing past presents but it simultaneously dismantles any means of truly experiencing them—it distorts and hides the very things it appears to present to us. In *Phantom Communities* (1998), Scott Durham provides an interpretation of the oppressive relationship between the individual and the simulacrum described by Baudrillard. I quote him at length:

... the serial images and virtual realities generated by the media and information technologies of all sorts have become the sole arbiters of the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of everyday experience, to the point that the spectator or consumer appears only as the vestigial support for the ‘simulation model’ that he or she seems destined to repeat. To the extent to which the concrete time and space of the consumer (with all his or her desires, memories, and narratives) are unassimilable or unregularizable within the framework of this dominant code, they appear, in cybernetic terms, as mere noise—as useless, irrecoverable, and inexpressible. This is Baudrillard’s grim version of that now familiar postmodern topos, ‘the death of the subject’: the spectating subject appears as a mere monitor or terminal, as the screen on which all these codes and images intersect (Durham, 1998, p. 21).

Durham describes Baudrillard's notion that within the simulacrum, images are the only referent or touchstone for 'truth' or 'reality', to the extent that the subject is no more than the support network for this system. The 'concrete time and space of the consumer' becomes irrelevant, discardable. The individual is little more than a circumstance in which the simulacrum operates. Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise* addresses this issue when its protagonist, professor Jack Gladney, views his vital statistics on a computer screen—his body has been reduced to a system of digital signals, abstract information, and it is this system that takes precedence over traditional reality, despite the fact that such information is supposed to represent reality, be subjugated to it. In particular, the signals appear to represent him as dead, despite evidence to the contrary; this diagnosis is treated seriously by the medical staff and, eventually, by Gladney himself: 'there's something artificial about my death,' he observes. 'It's shallow, unfulfilling' (DeLillo, 1984, p. 283). In DeLillo's novel, Gladney has had the primacy of his own physical body usurped by its digital simulation. He registers a sense of loss, his hopes and expectations regarding his death incapable of being absorbed into the simulacrum. As such, Gladney is disconnected from his own death, one of the most fundamentally personal events of a life, which has successfully been absorbed into the simulacrum. He has been left behind, excluded from the space of his own death. This is one vision of the death of the subject under Baudrillard's simulacrum, in which aspects of the self are disconnected from each other, some swept up by the simulacrum, and others excluded. The 'shallow' feeling Gladney experiences is a loss of self; something vital has been taken from him, incorporated into the external object, ultimately limiting his claim to his own identity.

This function of the simulacrum also occurs within memory's relation to the individual. Without direct access to past presents, those experiences contacted through, or manifested by, memory images and narratives, the memory simulacrum forms the sole arbiter of the truth of those pasts. The present is the only real, but since time is experienced linearly it immediately

becomes the past. In becoming the past, the present becomes a memory image, and is thus absorbed into the simulacrum. The past builds up. Since the present is a perpetually instantaneous phenomena, it can never keep up with the simulacrum gathering behind and around it. This is the unstoppable precession of memory, the incurable parade of images, that renders the subject's present useless—all that we can surely say is here and real. This is a total reversal where the simulacrum legitimises the real, rather than the other way around. What is lost to memory is excluded from the narrative of self, despite its reliable reality status at the time of experience. Memory as a simulacrum becomes the legitimator, the seemingly transcendent referent that imbues the ancillary, present self with meaning or purpose, but is simultaneously itself without grounding, without anything by which to gain its legitimacy.

A leading Baudrillard scholar, Douglas Kellner, differs from Durham in his interpretation of the effects of the simulacrum on the subject, and its resulting 'death'. Kellner argues that the simulacrum reverses the subject-object dialectic of modernity, in which subjects controlled and dominated objects. The simulacrum, the external, now controls and models the identity or subjectivity of the subject, the internal. 'In the society of simulation,' Kellner contends, individuals construct themselves through the 'appropriation of images', while their relationships and self-perceptions are determined by 'codes and models' (Kellner, 1994, p. 8). Kellner sees the Baudrillardian subject as a pastiche of images, while pre-existing codes and models dictate the ways we interpret the world. These also determine 'how goods are consumed and used, politics unfold, culture is produced and consumed, and everyday life is lived' (Kellner, 1994, p. 8). What we see is a radical reversal of the subject-object dialectic, in which the external now determines the qualities of the internal. Durham argues that parts of the individual that are inconsistent with the simulacrum become discardable. If the simulacrum has functionally become God, the entity that grants meaning, then aspects of the individual irreconcilable with the reality presented by the simulacrum become irrelevant to it, become irrelevant to reality. Durham identifies the

postmodern subject's fragmentation arising out of this. Kellner, on the other hand, argues that no element of the subject is irrelevant to the simulacrum. He contends that the simulacrum constructs all aspects of the self, and that the subject's fragmentation arises out of this fact. This is not to say that these identities, constructed by the external, are pre-determined or homogenous. The subject's exposure to the simulacrum is inevitably plural, presented with a chaotic flux of images, codes and models, a 'nonlinear world where it is impossible to chart causal mechanisms and logic' (Kellner, 1994, p. 8). One cannot determine what codes, models or images they will be exposed to or, thus, how their identities will be determined and fragmented.

In the case of memory, the subject and the object are ultimately both parts of the same entity—the remembering subject. The subject is both the story of their past and their subjective experience of the present. They exist both now and then. This doubling effect is persistent throughout the manifestations and consequences of conceiving of memory as simulacrum.

## Self as other

The doubled self is visible in Western art as early as in the Greek myth of Narcissus, who kills himself upon realising that the image he loves is his own, and is thus unattainable. The ancient Greek aphorism ‘know thyself’ implies that the subject can be multitudinous, as it posits a self capable of being observed by another self. There is also a duality inherent in Christian notions of the self as both spiritual and physical, divine and mundane. And, of course, the inverse is the Cartesian self, which suggests a holistic, independent and unified mental self (Blackburn, 1996). The Cartesian self posits this, or mental self, or I, as the true self, while the body is a course shell: an other, in a sense. The self as doubled is, in a sense, inherent in our very being: each person is literally the combination of two different people, their parents.

*Othello*’s Iago also notes the idea, when he says ‘I am not what I am’ (Shakespeare, 2004, p. 6). A pluralistic self is celebrated in Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’, when he announces that he ‘contains multitudes’. *Frankenstein* (1810) engages with the idea of the dual self, common to Romantic literature, as does Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).<sup>20</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky explores the idea of the split or doubled self in *The Double* (1846), while Robert Louis Stevenson, in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1885), remarks that ‘man is not truly one, but truly two’ (Stevenson, 2002, p. 55), going on to speculate that the subject will eventually be viewed as ‘a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens’ (Stevenson, 2002, p. 56). Certainly it is also evident in the work of modernist authors. Stream-of-consciousness narration, especially in the work of Woolf and Joyce, blends jostling, ill-distinguished voices, suggesting the subject’s lack of centre. The depersonalisation and commodification of the individual in the wake

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<sup>20</sup> Some critics (such as Niall Lucy) cite the Romantics as postmodern literature’s true precursors. Certainly they share themes (the sublime, a celebration of irrationality and subjectivity, the split or fragmented self, etc.).

of industrialisation was a significant anxiety for modernists, and certainly suggests a dislocation of the subject from its traditional and historical meaning structures.

Despite these early examples, the fragmentation of the self only arose as a cultural descriptor towards the end of the nineteenth century, and came to the forefront of Western cultural, artistic and scholarly consciousness around the beginning of the twentieth century (Bullock & Trombley, 2000, pp. 539-540). Rainer Maria Rilke's proto-modernist novel *The Notebooks of Mabe Laurids Brigge* (1902) constitutes an early exploration of the alienated and disconnected nature of the individual at the turn of the century. The work of high modernists such as Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Kafka take the fragmentation of the individual subject as a central concern; much of their creative work constitutes an exploration of this idea. Samuel Beckett, whose work constitutes a link between modernism and postmodernism, focused heavily on language as a means of identity construction. Rooted both in Descartes' mind-body dichotomy, and Wittgenstein's discussion of language as a self-contained, self-referential system, his deeply fragmented work depicts the decentred nature of the Western self.

Some critics see modernism as a period of mourning for the loss of unification in the subject. Lyotard, specifically, describes the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation as the result of a nostalgic yearning for a lost unity, broadly (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism can be seen as taking disunity as a given, and 'instead of lamenting it, celebrat[ing] it' (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999, p. 296). Nick Mansfield summarises the West's late twentieth century's conception of the subject as having 'no absolute, universal or consistent content' (Mansfield, 2000, p. 137). Ultimately, Stevenson's prediction that the subject is a 'polity of multifarious denizens' came true in the postmodern conception of the subject, but goes to show that the decentralised subject is not a purely postmodern creation. Rather, it has been present as an anxiety throughout history, but which the circumstances of postmodernity have triggered on a greater scale. Subsequently, postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard and Foucault situate fragmentation at the centre of

postmodern subjectivity (Kellner, 1994, p. 9). Specifically, for Baudrillard, individuals construct themselves through an accumulation of images, codes and models. This can be seen as an inversion of modernity's assumption that the subject comes to dominate the object, amassing secure knowledge used to understand and control external reality. Within Baudrillard's simulacrum, it is the external world—the world of objects—which defines and dominates the subject, since access to secure knowledge beyond the world of objects is impossible. The precession of the simulacrum renders impossible any logic of representation in which ideas can be said to relate to reality or truth: 'subjects lose contact with the real and themselves fragment and dissolve' (Kellner, 2002, p. 9).

Accepting the model of memory as a form of simulacrum, a paradoxical severing of oneself from oneself becomes a foundational aspect of the subject (if the subject can be said to have a stable aspect). We can say that the only reliable trait of the subject is its fundamental fragmentation, an irreconcilable state of difference. This is not so different from the Foucauldian subject, constructed out of various discourses, or the Baudrillardian, defined by its relation to objects. My conception is different, however. The corrupting nature of the system that a subject uses to make sense of itself, in the context of their own personal life, causes their fragmentation. The dominating object is the subject's own construction of their own past; the codes and models we appropriate to construct a self are the flawed productions of our own subjectivities. The process is a kind of infinite regress: an interpretation of an interpretation of the past, used to construct the subject, who then offers new interpretations on the images and processes which constructed them and will continue to do so.

The phenomenon of the self as other is one form of fragmentation that occurs under the model of memory as simulacrum. It arises out of the awareness of the narrative status of memory and the idea of the past as the predominant shaping mechanism for identity. This is very similar to the system by which the Baudrillardian death of the subject occurs, according to Kellner.

Instead of an external object (the simulacrum of mass media) shaping the subject, it is now an internal object—the images and narratives of the past as constructed by the individual. The object still controls the present, thinking subject, except in this case the object is also the product of the subject's own construction.

Memory is the subject, as Bunuel writes, but at the same time it is the raw material out of which the subject creates itself. Novitz describes life narratives as ‘imaginative constructs which people adopt’ (Novitz, 2001, p. 151), stressing the dual nature of self—the present self and the past self imaginatively created. The subject is both inside and outside of the memory narrative. It is the problem of the multiple ‘I’s’ of any act of narration—in the very act of telling a story, the narrator is automatically situated outside of it (Waugh, 1984, p. 134). As such, in narratives of self, like memory, we become strangers to ourselves. We see ourselves as both the protagonists of self-told stories and as the tellers of those stories. Out of this doubling arises a kind of uncanny resemblance, or uncertainty (not unlike that of the simulacrum appearing before us). The past appears to be as we remember, but we can never quite tell. This uncanny element runs through the conception of memory as simulacrum. Observing ourselves re-enact past events is immediately different to how they were experienced.<sup>21</sup> We approach the events from a distance. With hindsight, and the powers of interpretation, we are inevitably less engaged. So there is always a close but imperfect resemblance between ourselves and our pasts, our present and our past selves. This occurs even when we do not question the validity of the memory's content—the imprecision is inherent in the form. This exemplifies how the simulacrum of memory dissolves boundaries between self and past, between present and past. In the present, the subject constantly reshapes the nature of the past—it is an artefact of present constructions. The way we view our past selves is similar—in remembrance we reinterpret ourselves, the protagonists of our stories, reshaping them as we grow and change through various presents. This is certainly the

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<sup>21</sup> This uncanny doubling is also an effect of photography, of which section 4.4 of this chapter explores the implications.

goal of traditional psychotherapy—to recast the events of the past in a different light, promoting a happier, more productive narrative of self. Certainly this is true of Narrative Exposure Therapy for sufferers of post traumatic stress disorder (Robjant & Fazel, 2010).

The psychoanalyst's goal is to reaffirm the dominance of the subject over the internal object. In this case, the patient is the subject and their narrative of past is the object. When the patient can reconfigure the relation between themselves and the object of their past, they regain dominance over the object and become healthy. Under memory as simulacrum, the self is both subject and object, external and internal. The self talks about itself, is equally the present, thinking self and the representations of itself in the past. The self is caught in a stalemate where the object and the subject are locked in a struggle to control one another. The subject may reconfigure the object, but the object also shapes the subject. What arises from this is that neither is fixed—the subject will reinterpret and restructure the object, which in turn will affect the subject, engendering further shifts in perspective. Their relations with other things determine the meanings of objects and subjects. In the context of this thesis, the object is the absent past, essentially the story of memory and self, which the subject tells and reads, and which forms the base for their selfhood. We see that the object of memory is in fact very unstable and, furthermore, subject to undetectable change. There is no stable basis for selfhood under this conception.

Ultimately the self splits, othered from itself through its own attempts at self-definition. Not only is the self a linguistic structure, it is one where the author is 'situated in the text' precisely when he or she 'asserts ... identity outside it' (Waugh, 1984, p. 134). Denying a centre of orientation, a consistent self-narrator, and a stable tension between what is true and what is false means that totalising interpretations become impossible. There is no universal way to explain a narrative; multiple interpretations are necessary. The narrative is told from different positions, and thus the reality status of the two sources—truth and fiction—become unclear, contaminated

with each other. As such, narration takes on a fragmented and contradictory quality, not easily transcribed into a logical, totalised story. These, and other radical shifts in both the essence of narrator and narrative, as well as the shifts of context surrounding the telling of them, disturb the stability of the text to such a degree that notions of reality and fiction, truth and fiction, memory and imagination are seen to be just more 'games with words' (Waugh, 1984, p. 136), or categories (i.e. linguistic structures) used to categorise and order elements of reality.

## Overcoming the simulacrum?: ritual, photographs and the temporally-enclosed past

This section of the thesis considers the possibility of disengaging from the simulacrum and accessing the past in an authentic way. I have identified three ways in which an individual may attempt to overcome the simulacrum of memory—certainly there are more. I have chosen the revisiting of meaningful spaces, acts of ritual, and photographs as three potential means of accessing the past. I selected photography and the act of revisiting spaces because they are two of the most common methods of attempting to access the past, but also because, at first glance, they appear to present serious challenges to my argument. Both seem to suggest clear and reliable means of accessing past presents; I intend to prove that they do not. I selected the act of ritual because it is a non-representative means of linking actions through time, at least in theory if not in practice.<sup>22</sup> Other possible means of accessing the past include diary and journal entries, shared remembrance, and mementoes. Certainly these are just as worthy of investigation as the means I have selected, but a full investigation into each is outside the scope of this thesis.

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<sup>22</sup> I use ‘representative’ here to mean ‘producing a representation’. Some rituals incorporate representative gestures but do not produce a representation of the past; their effect is symbolic.

## i. The temporally-enclosed past and revisiting spaces

As discussed in the previous chapter, past presents (commonly referred to as ‘the past’) are temporally-enclosed. A vital aspect of the past’s character is permanently enclosed within a temporal site, no longer accessible by the subject. All experiences are in part temporal, so their meaning comes as much from the time at which they are experienced as any concrete qualities they hold. This applies to spaces as well. Trigg observes that such ‘temporal losses’ are irrevocable, unlike ‘spatial losses’ (Trigg, 2006, p. 54). This differentiation highlights a distinction between types of loss, namely that objects and events are both physical and temporal; the time at which they are experienced, or at which they exist, is as vital to their status as any physical traits they hold. As, for that matter, is the duration of the experience, whether the space’s meaning is located in different temporal positions, as with historical sites, or whether they are abandoned, or have been revitalised, or are due for demolition. Aspects of time affect the way sites are experienced and affect what they mean.

Nowhere is this more visible than when revisiting sites important to our lives, since they draw their importance from our past history with them. Because the meaning of these sites inheres both in the present and the past, in the present moment of revisiting and in the memory of the space, a kind of ‘spectral’ (Trigg, 2006, p. 53) doubling occurs. We revisit only the physical shell of the seminal space. The meanings and narratives that imbued it with significance are invisible, lost to time, and in their place is our memory of them. This memory is, of course, a construction of our present subjectivity (an abstraction of past subjectivities) rather than a legitimate accessing of the experience of the past, which does not appear clearly before us. This is how the doubling occurs—the site remains, but layered over that is our attempt at reconstructing the essence of the space. This attempt is firmly rooted in the present, however, and we

acknowledge that. Subsequently, the physical reconstitution of the sites of our past is inevitably underwhelming. We come to realise that the truth of our pasts is not contained within the physical space, that some part of it resides within temporal space too, and that that space is inaccessible. The impassive site brings our mental reconstructions into stark relief, which are also brought into relief against their spectral originals, so clearly are they the reconstitutions of the present subject, a different subject. The site becomes alienating. These places ironically become spectral, as they are linked to our lost histories, lost selves. They are accessible physically but elude us in their essence.

Trigg touches upon this in his book *The Aesthetics of Decay* (2006). He argues that revisiting old places leads to unfamiliarity and detachment, since the altered nature of the revisited space reveals memory's inaccuracies, diminishing its clarity and appearance of reality. He writes that

As the reality of the original memory becomes an object external to us, so the spectral quality of past experience becomes lucid. This realisation that space and place fall from certainty coincides with the experience of nostalgia (Trigg, 2006, p.53)

Here 'the reality of the original memory' is the past event upon which the memory image is based, and imbued or to some degree evidenced by the physical space. It is the comparison of this with memory that reveals past experience as spectral, and it is this comparison that imbues these spaces with a deep sense of uncertainty. This situation makes us fully aware of the inaccessibility of the past. With the object of memory directly before us, we realise we are as close as possible to the past event but still unable to grasp it. In this way, the lost status of the original—the inaccessible model—becomes clear. Rather than developing an intimacy with the past, the act of revisiting spaces actually distances us from them, creating an effect similar to that of the simulacrum—the past is both here and not here, real and illusory. This highlights the insufficiency of memory—we have both the physical site and a gesture towards the original

meaning of the experiences that occurred there, yet the past still eludes us. It flickers on the borders of various conceptual categories but cannot fully inhabit any. The resulting alienation and disconnection is not dissimilar to that of Freud's uncanny, which Trigg also explores.

Trigg contrasts the memory image with the returned-to place, and argues that because the memory image is of a past when the familiar was fixed, and which has changed in our absence, our imaginations are 'forced to anticipate ways in which the physical space has changed' (Trigg, 2006, p. 54). This imagination is both unreal and faltering, because it requires an already-lived past to construct an indeterminate present. With past places so conceptualised, when we return to them an uncertainty in memory is provoked. A possible conclusion to draw from this is that the longer we are away from a place, the more imagined construction occurs (Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000). Thus, the further distanced we are from the reality of the memory object (or place), the more the memory becomes simultaneously unreal and convincing. In this sense, the revisiting of spaces highlights a certain relationship between memory and time: the further the subject gets, temporally, from the events of their memories, the more important memory becomes. At the same time, the further the subject moves, the more the memory degrades, hence the less it reflects the original event. Revisiting spaces causes us to doubt that we 'ever lived where we lived' (Bachelard, 1994, p. 56), and to realise that the past is elsewhere, neither in memory nor in the physical site. Bachelard notes how memory actually does not help recover the past: "Time and place are impregnated with a sense of unreality ... we ask ourselves if what has been, was. Have facts really the value that memory gives them?" (Bachelard, 1994, pp. 56-57).

I have spoken foremost about deteriorated spaces, or at least altered ones, those that reveal our distance from the meaningful events that transpired in them, through their signs of wear, renovations, landscaped gardens, or total demolition. Certainly, the inaccessibility of the past feels more acute in these instances. The site no longer functions as a memory image made concrete; rather, we face the additional task of mentally reconstituting the site in the face of its

overwhelmingly different, and alienating, appearance. That said, the same function occurs in sites that have not been physically altered during our absence. One may think that one may meaningfully grasp the past by revisiting an unchanged space. If we cannot inhabit the past itself, perhaps we may inhabit its unaltered site, the space where the past occurred. Furthermore, one may say, the unchanged nature of the space demonstrates the veracity of the memory: the memory aligns with the physical evidence of the site, so there is no simulation here; the subject has accessed a tangible aspect of the past.

There are two issues with this argument. The first is that, as discussed earlier, the physical site alone does not constitute the entirety of the nature of the past. Experience, whether past or present, is as much mental as it is physical, and revisiting the site of an event does not constitute revisiting the event itself, regardless of the vividness of the memory. If anything, revisiting the now empty site reveals the transparency of the memory. We see the backdrop, but not the actors.

The second issue relates to Durham's description of the vestigial postmodern subject. Memory drives us to seek the sites of the past. When we revisit a seminal site we are doing so out of a longing, in some sense, to recontact what transpired there. Of course this is doomed to failure, since those events have passed. We are then caught in a kind of tension: the physical space before us seems lacklustre in comparison to memory, unable to provide the comfort or connection we expect. This is despite the vital, physical nature of the site and the amorphous, mental nature of the memory image. Memory seems more profound if the space itself is physically unchanged. Despite the verisimilitude of the site to the memory, it still has the spectral quality Trigg describes, is still unable to fulfil the expectations placed upon it by memory.

It is in this moment that we recognise the primacy of the memory image, and recognise that simulacra have taken precedence over physical reality. It is as if our own mental reconstructions have overridden the physical space itself, made the very site in which the event occurred vestigial to the essential element at play: the memory image, the memory narrative, the

mental conceptualisation. The site is where it started, but it is not about that any more, the truth is in memory. Just as Durham's postmodern subject is the screen upon which the simulacrum is projected but simultaneously vestigial to it, the revisited space was once fuel for the simulacrum of memory but is no longer vital to it: the simulacrum has subsumed and overridden the physical space. As Baudrillard puts it, 'today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there' (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 1). Leaving the site of the past, a persistent anxiety remains: if the simulacrum makes the site impotent, what happens to the vanished actors within it, wherever they are?

## ii. Ritual

Ritual, both personal and cultural, could be seen as a means of contacting the past. It bypasses troublesome issues of selection, omission and perspective in representative methods and appears to construct a link throughout time. One could see the repetition and traditionalism of ritual gesture as a way of performing similarly to how others performed in the past. Ritual as a means of contacting the past will be explored in this chapter.

A ritual can be seen as a system of symbols embodied in action, words, and objects (Bell, 1997). This apparently straightforward definition belies the difficulty of defining ritual, or of constructing a framework through which to analyse or explain ritual practice. Catherine Bell, probably the most eminent scholar of ritual, writes that ritual 'is always contingent, provisional, and defined by difference' (Bell, 1992, p. 91). It is only possible to understand ritual in relation to other activities; the meaning of a given ritual is as relative as the meaning of any other human activity. In her later book, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), Bell outlines several general attributes a system must have to be called a ritual. She includes formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance (Bell, 1997, p. 138).

Repetition, inherent in 'invariance' and 'traditionalism', is core to the definition of ritual action. A single event is not a ritual, but may become a ritual when repeated. In this sense, when someone performs a ritual, whether personal or cultural, they are referring both backwards and forwards to other performances of that ritual. Part of the action's symbolic value is that it will not be performed just once. In this way, ritual denies the linearity of time because every single time someone performs the ritual they are in a sense performing it all other times as well. In this way, the moment of ritual is transcendent. Of course, one cannot perform an action precisely the same

way every time, and some forms of ritual incorporate individual deviation into the ritual itself.<sup>23</sup> I am not so much talking about storytelling ritual here, rather symbolic rituals, such as worship rites (such as holy communion); coming-of-age rituals (such as Bar or Bat Mitzvah); feasts (such as Thanksgiving); oaths of allegiance, etc. I am also talking about ritual in its ideal state: in principle, rather than in practice.

The precise actions of rituals may change. For example, no ritual feast is performed identically every time. Despite this, the functional elements of the feast, such as which foods are eaten, where certain people sit, and the symbolic elements, such as what the feast represents or celebrates, or why certain foods are eaten, remain generally consistent throughout performances. This is core to the *principle* of ritual, which is that, ideally, the ritual is performed identically throughout time. This is the ‘invariance’ in Bell’s description. The purpose of a particular ritual is intrinsically tied to its symbolic function (sacral symbolism). It confers solidity and reliability upon the temporal nature of the world. The performance of ritual links the subject to the previous times it has been performed, and to the times when others have performed it. We enact the ritual the same way each time so we know we are reliving part of the past—constructing a stable thread through time. In the ideal moment of ritual we enact gestures or performances similar to those acted by people in the past, and by those to be acted in the future.

Despite the imitative nature of ritual, it is not truly re-acting the past, since a re-enactment is a diminished form of the original. Re-enacting posits itself as the imitation, the copy of the past original. The essence of ritual, on the other hand, resides as much in past ritual performances as in future ones, and in those of the present. This is why I describe the moment of ritual as transcendent—its essence is not as a single event. A single action cannot be a ritual. Ritual becomes ritual when it lifts above time, when it is performed across time, since a significant part

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<sup>23</sup> Oral tradition across the world incorporate their tellers’ gestures, phrases, and other identifying features into the stories (Phelan, Kellogg, & Scholes, 2006). That said, these are instances of narrative ritual. Other rituals, such as Catholic rites, for example, allow little space for interpretation or individual expression.

of its meaning is that it has been performed many times and will continue to be. It exists as original and model in each of its incarnations.

It may be useful to draw from anthropologist Maurice Bloch's arguments about ritual and conformity. Earlier, I entertained the notion of ritual as a means of accessing the past since it involves, in principle, repetitive actions performed similarly throughout time. In his writing on conformity, Bloch cites what he called 'ritual communication' (Bell, 1997, p. 70). This is communication within a ritual that employs a restricted vocabulary and grammar, allowing minimal interpretative embellishments on the part of the speaker. Bloch argues that the speaker is essentially anonymous in these circumstances, without the capacity for argument or individual expression (Bell, 1997). An example is the phrase 'I do' in a traditional Western wedding. Ritual communication is a good example of ritual as imitative and as performed within narrow margins of action throughout time. These kinds of rituals are, in principle and in action, to be performed the same way every time, throughout time, and could thus be interpreted as attempts to solidify a stable present throughout history, a kind of reliable fixture in an ever-changing world. Bloch's issue is that these rituals do not allow for individual 'creativity', and are in that sense oppressive. This kind of oppression is a subjugation of the individual self to the broader cultural institutions within which the self is situated. These cultural institutions reach beyond the lifeline of the individual, constructing the individual as part of a trans-temporal system. This does not pose a threat to my conception of past presents as temporally enclosed because it is actually a means of reconstructing a culturally informed and controlled idea of the past. It is an institutionalised kind of memory into which the individual performer inserts him or herself, rather than a means of accessing a temporally-enclosed moment.

Some anthropologists (Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz) have noted the structuring quality of cultural rituals. Namely, they observe that ritual may not be descriptive of social practice or social reality as much as it is prescriptive, because it provides a model for how

members of that society should act or feel. In this regard, Levi-Strauss, significantly, saw ritual as a non-verbal counterpart to myth (Bell, 1992, p. 111). While Levi-Strauss never formulated a theory of ritual, this connection between ritual and myth is useful in the context of memory as a system of simulation. I explained in an earlier section how memory works as a meaning-granting narrative, a way of organising the disparate elements of a life into a coherent trajectory. This is functionally similar to myth, stories that impart a sense of cultural identity (myths of heroes, victorious battles, the founding of settlements), or which seek to explain the natural world (creation myths). If we do take ritual to be a non-verbal counterpart to myth, one could say that it is also similar to memory in that they are both organisational systems. Some force, whether an institution in the case of ritual (for example), or an individual in the case of memory, applies this organisational structure to the events of a person or group of people so as to render them meaningful. This is just a functional similarity, however, and one cannot use it as an example of how ritual helps us access the past. If anything, in this regard ritual further obfuscates the truth of events or situations, in that it is a process of structuring, of imposing human order upon events and situations. There is a strong relation here between ritual as a structuring agent and the postmodern simulacrum. Kellner argues that the simulacrum proliferates in the world through its role as a model for behaviours, values, and so on. Ritual and myth function the same way as prescriptive tools: a specific, non-universal imperative (e.g. creation story, moral mandate, social behaviour) is propagated through a repetitive and symbolic structure (Bell, 1992).

### iii. Photographs

This thesis makes frequent reference to the notion of the past being absent, temporally enclosed, inaccessible, and so on. The distinction has been made between past presents, as moments of experience that have passed, and the past, construed here as a present reconstruction in the mind of the subject, essentially an idea. The crux of my argument is that past presents are inaccessible except through the representational function of memory, which creates the idea of the past. It seems worthwhile to address the apparently obvious counter-example of photographs, since at first glance they appear to preserve past presents clearly and unambiguously.

The seminal theorists of twentieth century photography—Benjamin, Sontag, Barthes—were writing before the advent of digital photography. There are certainly similarities between physical and digital photographs as interpretable objects, but the differences allow physical photographs a certain prestige, what Benjamin terms ‘aura’, generally conceived of as a ‘primarily aesthetic category’ (Hansen, 2007) which he believed was antithetical to the notion of any reproduced or reproducible cultural production (Benjamin, 2010). Miriam Bratu Hansen describes the common usage of ‘aura’ as a term used to designate aspects of traditional art Benjamin saw as lacking in his age: ‘authority, authenticity, and unattainability’ (Hansen, 2007). Benjamin writes in his ‘Protocols of Drug Experiments’ that ‘genuine aura appears in all things’ (Benjamin, 2006, p. 58), and Hansen takes the position that scholars have generally misinterpreted Benjamin’s notion of aura. This question is outside the scope of this thesis, but the conventional usage of Benjamin’s term, as developed in his later work ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), is useful.

If traditional print photographs are allowed some vestige of an ‘aura’ of authenticity, then digital photographs lose even that small prestige given that the majority of photographs today are not physical objects. This shift in the status of the photograph is not to say that the work of early theorists is useless—far from it. In fact, the issues raised by these writers intensify with the proliferation of online images, and the ease of manipulating them. I could discuss the implications of physical photographs and memory, but it is more relevant today to discuss photographs as digital images. While much of the discussion in this section is about photographs generally, I will also examine the digital photograph as a collection of infinitely reproducible information, completely non-physical, a pure image.

Photographs carry some weight as objective recordings of the past. Police use photographs as a matter of routine to unambiguously demonstrate someone’s presence or appearance. More generally, when looking at a photograph we see before us, in the present, what was there in the past. Furthermore, physical photographs are static objects. With time they will fade but the images they display will not change beyond this, will not alter in any substantial manner once the photo is developed. So at first it seems reasonable to cite them as stable representations of past events and, therefore, to see them as a legitimate means of contacting an absent past. This is not to say that nobody has been sceptical about photographs before, though. In his book *Camera Lucida* (1981), for example, Roland Barthes discusses the illusory nature of photographs at length, and Susan Sontag tackles their apparent objectivity in *On Photography* (1977).

When discussing photographs and memory, it is important to recall that while memory does allow us to represent the past in the present, those representations are so different from their models as to be different things entirely. Photographs operate similarly—in a way, they are outsourced memory, since they represent the past in a very similar character to the visual aspect of its original form. The major issues with photography as a means of accessing the past are

- its limited perspective;
- the photo's status as an interpretable object; and
- the doubling effect of being photographed.

As a medium of representation, photography suffers similar limitations as those of memory. Inevitably, the act of creation is an act of selection, deliberately including some things in the shot and not others. In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag comments on this:

In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are (Sontag, 2005).

One could say that it is not even a matter of intention, that this limitation is fundamental, inherent to the medium of photography. Two people standing side by side would take minutely different—but different—photographs. This is the visual equivalent of the instability of the narrator in literature; various members of a family, for example, tell different stories about the same event. This is a flaw in photography's representational capability, and does little for our understanding of the nature of the past present it captures. It offers a clue as to how a particular version of the past may have been. Certainly the photograph may be partially true, but a partial truth is, at least, partially false. Roland Barthes, however, believes a partially true image to be entirely artificial, as he explains in *Camera Lucida*, in which he describes looking at photos of his recently deceased mother:

I never recognised her being except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, and yet it was no one else ... I recognised her differentially, not

essentially. Photography therefore compelled me to perform a painful labour; straining toward the essence of her identity, I was struggling among images partially true and therefore totally false (Barthes, 2000, p. 66).

For Barthes, an image which is not completely true becomes false. Implicit in this is that every image is false, since it is impossible for an image to encapsulate an object in its essence. This idea is at the heart of the problem with photographs as links to absent pasts, and at the heart of the broader notion of memory as a system of simulacra.

The second major issue with photographs is their status as interpretable objects. As with any text, the meaning is at least partially dependent upon the proclivities of the viewer.

Photographs are no different. They are not mathematical formulae for everybody to solve the same way, which faithfully reveal the past once we have unpacked them. Rather, individual viewers will receive different impressions of the depicted subject. Furthermore, the same viewer could plausibly receive different impressions upon repeated viewings throughout their lives. A photo of oneself viewed days after its creation will suggest different meanings about the same photo viewed decades later. We can take this even further, borrowing from Barthes' concept of writerly texts (Barthes, 1991), and Ihab Hassan's attempts to undermine traditional distinctions between interpretative criticism and inventive literature. Writerly texts are works that destabilise the reader's expectations and allow multiple meanings to surface (Barthes, 1991). He describes them as writerly because the reader is seen as responsible for constructing meaning to such an extent that they take on a creative role not dissimilar to that of the author (Barthes, 1991) (the concept is compatible with his notion of the death of the author). Ihab Hassan's *Paracriticisms*, an undeniably 'writerly' text, explicitly demonstrates the links between interpretation and invention (Hassan, 1975). Indeed, it attempts to demonstrate that these links are so profound as to suggest that the two terms can occupy the same space, at least within his own paracriticism.

Barthes differentiates writerly texts from 'readerly' ones, which are essentially traditional, non-self-conscious creative works, typified by the nineteenth century realist novel. He argues that these texts position the reader simply as the receiver of a fixed, pre-determined meaning. Whether or not it is accurate to say that realist novels carry a singular meaning, Barthes was writing to distinguish between the realist tradition and the then newly-popular *nouveau-roman* or metafictional text. Where the realist novel, according to Barthes, attempts to present a window onto the world, the *nouveau-roman* demonstrates its constructed status, allowing the reader to 'inhabit' (Barthes, 1991) the site of meaning in the text. Despite their lack of formal self-consciousness, personal photographs are texts of this kind, as the viewer is primary in constructing the meaning of the photograph, particularly in photographs from the viewer's own life.

One might say that photographs are not writerly texts because a photo of a cat is still a photo of a cat regardless of who looks at it. This is true, but the photographer is not as fascistic as the author. Barthes explains that the author of a readerly text has a singular intention for the work, one privileged interpretation by which to explain it. The cat photo, however, suggests different things depending on the viewer. In 'The Death of the Author', Barthes describes a text as a 'multi-dimensional space' in which 'writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (Barthes, 1993, p.146). It is a foundation from which interpretation may take place, rather than suggesting or demanding a specific interpretation as part of its very structure. The owner of the cat will extract a different meaning from the photo as somebody who hates cats, or a vet, or someone who owned a similar cat in childhood. Imagine Barthes' reaction to the photo of his dead mother compared to that of someone who never met the woman. This great variation in interpretation accounts for the photograph's status as a writerly text.

While photographs do not perfectly align with Barthes' concept of a writerly text, partly in that they are not made of language, the comparison foregrounds the fact that the meaning of

the photograph resides within the viewer as much as within any objective content in the image, or in the intentions of the photographer. Barthes concludes his essay by musing that a text's meaning lies 'not in its origin but in its destination' (Barthes, 1993, p. 148), a destination which is not even the unified, humanistic subject but rather an interpretative point at which threads—historical, cultural, visual, aesthetic—align. I diverge from Barthes here and say here that this interpretative position, the reader/viewer, can indeed be 'personal' (Barthes, 1993, p. 148), and that the personal attribute brought to a reading is just one aspect of the others Barthes cites explicitly.

So, if we can see personal photographs as writerly texts, or those for which the meaning is to a large degree constructed by the audience, and accept Lyotard's notion that interpretation can be an act of creation, then it becomes fairly clear to see that personal photographs are not such simple links to the past, or preservations of it, than may have been previously assumed. Photographs are not objective links to the past since the subjectivity of the viewer is vital to their meaning. The shifting nature of photographs in the presence of interpretation leads to the next issue, specifically with photographs of the self, and that is that they render our image external to ourselves.

When viewing a photo of ourselves, we may see ourselves from angles we would never experience in reality. This has an eerie—uncanny—effect upon our relation with the past. We see ourselves in places we remember but not from the perspective we remember experiencing them from. We become doubled, able to remember being there but also able to see ourselves in that position, externally. Barthes writes on this in *Camera Lucida*:

... The Photograph ... represents the very subtle moment when ... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (or parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre (Barthes, 2006, p. 14).

The effect is undoubtedly uncanny. We witness ourselves as objects, from a dislocated perspective, apparently outside of ourselves. This is inherent in any photograph of the self (perhaps the rise of the 'selfie' suggests a fundamental acceptance of this doubling, a new comfort with the postmodern notion of the self as fragmented).<sup>24</sup> This dislocation is inherent in photographs and further supports my argument that they cannot grasp the past presents they appear to represent, instead inciting further alienation, and further fragmentation. They share other attributes of the postmodern simulacrum, as well. I wrote earlier about the simulacrum as a system by which the object dominates the subject, where the individual self becomes vestigial to the simulacrum that encompasses it. For Barthes, seeing a photograph of oneself is seeing oneself become an object, a process not that dissimilar from the objectification of the simulacrum. His use of the term 'death' is telling, as it implies that the object has discarded the subject and taken on a life of its own, shed its original, to exist and proliferate independently of its source.

The photograph is, in a limited sense, a visually clear representation of a memory image. This more objective (but nonetheless flawed) access to a version of the past actually reveals the insubstantial nature of the memory image. Neither is true, both reveal the flaws in the other. More significantly, perhaps, is that the contrast between remembered event and photographed event reveals the multiplicity of perspectives that create an event. It reveals, threateningly, that there is never one single event, that there are as many events as there are perspectives experiencing it, and that any reconstruction of that event is by definition limited—further, *what* these reconstructions attempt to reconstruct is limited and insubstantial itself. One outcome of this is that on some level, the individual's perspective is invalidated.

Following this logic, the photograph is not a satisfying link to the past because it represents the past only in one sensory dimension—visually. The texture and taste of experience

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<sup>24</sup> Perhaps, as postmodernism took modernism's anxieties and discoveries for granted, so post-postmodernism will take postmodernism's. Nealon suggests that a postmodern position will conclude an argument with commodification (for example), whereas a post-postmodern one will take commodification as 'a more or less neutral beginning premise for ... analysis' (Nealon, 2012, p. 63).

is subtle and nuanced, often emotional, deeply subjective, and constructed as much out of sensations, impressions and reactions as out of physical elements. When I remember leaving my hometown for the first time, the significance is not in the colour of the car I drove in, the small talk with those accompanying me, the sound of the engine or the trucks on the highway.

Certainly those things may be present in memory, but what differentiates that trip from other, physically identical trips is the imbued sense of meaning—the awareness of imminent change, the significance imposed by my knowledge of the circumstances of the trip. Photographs cannot preserve this aspect of the past.

Certainly, with the proper knowledge, a photograph could help evoke the relevant sensations. Most famously, in his 1913-27 novel *In Search of Lost Time* Proust's recollections are prompted by the eating of a *madeleine* cake (Proust, 2015), and is commonly cited as an example of this kind of memory prompt. It is only as a prompt, however, that the photograph functions in this capacity. It is valueless in itself as a link to the past; it cannot preserve these sensations in itself. Furthermore, since the individual itself reconstructs these sensations, it cannot even be seen to reliably prompt them, cannot be seen as a link to those past sensations since they are accessed through the constructive medium of the subject. A photo will not always prompt the same emotions, since a present reaction to the image creates those emotions. If a photograph taken on the last day of my mother's life inspires sadness in the months after her death, in the years after it may inspire fondness, or gratitude, once the pain of loss has passed and reflection is possible. So the photograph is not automatically a link to the emotions, sensations or subjective reality of the time at which it was taken. This relates to its status as an interpretable object. Because interpretation changes with the viewer and as the viewer ages, the photograph does not store any reality of the past beyond the base physical; i.e., an appearance. And then only as a framed version of that reality.

I would like to talk briefly about the implications of digital photographs and the internet, not simply because they are contemporary, but because they provide a particularly vivid example of the proliferation of images and the treachery of the photograph. Today, the image holds a more privileged position than in Benjamin's time, due to the image-centric nature of the internet, specifically. If anything, the abundance and ever-changing nature of digital imagery places it firmly within the realm of the simulacrum, and is one of the most direct examples of its self-replicating nature. With digital photography, the photograph loses even the last vestige of the 'aura' of the object (Benjamin, 1970, p. 221). Benjamin claimed art lost this aura with the advent of photography and mass reproduction; Sontag, later, claimed that the photograph still had the aura of the object, that its reproducible nature actually imbues it with its own aura 'since it is, to begin with, a printed, smooth object,' and 'loses much less of its essential quality when reproduced in a book than a painting does' (Sontag, 2005). Elsewhere, she writes of photographs as 'collectable objects' (Sontag, 2005), implying that the physical object has value beyond what it represents.

Of course, both Benjamin and Sontag are right, in a sense. The photograph is reproducible in a way that a painting is not, while each individual photograph is still its own object. Digital photographs, however, exist only as information in a computer system. They are truly infinitely reproducible, as physical photographs are not, but that is not even the extent of their difference. Digital images proliferate independently of the people that make them. Uploading an image to an online message- or image-board board lets global users save (copy) the image as many times as they like, and repost them elsewhere online as many times as they like. Despite each individual save, or download, being the action of a specific user, the action is anonymous and broadly the effect is automatic. The internet effectively reproduces these images by itself, uncontrollably. It is even reliably uncontrollable—certain kinds of image will almost

certainly proliferate, or go ‘viral’.<sup>25</sup> In this sense it fits Baudrillard’s description of the simulacrum as a system of copies that perpetuates itself. Moreover, in an increasingly internet-focused culture with convenient access to editing software, digital images need adhere less than ever to whatever referent they depict (or appear to). These images proliferate just as quickly as more legitimate images, yet there is no way to tell how authentic they actually are. This may be the most explicit manifestation of Baudrillard’s simulacrum to date: untrue images we cannot identify as untrue, proliferating at an uncontrollable rate, the effect not of an individual, but of the system itself.

It is worth clarifying what I mean when I say that the proliferation of these images is not the result of any specific individual’s effort. Of course, individual people download the images themselves. But an uploaded image is virtually guaranteed to proliferate, regardless of the original uploader’s intentions. That individual people are downloading and sharing these images is not really the point, the effect is that the internet, as a system, makes sure this proliferation occurs. One person’s choice not to duplicate the image is essentially, and practically, irrelevant. Hence the notion of the leaked image, released onto the internet to be copied and reposted *ad infinitum*. We can predict this proliferation, but no person or group can stop it, or necessarily even chart its growth. The internet, as an image-sharing system, is outside the control of those who created it—humanity. Despite being the ones who operate it, we cannot stop it. The subject no longer controls the object, which reproduces automatically.

Ultimately the issue is not to seek a verifiable truth in the images of the past offered to us by memory, but rather to accept its elusive nature and focus on the methodologies through which individuals and cultural groups construct relativistic, pluralistic meanings and identities out of memory narratives. Certainly this is the approach much postcolonial, postmodern and feminist theory takes. This is not a way out of the epistemological quandary created when accepting memory as simulacrum, however. Tackling memory in this way provides a productive outlet for

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed discussion of viral internet phenomena, see Berger & Milkman (2012)

what is ultimately an oppressive situation but does not address the terms of that situation or offer a means of mitigating it.

The simulacrum of memory has profound effects upon the nature of the subject. It paradoxically empowers the subject, through the admittance of the reality of their personally-constructed narratives of self, but simultaneously disperses their subjectivity across multiple ontological levels—as both narrator and character, and through their concept of self spread throughout present self-image, construction of their past, and the various ways in which they are otherwise represented, all of which change over time.

I will now turn to the possibilities that creative work offers in the apprehension and expression of this slippery and complex circumstance. Postmodern literature evades some limitations of criticism, so it is useful in that regard, but it is also the only literature to focus much of its attention upon the effects of the simulacrum on the subject. By interrogating this literature, we may be able to identify corollaries between the status of the subject within the memory as simulacrum conception, and in postmodernity. These corollaries may provide further insight into the nature of individual memory and identity when founded upon a premise of simulation. Critical language is, to an extent, bound by logic, clarity, and reasoned argument. When exploring ideas that evade these elements, creative writing may have an advantage over critical work. Fiction is not bound to reason and order in the same way as criticism, or theory, and, as such, is more free to embody the nature of irrational or contradictory phenomena such as the simulacrum. This may be one reason why many postmodern thinkers favour unorthodox writing styles. Not only does adhering to a reasoned and controlled style contradict some postmodernists' theories (e.g. Derrida's), but a looser, hybridised, or less rational style better embodies and expresses the concerns of postmodernism. Baudrillard cites science fiction as a major influence, and while this is evident in his ideas, his writing voice also often veers towards a narratorial, even fantastical tone. Unlike conventional criticism, creative writing can comfortably

accommodate irrationality, contradiction and paradox into its very form.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, at least, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to mount an investigation into the means by which fiction can achieve what criticism cannot.

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<sup>26</sup> Some postmodern critics have attempted to incorporate their content into the form of their writing. Derrida's attempts to do this are responsible for the opaque nature of his work, and Baudrillard's for the contradictory and evasive nature of his.

## Chapter three

### Literary representations

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Despite few authors explicitly relating memory to simulacra, many have represented the individual in ways consistent with the consequences discussed in the last chapter—as fragmented, as dispersed within and defined by simulacra, and as incapable of reliably granting legitimacy to aspects of their past or memory. I have divided this chapter into three sections, each of which relate to a consequence of conceiving of memory in the way I advocate, and I will analyse the work of one novelist for each section. This structure helps place my work in a historical context, and will also allow me to identify the techniques postmodern novelists implement to depict these conditions.

While my novel shares topics with many others, particularly postmodern novels, these arise for different reasons in my work. In this chapter, I read three postmodern novels because each has a topic in common with my creative work. The difference lies, however, in *why* these topics arise, as well as how they are represented. In the work of American novelist Paul Auster, for example, the condition of a deeply fragmented subjectivity is partly the result of his typical narrators' statuses as linguistic creations and their awareness of that. In my novel, *I'm You*, the protagonist's deeply fragmented subjectivity is the result of my central thesis—memory as a form of simulacrum.

These subjects can all be seen as conditions of the world under certain circumstances. As discussed in Chapter Two, conceiving of memory as a form of simulacrum posits a circumstance that gives rise to certain conditions. The conditions in turn affect the subject. I will read each of

these example texts with regard to a certain condition, respectively, as each demonstrate different means for how the conditions may manifest artistically. I will discuss the dominance of the simulacrum with reference to Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1998); the fragmentation of individual identity/self as other with reference to Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987); and irrational causality in regards to Jan Kjaerstad's *The Seducer* (1993).

It is not necessarily easy to delineate each of these conditions. Each condition is interconnected and, to a greater or lesser degree, appears in the work of each author; the fragmentation of self is as important in Murakami as in Auster. The organisation of these conditions is a general guide rather than a strict categorisation.

The dominance of simulacra in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird  
Chronicle*

What differentiates simulacra from illusion is the reversal and eventual nullification inherent in simulacra—illusion does not undermine the validity of the real, it merely challenges it. While a successful illusion will mislead the viewer, it does not threaten the reality status of what it represents. The crux of the simulacrum, that which differentiates it from illusion, is that it obfuscates the boundaries between real and false, and alters the terms by which we differentiate levels of reality. Illusion does not do this.

Simulacra appear frequently within postmodern literature. Samuel Beckett's proto-postmodern trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable* (1951-53), deeply problematises the relationships between language and reality, between appearance and actuality, between real and false, and does so through linguistic techniques of ambiguity, contradiction and irrational logic. Despite not explicitly engaging with the simulacrum as such, the merging of voices and identities at an ontological level inhabits similar territory. By obscuring distinctions between characters, the trilogy foregrounds the ambiguous and contingent nature of personal identity. By the end of the trilogy, there is no way to determine precisely where one character stops and another begins, or even whether all the characters are different manifestations of the same consciousness. This is an example of how an author may address issues related to the simulacrum without exploring it as such; the simulacrum effaces difference, leading to a situation in which it is impossible to draw meaningful distinctions between concepts. In this sense, Beckett's work prefigures core issues of postmodern philosophy, and is a considerable influence on the work of many postmodern writers, notably Paul Auster.

Other authors also engage with the simulacrum, or related issues. Jorge Luis Borges prefigures these in his short fiction; the simulacrum is specifically evoked in his 1940 short story 'The Circular Ruins', for example. Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) describes a city in which a mad scientist's illusions overrun reality, to the point of altering and eventually defining it. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) offers a vision of society in which a variety of media mediate everyday life. Jonathan Lethem's characters eventually discover that the meaning-generating object of their desire is in fact virtual in *Chronic City* (2009). Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco, William Gibson and John Barth all incorporate various forms of simulacra into their fiction. Significantly, the simulacrum maintains a persistent presence in the work of contemporary Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, who variously employs the simulacrum as structure, metaphor and symbol. I have selected his work for detailed analysis not only because it employs the simulacrum on so many levels, but also because of its close relation to how the creative component of this thesis employs the simulacrum as a structural device. Despite the near-ubiquity of the simulacrum within postmodern fiction, its authors rarely employ it structurally; that is, few novels incorporate the logic of the simulacrum in terms of the 'order, emphasis and rendering' (Abrams, 1993, p. 72) of their component parts. Exactly how *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* and my own novel, *I'm You*, achieve this, albeit differently, is discussed in depth in later sections.

Haruki Murakami's novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* was published in Japan in instalments, over 1994 and 1995, and was translated into English by Jay Rubin in 1998. The novel explores and disturbs the relations between personal and cultural histories, between stories, dreams, media and reality, and between the many guises reality may take and the way they affect each other. Most significantly, Murakami evokes this through the use of alternate worlds. The hidden, psychic, spiritual or secret world is a common Murakami metaphor and structural device for exploring the repressed side of any narrative, or binary structure. Murakami will often incorporate

alternate worlds in his narratives that highlight versions of reality which may be hidden or repressed in everyday life.<sup>27</sup> The dominant logic of this structural device coincides with that of the simulacrum, as a system in which differences dissipate and categories become indistinguishable from one another, forcing us to reevaluate where truth and authenticity lie. In his 2006 book *Murakami Haruki*, Michael Seats cites the simulacrum as ‘the central, structural, and figurative device deployed in Murakami’s early and later fiction’ (Seats, 2006, p. 236).

*The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* tells of an ordinary Japanese salaryman, Toru Okada, who quits his job as a legal clerk ‘not ... for any special reason’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 9), but to look after the home while his wife, Kumiko, supports them. Their cat vanishes—shortly afterwards Kumiko vanishes, too. Thus begins Toru’s journey to find his wife, despite the wishes of her powerful brother, TV personality and ‘hero for the new age’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 74), Noboru Wataya. The reader eventually learns that there is a ‘darkness’ (Murakami, 2003) in Kumiko’s family line that Noboru carries. It grants him mysterious powers but defiles those around him—their sister killed herself due to this defilement. Years prior to the events of the novel, Toru impregnated Kumiko, but, buckling to practical pressures, they terminated the pregnancy. This occurred at the precise moment when Toru was in Sapporo on business, watching a magician perform a pain-defying trick. The abortion somehow activated the familial strain within Kumiko and brought her to Noboru’s attention.

He began to corrupt her emotionally, as he had their sister. Although Kumiko’s sister’s corruption is ambiguous, it is stated in clear terms that Noboru ‘defiled [and] ... violently raped’ (Murakami, 2003) another woman, Creta Kano, who is five years younger than her sister, Malta. Kumiko is also five years younger than her sister, so it could be inferred that Noboru is doing the same to Kumiko as he did to Creta, given the novel’s preoccupation with cycles and recurrence.

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<sup>27</sup> *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) features such a world, as do most of his novels since 1988: *Dance, Dance, Dance* (1988), *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1994-5), *Sputnik Sweetheart* (1999), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), *After Dark* (2004), and *IQ84* (2009-10). His 2014 novel *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* is the first to break this tradition, although events in the novel do suggest the possibility of such worlds.

Toru also goes as far as to suggest that Kumiko's sister suffered the same fate as Creta, and that Noboru drove her to suicide. Eventually, Noboru takes Kumiko away to an undisclosed place, somewhere both psychic and physical, represented in the novel as a mysterious hotel.

In a flashback to before Kumiko left, she and Toru are told the story of a Japanese soldier, Lieutenant Mamiya, who was left to die at the bottom of a well. The experience permanently changed Mamiya, 'burned up the very core' (Murakami, 2003, p. 170) of his identity, rendering him unable to feel emotion or any real sense of connection with the world. Toru is urged to find 'the deepest' (Murakami, 2003, p. 51) place he can if he wishes to examine reality. For him, this happens to be a dried-up well in his neighbourhood. He climbs to the bottom of the well, and from there can psychically access the world in which Kumiko is trapped, which manifests for Toru as a hotel. The well is Toru's gateway to a parallel world, and is the foremost example of Murakami's use of alternate worlds as a narrative technique. The world Toru accesses and in which Kumiko is trapped will be referred to here as the 'hotel world'. It is the novel's prime metaphor for the simulacrum, for a less legitimate world that nevertheless influences and even precedes everyday reality.<sup>28</sup>

The first time Toru climbs to the bottom of the well, the peculiarity of the darkness strikes him: 'In it, you could see something. At the same time you could see nothing at all' (Murakami, 2003, p. 222). Immediately the dual nature of this new space is revealed, comprised of both vision and blindness, presence and absence. He continues, remarking that his 'memories began to take on a power they had never had before. The fragmentary images they called up inside me were mysteriously vivid in every detail' (Murakami, 2003, p. 222). The well is established not only as a paradoxical, doubled space, but one in which previously unprivileged realities become significant, as powerful as their conventional contemporaries. It is in this space

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that the novel contains many interlocking narratives, characters and events. It is rhizomatic in structure, with each element relating to at least one other part of the story. As such, attempting to isolate a specific narrative thread is almost impossible without necessitating the explanation of other narratives. I have attempted to do so here, but my analysis will not attempt to decode or explain each of the numerous levels of meaning and ambiguity within the work.

that Toru, a man without power or status in everyday Japanese society, is able to gain the power to confront Noboru Wataya and find Kumiko. It is a space of reversals. Reversal is meaningless without differences between the things being reversed, however, so it is worth elucidating the differences between Toru and Noboru before continuing.

Toru and Noboru are opposite in every respect. Most significant are the differences in their personalities, as well as in their social status and power. Noboru would 'pour all his energies into maintaining his position as number one' (Murakami, 2003, p. 73), whereas Toru is virtually indifferent to success, leaving his position as a legal clerk for no particular reason (Murakami, 2003, p. 9). Noboru's past is sinister: 'she was defiled by Noboru Wataya. Violently raped' (Murakami, 2003, p. 41), while Toru's past is both mundane and transparent. Until the events of the book, he worked 'the law job [he'd] had since graduation' (Murakami, 2003, p. 9), and since quitting lived a quiet life, cooking, cleaning, and reading at home.

Toru and Noboru's differences are manifested most clearly in their choice of assistant. Cinnamon, who helps Toru, is mute. He is also impeccably clean, organised, handsome and intelligent. He works with his mother, out of a sense of familial loyalty as much as for an income, and they work with Toru out of a belief in his capabilities rather than for profit. Noboru's assistant Ushikawa, on the other hand, is a private detective who is filthy, rude, poorly dressed and immoral. When describing himself, he says that, 'If there are spirits lurking everywhere, I'm one of the dirty little ones down in the corner of a bathroom or a closet' (Murakami, 2003, p.430). Money is his sole motivation, and he talks endlessly. Most telling, however, is his choice of clothing, with 'deep wrinkles', a 'yellow tinge', 'two sizes too small', and with 'one button on the chest ... ready to fall off' (Murakami, 2003, p. 428). Cinnamon, on the other hand, is

possibly the handsomest man [Toru] has ever seen, and wears a shirt of almost painful whiteness and a deep-green necktie with a fine pattern.

Not only was the necktie itself stylish, but it had been tied in a perfect

knot, every twist and dip exactly as one might see in a men's fashion magazine. ... Everything looked brand-new, as if he had just put it on for the first time a few minutes before (Murakami, 2003, p. 363).

The starkness of the oppositions between Cinnamon and Ushikawa suggests that they are deliberately constructed, that oppositions and relations are of great concern for Murakami, and that he is highlighting them here through the use of their assistants as a literary device.

Toru and Noboru's relative statuses in society are of great relevance, too. Unlike Toru's homely, isolated position, Noboru's social status is entirely contained within conventional structures of power and influence: 'Soon the mass media began to introduce him as a hero for the new age' (Murakami, 2003, p. 74). He becomes so ingrained within these structures that he seems 'more relaxed in front of the cameras than in the real world' (Murakami, 2003, p. 75). Toru describes Noboru's worldview as 'fabricated' (Murakami, 2003, p. 75), a combination of 'one-dimensional systems of thought' (Murakami, 2003, p. 75), which he reconfigures instantaneously to serve whatever purpose is necessary. Noboru's shifting, superficial personality contrasts with Toru's hunger for stable reality in the deepest place he can find it. He is encouraged by Mr. Honda, a subtly mystical old man, to 'find the deepest well and go down to the bottom' (Murakami, 2003, p. 51).

Mr. Honda outlines the differences between Noboru and Toru early in the book, although not so explicitly. If you like, he elucidates the differences between conventional structures of power or influence and the means by which others may realise their goals. Early in their marriage, Toru and Kumiko visit Mr. Honda for advice. Toru has asked whether it was right for him to leave his legal job, to which Honda responds.

The law presides over things of this world, in the end. The world where shadow is shadow and light is light, yin is yin and yang is yang, I'm me

and he's him. "I am me and / He is him: / Autumn eve." But *you* don't belong to that world, son. The world you belong to is above or below that (Murakami, 2003, p. 51).

Although Toru does not realise it, Honda is trying to inform him of an essential difference between Toru, and the conventional reality that Noboru Wataya inhabits. Honda makes it quite clear that the conventional world is one of apparently clear boundaries, and of binary relations which grant meaning to concepts. Toru, on the other hand, is not of that world. He resides in a place in which such concepts are not so easily delineated. It is no coincidence that Toru finds the means to challenge Noboru by going *down* the well. In the novel, depth affords the means to bypass conventional structures, and it is at the bottom of the well—far from the reality of mass media and Noboru Wataya—that Toru accesses these means. It is important to establish these differences between Toru and Noboru early, since many of Murakami's strategies rely upon the reversal of such oppositions. This manifests most significantly in Toru's entrance to and activities within the Hotel World, the alternate reality that allows him to bypass traditional structures of power, strike at Noboru, and contact Kumiko.

At one point, Toru addresses the cyclical nature of Noboru's hidden darkness. It is comparable in the novel to Japan's repressed history of violence (Nanjing, and the atrocities represented in the chapters 'The Zoo Attack (or, A Clumsy Massacre)' and 'The Wind-up Bird Chronicle No. 8 (or, A Second Clumsy Massacre)'. Toru says that

a certain kind of stagnation, a certain kind of darkness, goes on propagating itself by its own power in its own self-contained cycle. And once it passes a certain point, no one can stop it (Murakami, 2003, p. 202).

This description is vital to understanding the function of the simulacrum in the novel, Noboru's character, and the means by which Toru may find Kumiko. The 'self-contained cycle' is the simulacrum, something which does not refer to anything outside of itself, and which can only be affected—if at all—from within its own structures of power. This 'stagnation' is inherent in the various simulacra in the novel: contemporary Japan, history, and Noboru himself. It is only because Toru is an outsider, capable of bypassing the endless, closed self-referentiality of the simulacrum, that he is capable of undermining it.

Upon entering the hotel world for the first time, Toru remarks that 'before dawn, in the bottom of the well, I had a dream. But it was not a dream. It was some kind of something that happened to take the form of a dream' (Murakami, 2003, p. 241). Immediately notions of resemblance and difference, falsehood and a blurring of boundaries are associated with the space. The experience appears to be a dream, yet is not. While asleep, dreams seem as real as everyday reality but of course they are not. So the environment Toru enters is a copy of a copy, something that resembles something that resembles something else. Furthermore, this simulacrum is explicitly one in which conventional barriers blur. 'I lose the ability to distinguish between the two kinds of darkness', Toru says. 'I try ... to leap from one reality to another' (Murakami, 2003, p. 393). There can be no doubt that Murakami is developing a world in which multiple realities vie for significance. This becomes very important to the dramatic climax of the novel, when different realities all have effects in the everyday world, making it impossible to determine what 'actually' happened.

During one of Toru's earliest sojourns into the hotel world, he encounters his brother-in-law, Noboru. Or, at least, Toru encounters his image, on television. Noboru appears to be addressing the public, but is talking in abstract, pseudo-philosophical terminology and is clearly only addressing Toru. 'The stupid ones can never break free of the apparent complexity,' Noboru says. 'They might as well be ... down a well ... They can't tell front from back, top from bottom,

north from south' (Murakami, 2003, p. 241). Noboru is obviously addressing Toru directly. He devalues Toru's method of destabilising traditional boundaries, and reinstates the importance of defining categories, of delineating concepts, which Toru does not do. Noboru draws his power from clearly defined, socially enforced distinctions. He is firmly on the dominant side of oppositions such as wealthy/poor, educated/ignorant or famous/anonymous, and it is from the power embedded in these dominant positions that he manages to do what he does, and remain inaccessible by Toru, who is positioned on the subordinate side of each opposition. It is thus important for Noboru to maintain such distinctions, and this is the purpose of his address. The fact that Toru stays home while his wife works defines his social identity; he has no ambition, but his refusal of conventional categories is how he attains power—he can do things someone restricted to conventional roles cannot. After Kumiko's disappearance, Noboru informs Toru that she left him to be with another man. Toru confronts Noboru, saying:

To you, with your values, I may well be nothing but garbage and rocks.  
But I'm not as stupid as you think I am. I know exactly what you've got  
under that smooth, made-for-TV mask of yours ... I could bring it out  
into the light (Murakami, 2003, pp.202-203).

Toru addresses the disparity between his and Noboru's worldviews, and their respective beliefs on what constitutes power. Toru situates political power and media influence as the site of Noboru's strength, but insists that it is his own knowledge of what lies beneath the surface of such things that affords him his own power. In the act of bypassing simulacra modes of power, Toru is later able to confront Noboru. This is one method by which Murakami demonstrates the dominance of simulacra over traditional reality. Toru cannot access Kumiko in everyday reality due to his lack of status within the hierarchical power structures that define it. It is only by breaking down barriers and inhabiting a liminal, non-hegemonic world that he can achieve his goals.

Noboru inhabits the simulated worlds of mass media and politics, is protected by and encased within the massive symbolic structure of late capitalism, and is thus inaccessible by Toru. Indeed, he is such a part of them that his physical body is almost unreal—looking at him in person is ‘like looking at a television image ... he moved the way people on television move’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 197). In the novel, contemporary Japan is defined by simulacra, history, media and politics. It is this world in which Noboru is powerful, and, despite its unreal status, it determines the circumstances of the society. It is ironic, then, that Toru strikes at Noboru through another simulacrum—that of the hotel world. Toru’s simulacrum, and the reversals it allows for, creates an emancipatory reaction against the structures that empower Noboru. A simulacrum to undermine another simulacrum. That Kumiko is trapped inside this world further deepens the play of reversals occurring between levels of reality in the novel. It is an example of the constant deferral of the simulacrum—what is false becomes real and then becomes false again, *ad infinitum*.

After waking from his first visit to the hotel world, Toru discovers that someone has closed the lid to the well, trapping him inside. He suffers intense hunger pangs and delirium, in an echo of the experience suffered by Lieutenant Mamiya. Moreover, Toru experiences the sensation that time has become meaningless. When someone finally rescues him, he feels reality has changed: ‘as if, in the days I was down the well, the old reality of this place had been shoved away by a new reality’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 285). And indeed, it has. He shaves his beard to discover a vicious purple mark on one cheek. A character associated with Mamiya (during World War Two) had an identical mark, so its appearance on Toru represents the intersection of three separate realities—everyday Japan, the hotel world, and the historical world of the past.<sup>29</sup> This demonstrates the power of the simulacrum, for if the effect of a cause in one reality is present in all realities, it is no longer possible to differentiate between them, to assign legitimacy to one over

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<sup>29</sup> Toru’s mark is implied to be in some sense hereditary, mysteriously and irrationally transmitted to him through history. In this sense it is similar to the Wataya family’s ‘darkness’, explicitly described as a familial trait.

the other. ‘Everything was intertwined,’ Toru explains, ‘with the complexity of a three-dimensional puzzle — a puzzle in which truth was not necessarily fact and fact not necessarily truth’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 527).

Of great significance here is the similarity to Noboru’s earlier dismissal of Toru, that he cannot tell ‘up from down’. For Toru, however, this is not a bad thing. Where Noboru sees failure, Toru sees the possibility of attaining his goals. It is not that Toru actually is failing, but that this very lack of differentiation is what allows him means to Kumiko. Noboru relies on firm distinctions and the power that flows from them, so for him, an indifference to distinctions is a form of failure. Toru, however, having no power within traditional structures, is empowered when they dissipate. This is precisely because, in Mr. Honda’s words, he belongs to a world ‘above or below’ that one, one in which categories shift and meld, rather than one in which ‘I am me and he is him’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 51).

Toru’s experience in the well leads him to realise that the alternate world is his only means of accessing Kumiko and defeating Noboru. At first he can only see the rooms of the hotel from above, as if on a blueprint, but ‘from one detail to the next, there is no connection, no warmth ... But it’s worth a try ... a connected reality takes shape little by little ... I sense the wall that separates me from that place melting’ (Murakami, 2003, p. 394). He knows the only way to get where he needs to be is to break through the barriers separating concepts, that these barriers operate physically, socially, figuratively, and so on.

Going to the bottom of the well becomes a ritual, which Toru repeats identically each time. Amongst other objects, he takes a baseball bat which bears an abstract relation to Noboru. Late in the novel, Toru is in a downtown area of Tokyo and notices the magician who performed the pain-defying trick in Sapporo at the moment Kumiko had the abortion. He follows the magician to an apartment block and is attacked by him—with a baseball bat. Toru wrestles the bat from the man and, uncharacteristically, thrashes him mercilessly. This man is strongly—and

irrationally—associated with Noboru Wataya and Kumiko’s abortion, and this bashing is a vital point for plotting the interaction of various levels of reality in the book. It is implied that Kumiko had the abortion at the precise moment when Toru saw the man perform the trick. Although the multiple timelines of the novel are difficult, or impossible, to plot precisely, it is reasonable to assume that when Toru bashed the magician, other entities were similarly attacked in different realities of the novel.

After bashing the magician, Toru returns to the hotel world and does break down the barriers and accesses Kumiko’s room. He does not immediately know that it is her, as she remains in the shadows and will not reveal her face. His attempts to break the barriers between hotel rooms manifest in a rather obvious symbolic action as him attempting to physically pass through the wall of Kumiko’s room. Significantly, he succeeds immediately after he discovers his baseball bat has gone missing. This is important because it occurs at a time in the plot when all realities are becoming unstable. The novel implies that characters existed in multiple times and places, have multiple incarnations, or appear as something other than what they are. Toru visits the well and discovers the bat is missing. Upon entering the hotel world he crosses the barrier, leaves Kumiko’s hotel room, and wanders into the lobby, where several people are watching television. A news story comes on—someone perfectly resembling Toru has badly bashed Noboru Wataya with a baseball bat. This event signifies an irrational cross-causality between everyday Japan and the liminal hotel world. Identifying a linear causal structure between the events in the worlds is impossible. Just as, for Baudrillard, the simulacrum is rhizomatic and ‘instantaneous’ (Bogard, 1994), the world of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* becomes similarly porous, flattening difference between characters, realities and events. and allowing an irrational cross of influence.

People in the lobby recognise Toru as the assailant and he flees, returning to Kumiko’s room. He speaks with her, although she will still not reveal her identity. She hands him a baseball

bat tacky with blood and matted hair—presumably the bat used to bash Noboru, but also echoing Toru bashing the magician. An armed assailant enters the room, his face hidden by shadow, and attacks Toru, who defeats him, but receives a wound to the shoulder in the process. The man falls face down in the darkened room. Kumiko begs Toru not to reveal the face of the man he has beaten, which he agrees to. This may be because the man *is* Noboru, and to reveal this would be to reveal the impossible irrationality of the simulacrum—an ontological nightmare too terrible to face.

Upon returning to everyday Japan, Toru finds the well filling with water. This symbolises Toru's victory and the unblocking of a spiritual or psychic obstacle, as well as barriers broken down. Toru's knife wound remains—events in the simulated world have effects in privileged, everyday reality. Cinnamon rescues him and informs him that Noboru collapsed in public and is in a serious condition, suffering 'some congenital weakness in a blood vessel in his brain' (Murakami, 2003, p. 598). We learn in a letter from Kumiko that she intends to pull the plug on her brother's life support, although her position in either the real world or the hotel world is ambiguous. The ending signifies the utter obfuscation of boundaries between levels of reality. Toru's TV presence bashed Noboru, within the dream world, while Toru bashed the magician in everyday reality, perhaps simultaneously. The magician represented the moment at which Kumiko had her abortion and the entire thing started, and is also powerfully yet irrationally linked with Noboru. Kumiko, however, hands Toru a bloodied bat, indicating that in some way, she was responsible for Noboru's injuries. Finally, back in the everyday world, Kumiko informs Toru that she intends to terminate Noboru's life support. Given other links between the hotel world and everyday reality, it is difficult not to assign some significance to the fact that Noboru suffers a failing in his brain, and that in the hotel world he was bashed in the head. This ending supports the notion that simulacra have the power to affect reality, and, perhaps, that Toru has

succeeded in recreating the world in line with his non-conformist position, rather than one in which 'I am me and he is him' (Murakami, 2003, p. 51).

Toru never learns where Kumiko actually was, and his ontological position is ambiguous to her, as well: 'I often used to dream of you ... you were always searching desperately for me. We were in a kind of labyrinth, and you would come up to almost where I was standing' (Murakami, 2003, p. 603).<sup>30</sup> As such, their worlds are respectively both true and false, and reflect one another's in that hers seems ambiguous to him, and his to her. The capability of the simulacrum to disturb boundaries between realities powers the movement of this narrative. When privileged realities are affected by events in non-privileged ones, and when the identities of characters and their functions are obfuscated, scattered across different realities, the dominance of the simulacrum emerges as a means of overcoming hegemonic ordering strategies.

Ultimately, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* critiques the notion that human realities can be neatly cordoned off. In Baudrilllean terms, the difference between the realities has imploded. Murakami employs the simulacrum as a structural narrative device, as a means of destabilising traditional oppositions between concepts or realities. His work suggests that there is no final conclusion or legitimising referent for any human construct, and that the postmodern subject is locked in a system of endless deferral. Connections can be made and remade, and relations define our positions, yet we can reach none of these positions are stable or final. As Toru says to Kumiko in their final encounter:

What it all boils down to is that you have gone over from my world to the world of Noboru Wataya. That shift is the important thing. Even if you did, in fact, have sex with another man or other men, that is just a secondary matter (Murakami, 2003, p. 578).

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<sup>30</sup> The fact that in the hotel world, Toru always sees Kumiko in bed could suggest that they are meeting in their dreams, that he is sleeping in the well. This is supported by Toru likening the experience of entering the hotel world to falling asleep.

Toru is stressing the importance of relations here, of movement, that the significance lies in the shift in Kumiko's position, rather than any content associated with that position, or her previous one. And this relates to the simulacrum, to the dominant logic of the postmodern world. When all difference is flattened, as Baudrillard claims, nothing can be exchanged for meaning, there is no content, as such, just equivalent signs exchanged with each other. This is why the content of Kumiko's actions are irrelevant to Toru, but her movement is.

The novel ends on this note. Noboru is injured but Kumiko is still missing, and Toru has no more direction in his life than he did at the start of the book. But why should it be resolved? Toru's world is defined by simulacrum, is effectively unreal, incapable of becoming real. Any resolution would suggest a resting point, a final place where meaning could be found. That is not the way his world—the world of simulacra—works. The cycle is endlessly deferrable, incapable of resolving itself or of being resolved—Everything is movement between times, places people, realities. The novel represents this through the notion of 'flow' (Murakami, 2003, p. 51), most specifically after the final confrontation, when Toru's well begins to fill with water.

This notion of flow, of realities seeping into one another, is inherent to *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. That said, the interplay of, or movement between, concepts appears in other postmodern literatures as well. In Murakami, there are crossovers between people, historical events, physical and psychic spaces, and so on. Paul Auster's novella 'Ghosts' contains similar crossovers, albeit employed for different purposes. One of the most distinct similarities between the works is the interconnected and undifferentiable nature of place and self, and self and other.

## The self as other in Paul Auster's 'Ghosts'

The fragmentation of the self was a common subject in twentieth century art and scholarship, and different fields of thought will explain this fragmentation differently. For example, the fragmentation and alienation one may feel as a result of Baudrillard's loss of the social (Baudrillard, 1999, pp. 80- 81) is of a different nature than that produced by memory's shifting structure and evasive meanings. The varieties of social roles one performs, in the manner described by Goffman (Goffman, 1959), likewise constitute another kind of fragmentation, with different consequences. Postcolonialism, feminist theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis all posit different causes for the fragmented nature of postmodern identities. So it is no secret that fragmentation—pluralism, inconsistency, contradiction, performance—forms the basis of many contemporary theories of identity (Mansfield, 2000). What must be examined are the causes and effects of the multitudinous kinds of fragmentations taking place.

Paul Auster's 1987 novel *The New York Trilogy* does not deal with memory or its consequences, but the kinds of fragmentation experienced by its protagonists relate closely to what I describe. Positioning the individual at the intersection of language, narrative, genre and physical reality, Auster's characters experience an uncanny alienation from themselves—a doubling—that reflects what is described critically in the previous chapter. The concerns of this thesis and those of Auster's novel are related in this respect, although they differ when describing the causes of these conditions. Likewise, Auster's preoccupation with space and how it determines individual identity is deeply relevant to my own creative work. This section analyses Auster's novella 'Ghosts' (from *The New York Trilogy*) as an examination of the postmodern individual and the effect physical space has upon its fragmentation.

*The New York Trilogy* is divided into three sections. Each functions as a novella, but all are enclosed within the novel frame; the relations between these sections determine the overall meaning of the work. The second part of the novel, 'Ghosts', tells of Blue, a private detective in the 1940s. Blue is hired to stake out a man, Black. Blue's employer, White, has rented him an apartment directly across the street from Black's. Their windows face each other, mirror-like; both men are clearly visible to each other from their own apartments. It is this constant co-presence that determines them as individuals, and which defines their spaces. Blue sets up his stakeout, but nothing happens. Black doesn't move from his desk for more than a few minutes each day, seemingly spending his entire time writing and reading.<sup>31</sup>

The novella provides a complex examination of the self as a product of relations, manifested between two individuals and the spaces they inhabit. As mentioned previously, Auster's characters are situated at the cross-point of the realms that construct them. These realms are that of the other, and the other's presence within the subject; and the role of discourses, or means of structuring reality, in this case genre, history, and language. The novella also implies that the subject's identity is partly imbued within the spaces they inhabit. This suggests that the concept of selfhood is not limited to the body, but that the space around the subject informs and is informed by the self. Ultimately, Auster presents a subject variously constructed out of multiple threads, none of which attain dominance, but which fluctuate in a perpetual interchange of meaning.

Most of the novella takes place within Blue's apartment. More accurately, perhaps, the identity of the space inheres as much in the physical site of Blue's apartment as in the constant presence of Black's. Auster brings the difficulty of clearly defining the identity of a space to our attention early on, when he introduces us to Blue's apartment:

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<sup>31</sup> Given Auster's preoccupation with language, and his later acknowledgement that his characters are, on a fundamental level, linguistic creations, Black's action in this regard is significant. Not only does it echo Beckett's *Molloy*, presented as Molloy's own writing, it suggests writing and language as acts of self-creation, intimately tied with the nature of the subject.

The address is unimportant. But let's say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument. Some quiet, rarely travelled street not far from the bridge — Orange Street perhaps (Auster, 1998, p. 138).

If Auster were writing in the realist tradition, his goal would be to convince us of the reality of his constructions. He would be precise and use concrete language, rather than appearing to choose his setting arbitrarily, apparently indifferent to fact. 'For the sake of argument' suggests Auster has no special stake in the setting of the novella, that it may as well have been Chinatown, or Liberty Island, or anywhere else. Of course, Auster does in fact have his reasons for this setting, so why pretend the setting is arbitrary? This is, in part, a strategy by which Auster may situate the space of the apartment itself between text and reality. Auster mentions that Orange Street is the historical site where Walt Whitman handset *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>32</sup> Auster and his readers also want to think of the apartment as a concrete space in which characters move and things happen, for the purposes of story (at least before this construction is subverted). At the same time the apartment is a linguistic construct, and for all Auster's casual language, or perhaps through it, he is revealing that fact to us here. In this way the apartment is caught between three realities—the historical site, the site as story, and the site as linguistic construction. So from the beginning, Blue's apartment is a paradoxical space that exists on several different levels. Ilana Shiloh explains that subsequently the world of the text materializes and the extra-textual space becomes immaterial' (Shiloh, 2012, p. 73). Readers can no longer be certain which is real, nor how they should read this space.

Through its relation to the mirrored space (Black's apartment), a normally domestic, comfortable, non-threatening space incorporates its own opposite, and becomes claustrophobic and alienating. Both Black and Blue become othered, can see themselves as external objects as well as their own personal subjects. The presence of the other gives them meaning, but

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<sup>32</sup> Auster's claim is hard to validate. *Leaves of Grass* was certainly printed in Brooklyn in 1855, but the newspaper office at which Whitman worked, on Orange Street, burnt down in 1848 (Browner, 1999).

simultaneously undermines their own autonomy. They lose definition as they gain it. Writing on Auster and drawing on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Shiloh (2012) claims that 'while the Other's look makes me a gift of my identity, it at the same time destabilizes my universe. The Other's existence usurps my privileged position in the world' (Shiloh, 2012, p. 62).

This becomes especially troublesome when, as in 'Ghosts', aspects of the self are located within the other, and vice-versa: 'To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself' (Auster, 1998, p. 190). Black and Blue's identities are so deeply meshed with one another that they maintain the paradoxical positions of being both self and other—to themselves and one another. What this results in is a circular, futile system of alienation and identification. In the moment of identification with an aspect of the self, the subject is simultaneously alienated from it, as it appears as part of the other rather than within the self. We see parts of ourselves as parts of the other, as imposter elements, as the other residing inside us.

Blue wakes at eight every morning, eats breakfast, and spends the day watching Black. It is this ritual, enacted within the shared space, that begins to dissolve Blue's identity: 'He needs me ... he needs my eye looking at him. He needs me to prove he's alive' (Auster, 1998, p. 184). The ritual leads to a point at which their identities are so fused, through their relations that blur conventional categories, that the only way to establish his own identity again is to break the ritual. He tries to, but by that point the men are so tightly fused that it makes no real difference: 'How he knows [what Black is doing] is something of a mystery to him, but the fact is that he is never wrong' (Auster, 1998, p. 158). Not all moments are like that, however. Sometimes he feels so cut off from Black that he 'loses the sense of who he is' (Auster, 1998, p. 158), suggesting that his relation to Black imbues him with his own sense of identity. As the story develops, Blue falls even more harmoniously into step with Black, and 'discovers the inherent paradox of his situation ... the closer he feels to Black, the less he finds it necessary to think about him. In other words, the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is' (Auster, 1998, p. 160).

At one point, Blue goes to a baseball game and finally believes to have shed Black's presence. He has a transcendent experience, 'struck by the sharp clarity of the colours around him: the green grass, the brown dirt, the white ball, the blue sky above. Everything is distinct from every other thing (Auster, 1998, p. 161). This is a clear reference to the interlinked identities of characters Blue, Black and White (Black and White are eventually revealed to be the same man). Unlike these human subjects, however, the external objects at the baseball game are autonomous and independent, 'distinct' from each other. Blue is only capable of seeing these independent objects because he has removed himself from the ritual space of the apartment, has, at least superficially, broken out of his oppressive network of relations.

Or so he thinks. Living in the 1940s, Blue unintentionally attends Jackie Robinson's first game—the first time an African-American played at a national level. He 'finds it difficult to take his eyes off Robinson, lured constantly by the blackness of the man's face' (Auster, 1998, p. 161). While, historically, Robinson's presence certainly would have been incongruous, there is another reason for Blue's steadfast attention. Situated in a world self-consciously constructed from language, the noted 'blackness' of Robinson's face is no coincidence. Blue finds himself 'cheering whatever Robinson does' (Auster, 1998, p. 161), thoroughly identifying with the man, and he does this because one vital thread of Blue's identity is his status as a feature in a system of language. Auster makes it clear throughout the novella that these characters are such signifiers. Their names are particularly telling in this regard: Blue, Black, White, Brown, etc. Regardless of the signified, Blue is watching the same signifier: A black (Black) man. Before anything else, language is a system of signification, with the signifier offering the only stability, since each signified is liable to change. So for an entity constructed of language, Blue's watching 'a black man' is no different to his watching 'a Black man'. As he leaves the stadium, he notices that he did not think of Black 'even once' (Auster, 1998, p. 161). Of course, he was watching the entire time. More than that, he thoroughly identified with him, was linked in an identical manner to

how he feels with Black. The other man is so ingrained in Blue that even watching a symbol of him is unnoticeable, is natural practice. This is an example of how the signifier usurps meaning from the signified. Because Blue himself is just a marker, signifying all these other things (genre detective, man, self, etc.), he can only relate to other markers on the superficial level of signification, i.e. as signifiers. He is not watching Jackie Robinson, the first professional African-American baseball player. He is watching the signifier and the signifier alone: the word 'black'.

Blue eventually confronts and kills Black. As is typical of similar stories, the double is not permitted to exist alongside its original—one must go. Dolar explores this tendency in her important article “‘I Will Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny” (1991). It is only once the mirror is shattered, so to speak, that Blue can regain his autonomy, break out of the cycle of ritual and release himself into the world. As a linguistic construct, Blue is freed when the story ends and he leaves the apartment, leaves the ritual space, the space both textual and physical, historical, imaginary and real.

Certainly, an element of irrationality is strong in 'Ghosts'. Not only is the premise itself unlikely, but the deep alienation and fragmentation suffered as a result of Blue's situation is probably exaggerated for Auster's aesthetic and conceptual purposes. Regardless, one must read the book as Auster (presumably) intended it to be read, as an exploration of notions of an alienated and fragmented postmodern self, rather than as a realist text. Jan Kjaerstad's 1993 novel *The Seducer* explores a similarly fragmented postmodern self, but situates irrationality and non-linear temporalities as the site of its construction. Kjaerstad appears to propose that human subjects are constructed out of necessarily fragmented narratives, and that human subjectivity is thus similarly fragmented. Both authors depict similarly fragmented subjects, although in very different ways and for very different purposes.

## Irrational causality and instantaneity in Jan Kjaerstad's *The Seducer*

Norwegian author Jan Kjaerstad's 1993 novel *The Seducer* purports to be a biography of Jonas Wergeland, a fictional character famous for his revolutionary television program, *Thinking Big*. An unknown figure narrates his story, which is told through non-chronological episodes that are linked by the recurring, central moment of Jonas returning home to find his wife murdered. The events of his life circle this axis. The narrator makes irrational causal links between sections, jumps backwards and forwards in time, thoroughly distorting the linearity of conventional time. This structure embodies Kjaerstad's unique conception of identity formation, and relates to the perpetual immediacy of the postmodern simulacrum.

It is important to note that the irrational causality explored here occurs not just on the level of discourse, but also on the level of story. The former would entail a story in which the events occur linearly but which are presented out of order. In the latter, the very events of the story occur in a nonlinear or irrational way, regardless of the manner in which they are presented. They may 'describe a world where time actually and objectively moves backward' (Ryan, 2009, p. 143), for example. This type of irrational causality is uncommon; more typically it occurs on the level of discourse; see Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*, Beckett's trilogy, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, or the works of Joyce, Woolf, William S. Burroughs or Thomas Pynchon. This kind of non-linearity is extremely common; even a flashback is such a device. Alfred Chester's *The Exquisite Corpse* (1967) and D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* (1981) are two books that incorporate thoroughly irrational, non-linear temporalities on the level of story as well as discourse.

In *The Seducer*, events are certainly non-linear on the level of discourse. This is evident in the novel's fractal, tangential and episodic structure. The narrator also insists that this is truer than presenting the events in a linear fashion. This is because to grasp the multitude of influences on Jonas Wergeland's life choices and events, to properly elucidate the complex causal mechanisms that led to his wife's murder, the events had to be presented in that way, or so the narrator claims. Their content determines their structure. To present them linearly would be to mislead, to misrepresent the reality of the events described. Furthermore, the narrator explicitly addresses irrational causality on the level of story:

Gabriel gained a fresh insight into the chain of cause and effect: it suddenly dawned on him that he had not slept with that woman because he was attracted to her but in order to avenge the cut to his eye. As if the latter had come first (Kjaerstad, 2006, p. 109).

Likewise in D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, a pain in one character's ovaries precedes the wound itself, and is actually described as its cause. Unlike *The White Hotel*, which suggests a linear, if reversed, causality, Kjaerstad goes on to posit a rhizomatic network of causes and effects. While this network is most explicit in the structure of the novel, there is also good reason to believe that atemporal, rhizomatic networks inform his conception of identity. Certainly this is present in the form of the novel (a fragmented work meant to represent a life), but also appears explicitly, in Kjaerstad's use of the metaphor of identity as being like sediment.

For Kjaerstad, identity is both a collection of narratives that build up inside the subject and simultaneously are the subject, which the subject draws upon in order to establish a sense of identity. Axel says that

... every human being could be said to be as much an accumulation of stories as of molecules. I am, in part, all the things I have read over the

years. They don't leave me. They settle inside me like — how can it put it? — like sediment (Kjaerstad, 2006, p. 419).

He describes himself as an 'accumulation of stories', rather than as a consistent, stable entity. Even when Axel appeals to a scientific definition of what constitutes a person, the sense of fragmentation is still present as an accumulation of molecules, rather than as a cohesive, singular entity. Indeed, this fragmentation is at the heart of Kjaerstad's conception of the subject, both implicitly, in that he takes a kaleidoscopic, non-linear approach to constructing Jonas' life, but also explicitly. The novel's recurring motif, *how do the pieces of a life fit together?*, implies an essential fragmentation of the subject. This view relates to irrational causality in narrative because it suggests a manner of identity construction in which the subject exists as a collection of stories, events, impressions, experiences—subjects are literally the events of their lives, a mixture, rather than a stable entity to which things happen. Their content determines their structure. What Kjaerstad's novel attempts to demonstrate is that these experiences may occur chronologically but that their influence is not linear, because events make their impact with no regard to causality. They build together into an atemporal mixture from which we draw our ideas about ourselves and the events we encounter. 'Chronology is not the same as causality,' Kjaerstad writes. 'Anyone wishing to understand Jonas Wergeland's life will first have to dispense with the belief that the passage of time says anything meaningful about cause and effect' (Kjaerstad, 2006, p. 67). Kjaerstad thus divorces causality from temporality.

In his 1994 essay 'Baudrillard, Time and the End', William Bogard argues that simulation is 'the cancellation of distance, space, and ultimately (linear, historical) time itself, and the substitution of simulated distances, simulated times, etc., the immediacy or embrasure of a pure, encompassing "experience"' (Bogard, 1994, p. 317). Likewise with Kjaerstad's sediment, the function of the simulacrum levels all distances. The sediment is the accumulation of different points in time, yet is accessible instantaneously by the subject. Likewise, in a virtual realm,

concepts such as distance (temporal or physical) become meaningless, since all is simulated, all exists conceptually, and all is immediately accessible. The notion of linear time becomes questionable. If the real is the simulacrum and the contents of the simulacrum are immediately accessible, then linear time becomes removed from its position of privilege. Bogard describes the simulacrum's general form as that of 'repetition in advance' (Bogard, 1994, p. 319), arguing that it means 'any time is possible, and time flows in any direction ... it makes time split off from itself (from the linear time of history, the certain movement of the present into the past and the future)' (Bogard, 1994, p. 319). While Kjaerstad does not explicitly relate identity to simulation, it is evident from the above discussion that his representation of the relation between temporality and identity shares aspects with Baudrillard's description of temporality in the simulacrum.

While Kjaerstad's novel is not about simulation per se, it is certainly about identity, and presents fragmentation and irrational causality as two primary aspects of it. My conception of memory as simulacrum shares these aspects. Kjaerstad's artistic representation of these notions—a fractal, tangential structure and an irrational causality on the level of both discourse and story—constitute successful creative strategies for addressing this conception of identity. Furthermore, this manner of conceiving of identity simultaneously aligns with Baudrillard's notion of temporality under the simulacrum, as well as with my own conception of individual identity. Irrational causality is an appropriate method for creatively exploring these ideas because it destabilises traditional notions of linearity. If all is simulated, then things are only separated by simulated durations, simulated distances—a linear trajectory for history is lost.

Despite demonstrating examples of the consequences of simulated memory, none of the above texts are actually about memory, nor do they collect these examples in one place. Positioning the three conditions examined above in the context of individual memory, I attempt to appropriate postmodern creative strategies for new purposes. In discussing my creative work, I will refer to the works and techniques already described, but also elucidate new methods for

presenting these phenomena in a literary context, significantly, the use of the simulacrum as a model for narrative structure, and the manner in which that structure represents the view of memory as simulacrum.

## Chapter four

### Embodying the memory simulacrum in creative writing

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The creative component of my thesis is a novel entitled *I'm You*. It attempts to answer the research questions posed in the exegesis by demonstrating the conceptual effects of episodic memory as simulacra. The novel concerns Paul, an Australian anthropologist, who returns from an eighteen-month research trip in rural Argentina to learn that his oldest friend, Mark, has died. During his time away, Paul's close friends have had time to grieve, but Paul's return forces them to reopen the wounds. Tension arises between Paul and the group, specifically due to his relationship with Mark's widow, Klara, with whom Paul was once intimate. Ultimately Paul is ostracised from the group.

Thus isolated, Paul goes on long walks through the suburbs of Melbourne to take his mind off his situation. He stumbles across an abandoned house that resembles his childhood home. A high school dropout, Lana, lives nearby and the two form a friendship. As a pretext for spending his days there, Paul tells Lana he bought the house and is renovating it. Their friendship develops but Paul grows more and more obsessed with the events of his past, simultaneously refusing to acknowledge Mark's absence. Approximately a third of the way into the novel, mistakenly addressed letters arrive at the house Paul inhabits by day. He and Lana read them. The letters constitute a confessional narrative written by a disgraced academic, Christian Ellis, and detail his attempts to woo and corrupt a young woman, Sophie, during World War One. He did this, from the Australian home front, through a series of letters imitating Sophie's absent, soldier fiancée, Lynton Ashby. The letters Paul and Lana find are Ellis confessing his misdeeds to Lynton, and form an uninterrupted break in the middle of the novel. Much of what occurs in these letters resembles Paul's situation, and motifs recur between both narratives.

The final third of the novel returns to Paul, but things have changed. He is detached from the present—elements of his past begin to appear in his day-to-day life and he becomes unable to differentiate between what has happened to him and what currently is. Lana begins to notice his descent into simulacra (madness, from her perspective) but despite her attempts, is unable to help him. Late one night, Paul meets an older version of himself—a temporal doppelganger—and his identity disperses, merging with those of the people from his past, and with Christian Ellis’.

## Rationale

I chose to explore the issues of the thesis through the writing of a novel for several reasons.

Foremost because the first-person perspective provides an access point to the narrating subject's consciousness. One could describe the idea of memory as simulacrum as a radical version of the individual being an unreliable narrator of their own life. As such, having an unreliable narrator in the literary sense seemed appropriate. The first-person perspective also meant that events in the novel could have their truth status deferred—an omniscient perspective would have needed to clarify whether everything that appeared to happen in the novel actually did. Implementing an unreliable narrator meant that I could sustain a much greater sense of ambiguity. I also chose the novel form because I believe there are certain ideas better explored by the open, flexible and inclusive medium of fiction than through criticism, which can be quite rigid, and often attempts to provide answers. Some ideas, such as the simulacrum, are more effectively evoked through less rational mediums. In his 2012 book *Post-postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*, Jeffrey Nealon discusses the 'mongrel' (Nealon, 2012, p. xi) nature of postmodern theory. His comments can be applied to my choice to use fiction instead of critical writing:

in a paradoxical, fragmented world, one needed theoretical tools that worked both with and through notions of chiasmus, undecidability, open-endedness, and so forth (Nealon, 2012, pp. xi-xii).

The idea of the medium working through the notions that it shares with its content is of immense value for such investigations, since the content itself evades easy designation or description.

Given that the creative project is, in part, an attempt to explore a philosophical idea, it might seem reasonable to assert that a theoretical or critical approach would be more appropriate. Conventional (particularly analytic) philosophy, and critical theory as a subset of philosophy, is obliged to provide answers: to explain, to rationalise, to order concepts neatly and clearly. Because of the contradictory, indefinable and ultimately uncertain nature of memory as simulacrum, a traditional critical approach is too rigid to properly depict the issues at hand. In his book *Impossible Exchange* (2001), Baudrillard identifies a failure of traditional analysis in the postmodern era, arguing that deterministic, realist analysis is undermined by ‘another kind of functioning — probabilistic, relativistic, aleatory’ (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 26), and that the realist order is embedded within this:

in this de-polarized space (is it still a social or historical space?),  
traditional analysis no longer has any purchase, and solutions worked out  
at this level come to grief on a general uncertainty in the same way as  
classical calculations come to grief in quantum physics (Baudrillard,  
2001, p. 26).

Baudrillard argues that the rationalist model of analysis is no longer relevant to a world as relativistic and fluctuating as the postmodern one, that this era is unexplainable in rational terms. It makes more sense, then, that a text attempting to embody or explore such a world would be, on some level, irrational.

The difficulty (or impossibility) of reliably answering questions, or finding stable footing, can be seen in that *I'm You* tends to pose questions rather than answer them. It may be better to present memory as simulacrum in a format that does not demand clear and final statements, one that can successfully incorporate contradiction, gaps and ambiguity. Baudrillard's work, while critical theory of a sort, is an experimental type of theory, incorporating its subject matter's contradictions and confluences of terms into its very form. This is different from philosophy of

the analytic tradition, but is common to Continental and postmodern philosophy, most notably that of the likes of Lyotard, Derrida and Hélène Cixous. Indeed, Lyotard describes postmodernism as ‘deny[ing] itself the solace of good forms’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 78), and certainly this is evident in the form of his critical work. Given the unresolvable nature of postmodern phenomena, forms that rest upon inflexible, Enlightenment rationality; logic; or attempt to provide defining answers, are insufficient in addressing these phenomena. Forms that can embody ambiguity, irrationality, etc., are more suitable because the issues at hand escape final answers, need to be shown, through both the style and content of the text, rather than simply spoken about. In discussing differences between modernist and postmodernist writings on the sublime, for example, Lyotard argues that modernism attempts ‘to represent the fact that the non-representable exists’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 78). The act of attempting to represent the simulacrum artistically is similar to the modernist project in that descriptions of a non-representable thing will be insufficient compared to texts that attempt to embody non-representable traits such as ambiguity, contradiction and confluence. Fiction can have these characteristics and still be successful.

The premise of a narrator who loses the ability to discern past from present allows for other narrative techniques that further the conceptual and artistic goals of the novel. Six of these are particularly significant. The framed narrative is one, but I will not explore it at great length since there is already significant research on this technique in postmodern fiction.<sup>33</sup> Waugh argues that postmodern fiction utilises framed narratives in order to call attention to the layered discursive levels that constitute human reality (Waugh, 1984), while Linda Hutcheon describes postmodern framed narratives as ones that critique the notion that any reality can be presented objectively (Hutcheon, 1988). The figure of the double, or doppelganger, is also significant to my work since the trope neatly incorporates elements of doubling, repetition, fragmentation of self

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<sup>33</sup> See Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative* (1980), Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction* (1984) and Debra Malina’s *Breaking the Frame* (2002).

and the self as other; it is an effective symbol for memory as simulacra. *I'm You* also questions the traditional usage of the doppelganger as an omen of death (Rank, 1989), repositioning it in a postmodern context. I will discuss the structure of the novel at length, particularly its mirror-like quality, as well as its fragmented and episodic nature. This fragmentation incorporates a deeply irrational causality, which will be explored in the context of temporal simulacra, images of the past undermining the validity of the immediate present.

## Framing devices

Embedding narratives within one another, or framing narratives, is a technique as old as written narrative itself (for example, *The Odyssey*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Decameron*) and is present in many canonical Western texts, including Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), James Hogg's *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The purpose of the framing device in these earlier texts varies, but often involved a need for multiple perspectives (as in Hogg or Bronte), or a distance from content either possibly supernatural, in the case of James, or morally repugnant, in the case of Conrad. Regardless of their specific purposes, pre-modernists used frames to strengthen certain literary themes. In this sense, the pre-modernist frame was no different from any other literary technique in its purpose—it was implemented in service of a specific theme.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, framed narratives were employed to question the premises and assumptions of narrative itself, appearing in the works, in particular, of metafictionists such as John Fowles, John Barth, William Gass, Kurt Vonnegut and Georges Perec. A major goal for these writers was to undermine the authority of the narrative voice and thereby suggest that all narrators are, in fact, unreliable. The technique is still common, particularly in the work of later postmodernists. Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), and *Oracle Night* (2003); Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1998); David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) are contemporary examples of novels that incorporate framed narratives. Typically in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the frame device is used to highlight and problematise the artificial nature of narrative, and to interrogate the artificiality inherent in all forms of human construction (Malina, 2002). Debra

Malina describes this activity as ‘dramatiz[ing] the problematization of the boundary between fiction and reality endemic to the postmodern condition’ (Malina, 2002, p. 2). Framed narratives in Murakami’s *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, for example, allow him to question the manner in which we construct personal and cultural histories, and how we are doomed to repeat our mistakes. More radical, however, is the earlier work of authors like Fowles, who persistently level the ontologies of reader and protagonist, breaking the frame between them, blurring the boundaries of author/character or real-world/fictional-world. One example occurs in Fowles’ 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, when a character buys a toby jug that Fowles, the author, claims to own (Fowles, 1998). This section of the thesis will attempt to discern whether or not the conceptual implications of the frame result in a clearer depiction of memory as a form of simulacrum. This section evaluates the artistic and conceptual purposes of the frame narrative in the contexts of memory and simulacrum.

Any framed narrative implicitly grants legitimacy to its framing story while suggesting that the entire artefact is illusory, and a linguistic construction (Waugh, 1984). When a reader witnesses a character telling a story, it is difficult not to become aware that they, too, are listening to someone (the author) tell a story. There is always a level of removal when reading a framed tale—we are not experiencing it directly. Each frame is a level of mediation. While many framed tales will not explicitly draw attention to this function, it is hard to ignore in any considered analysis. The most common way of describing it, as a story-within-a-story, highlights the constructed nature of the exterior story. When reading a fictional text, readers grant a degree of reality to the events and characters described within. If those characters and events comply with how we perceive their physical counterparts to act in everyday reality, we can call the book realist (Abrams, 1993, p. 174).

If the framing narrative can be called a second-order reality, after everyday reality as the first, then the framed story can be said to be of a third order, since it exists as a construction of

the second-order fictional world, as that world exists as a construction of the first-order physical world. These are the ontological levels mentioned above in relation to Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Each internal ontological level—each story, or reality, inside another—grants a degree of legitimacy to those outside it by virtue of being inferior (interior), or more false than those surrounding it. They are constructed by the exterior narrative and are thus an artefact of the narrative they are created by, hence seemingly more artificial. They are also further from the reader, in the sense that other narratives mediate them. Simultaneously, embedded narratives draw attention to the status of all framing realities as constructed, as existing as products of human conceptualisation. Theory surrounding framed narratives thus relates to the idealist argument of not being able to experience objects purely, but only through the mediation of our senses and systems of conceptualisation. The dual motion of drawing attention to artificiality while simultaneously granting legitimacy has deep relevance to that of the simulacrum, which exists both as model and copy, true and false, which is the 'truth that hides the fact that there is none' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). The framed narratives reveal the way we order (frame) our discursive realities, rendering their constructed natures visible.

Paul Werth's 1999 study *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* differentiates between the text world or 'conceptual scenario' (Werth, 1999, p. 83), and the discourse world, or the situational context 'surrounding the speech event itself (Werth, 1999, p. 83). Both worlds are conceptual representations of some version of reality and are thus mental constructions, or frames. In her review of Werth's book, Laura Hidalgo notes that frame knowledge is the means by which individuals 'collect and organise ... knowledge' (Hidalgo, 2000, p. 322), and thus are capable of differentiating between discourse and text worlds. A subversion of framing processes could serve to reveal frame knowledge as human process rather than an objective state of affairs. Werth discusses frame knowledge in a variety of contexts, including discourses other than fiction. Indeed, his observations apply to any spoken or written form of communication. A fictional

work including multiple frames within one another forces the reader to acknowledge their ‘frame knowledge’ (Hidalgo, 2000, p. 322), the process by which they organise and prioritise certain linguistic conceptual representations. Multiple, interwoven frame narratives can problematise this process, highlighting the arbitrary nature of hierarchical differentiation between conceptual worlds.

One can see, then, how tempting the device of a framed narrative is when writing a novel about simulation, about orders of reality and their subversion. By their nature, frame narratives both create hierarchies, and allow for the possibility of subverting them. *I’m You* positions irrational and impossible events within a framed narrative and thus diminishes their reality status. If they are embedded within the second-order reality of the framing narrative, the reader cannot so easily dismiss them as a construction. For the purposes of reading a realist novel, a reader must suspend their disbelief and entertain the illusion that the world is real. If, however, events or characters appear in a framed tale *within* the framing reality of the text, they may lose some legitimacy. This is because they appear as a construction of a construction: a story within a story. The first framed tale in *I’m You* takes the form of Paul’s manuscript that Lana finds at the very beginning of the book. The irrational and impossible events can conceivably be explained as embellishments or stylistic exercises on the part of the fictional narrator. Alternatively, they may be seen as subjectively true expressions of madness or profound confusion. In any event, the subjugated order of reality they exist within diminishes their reality status.

I decided to implement the framed structure since it neatly posits a legitimate world, that of the framing narrative, and a less legitimate one, that of the framed narrative itself. I had to consider that, by presenting the contents of the novel as a manuscript, a reader could interpret any inconsistencies, incongruities or irrational events as Paul’s stylistic choices or limitations as an unreliable narrator (as an element of discourse), rather than as occurring in the actual world of the text (as an element of story). These events lose some of their ability to disturb the reader

since the novel presents them not as an inherent part of reality itself but as representations of reality: symbolic or otherwise conceptual means of presenting objectively unrepresentable subjective phenomena. When framed as the contents of a manuscript, they become rationally explainable within a world comprehensible by the reader. These aspects could be seen to be symptoms of mental illness or another subjective disturbance of his perspective. Incorporating irrational events into a framed story neatly posits them as expressions of that fictional narrator's experience; to place them in the framing tale would suggest a fundamental irrationality in the entire world of the text. *I'm You* can be seen as an irrational world situated in a rational one by an unreliable narrator. That is, until the end of the novel, when we discover that Lana planted her note in the house well after Paul disappeared, despite him having read it. The irrationality of the framed narrative, which until that point had been safely contained, explainable as Paul's illness, has bled into the framing world.

Irrational phenomena in the framing world undermine its status as the legitimising text world because it exhibits similar irrationalities to those of the world it contains. The framing world is no longer a standard by which to cite the unreality of the interior world. Consequently, the irrational events of the framed world gain legitimacy, through the same logic as that of the simulacrum in any form—by undermining the reality status of the original, the false gains its own reality. This technique incorporates the logic of the simulacrum on a structural level. The reader cannot easily rest, cannot comfortably grant authority to one of the book's realities over the other. They merge to a point at which distinction is impossible. While the reader may have dismissed or accepted the events as the manifestation of Paul's insanity, the final irrationality confounds this interpretation, suggesting that in some sense those events may have really taken place. In any case, the notion of something 'really' happening is made troublesome.

One of the most deliberately ambiguous events of the novel is the appearance of Paul's doppelganger, a man claiming to be an older version of himself, who holds the appropriate

knowledge of 'their' life. The double is a fairly obvious embodiment of the simulacrum.

Traditionally, the double appears to be an imposter since the narrator always appears first in narrative, and thus has some legitimacy to the reader. Paul's double, however, implies a timeline existing prior to his own, thus destabilising this narrative authenticity. Furthermore, the double is especially useful in the context of memory as simulacrum since it embodies the repetition and alienation inherent in the subject as a result of the conception.

## The double

The double, or doppelganger, has long functioned in myth as an omen of death and, variously, as a symbol of the dual nature of the subject (Stevenson, 1886; Conrad, 1910); morality and the conscience (Poe, 1839); alienation from the self (Dostoevsky, 1846; Saramago, 2005); and an extension of the subject's ego (Hoffman, 1817). It is worth noting that the duality at the heart of the doppelganger is similar in tales of split personality or automata, such as Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Shelley's *Frankenstein*. For Gry Faurholt, central to the doppelganger's thematic function is the notion of the self as other, 'the logically impossible notion that the 'I' and the 'not-I' are somehow identical' (Faurholt, 2009). Likewise, Rosemary Jackson argues that the double represents an alienation from the self and 'a desire to be re-united with a lost centre of personality' (Jackson, 1991, p. 108).

*I'm You* presents the temporal double: a doppelganger from a different point in the subject's life from that of the present. It may be tempting to draw a comparison between this kind of double and the trope of the time traveller, who in science-fiction, may revisit an earlier self (or be visited by a later one). There are two primary differences between my temporal double and the time traveller, however, and they imply different things. Despite how it may appear, the time traveller story is actually rooted in a linear definition of time, and is essentially rational. These kinds of science fiction narratives (*Primer*, *Looper*, *Twelve Monkeys*, etc.) posit advanced technology that creates a linear path through time, as if travelling up and down a river. This implies that each time visited is akin to a 'stop' along the river, and that while these stops are linked, they are essentially autonomous, and individuals can visit or revisit them as discrete temporal locations. This is also explainable 'rationally' by the presence of super-advanced technology. The temporal doppelganger, on the other hand, appears irrationally, with no

suggestion of its origin (other than the past of the original subject). In this way, it has much more in common with the psychological and fantastical doppelgangers of the literary tradition. It also implies the convergence of multiple paths of time, as touched on by Paul as he comes to accept the situation:

‘Why haven’t I seen him? Why don’t I see yesterday me walking around my house? Why don’t I run into versions of myself every day? Every second?’ I lowered my voice, incredulous, and fixed Paul with my stare. ‘Why don’t we form a snake, one me after another?’ (Smith, 2015, p. 116)

This form of double embodies the central themes of the book—memory and the self, linearity and time, repetition and originality, and the self as both fractured and othered.<sup>34</sup>

Traditional doppelgangers do not share memories with their ‘originals’, unlike mine. José Saramago’s doubles share precise physical details (such as scars) but live entirely different lives (Saramago, 2005). In *The Double*, Dostoevsky does not attempt to explain the history or past of Golyadkin’s double, who appears with no explanation. As such, the temporal double is unique in that it not only doubles the ego, and the body as object, but doubles the inner life of the subject, its memory and history. The subject’s entire past thus becomes questionable. Traditional doubles, such as those portrayed by Saramago and Dostoevsky, function to disturb the existential foundations of Western subjectivity: rationality; the divide between subject and object; human autonomy and uniqueness; humans as the only conscious creatures. Likewise, in Beckett’s trilogy of novels, the deep resemblances between Molloy and Moran disturb holistic notions of identity, as they do in Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, which is itself riddled with references to Beckett. In *I’m You*, the temporal double is not intended as a commentary on the relation between the

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<sup>34</sup> Jorge Luis Borges’ short story, ‘The Other’ details a dream in which Borges meets his younger self, or, perhaps, in which his younger self dreams *him*.

dichotomies mentioned above, but as a means of subverting them through ironic representation. As such, these symbolic resonances will be the focus of this section.

The most important function of the temporal double in *I'm You* is its status as a symbol of the dominance of the simulacrum and of a specifically postmodern 'death', which could be construed as a state of total non-differentiation. Indeed, Rubenstein notes a connection between merger and death in her writing on Auster, implying that the terms are, in some instances, almost interchangeable. She writes that Auster's *New York Trilogy* succeeds in '... articulating the ultimate merger/death that occurs between self and double' (Rubenstein, 1998, p. 260). Likewise, Baudrillard often speaks of death as a state of non-differentiation. In *Impossible Exchange* (2001), he writes of the theoretical possibility of medically-induced immortality, which in his view would lead to a state of biological non-differentiation. He writes that 'true death [is] not so much the physical disappearance of the individual being as a regression towards a minimal state of undifferentiated living matter' (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 37): the simulation of biological life. Baudrillard's point is that in a state of 'undifferentiated living matter', there is so little difference between humans, biologically, as to constitute a kind of death. This is an extrapolation of the logic of the double—the undifferentiated other threatens our own ontological foundations. As discussed in Chapter One, an act of simulation inevitably implies a state of identity, of non-differentiation or, one could say, of death. 'Dying is nothing,' Baudrillard reflects in *Cool Memories*. 'You have to know how to disappear' (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 14).

In *I'm You*, Paul's temporal double initially appears at the end of the first section of the novel, although he is not identified as such then. This appearance refers to the traditional role of the double as an omen of death (Rank, 1989). He reappears in the third section of the novel, when Paul has slipped thoroughly into the simulacrum of memory and cannot differentiate between past and present. This inability to discern the real from the false constitutes the particularly postmodern death discussed above. Earlier in the thesis I explored the notion of the

individual life being vestigial to the simulacrum, or an inconsequential excess. The physical death is the death of this vestigial existence, of less consequence than the total lack of differentiation that constitutes the postmodern (or simulated) existence.

David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* elucidates this notion through the character of Brian O'Blivion, a cultural analyst and philosopher who has long since died yet continues to interact with contemporary culture through a huge store of videotapes recorded before his death and broadcast by his daughter (Cronenberg, 1983). It could be seen, then, that in a world dominated by simulacra (such as that of the novel, or of *Videodrome*), physical death is dissociated from reality death—Brian O'Blivion can enjoy a rich, simulated life long after his physical body expires and, for all intents and purposes, remain alive. Where *Videodrome* offers immortality through the simulacrum, *I'm You* presents the opposite—an annihilation of self. The potency of the postmodern death is multiplied, since death here is an absorption into the simulacrum of the self creating an endlessly reflected infinity of deferred meaning, and deferred, undifferentiated identity.<sup>35</sup> This is different from Baudrillard's simulacrum, in which the subject is absorbed by the external to the extent that he or she is defined and subjugated by the object (this is perhaps analogous to the traditional doppelgänger). The simulacrum of memory, however, is completely internal, creating objects out of the memory images held within the subject. Hence fragmentation and self-alienation, and a deeper instability and uncertainty than that of the traditional simulacrum. The subject cannot even look to itself for stability or reassurance. Where the postmodern subject may draw purpose, or a sense of unique self, from their individualised meaning, vestigial to the simulacrum yet holding some personal significance, my conception of the subject cannot even do that. It is simulacra all the way down. The temporal doppelgänger embodies this instability, this undifferentiated identity and, ultimately, this kind of postmodern death.

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<sup>35</sup> Note that this constitutes both death and immortality—the disappearance of the individual self but the preservation of parts of the self within the simulacrum.

The temporal double is an effective symbol of this dominance of simulacra because it implies the consequences of memory as simulacra. Principally, by interrupting Paul's claim to personal autonomy or uniqueness, it demolishes his claim to authenticity. His present conception of self, or has been radically undermined by the appearance of his older self, which is simultaneously both 'I' and 'not-I'. The temporal double creates the potential for infinite incarnations of Paul at different moments in time (as expressed in the previously quoted passage). Confronted with an equally legitimate double, Paul has no reliable means of establishing and confirming his identity beyond his own subjective sense of self. He can refer to his memories, but memory itself is an unreliable source, useless as evidence. Dolar postulates that the uncanny, an effect undoubtedly produced by the appearance of a double, can be conceived of as the real breaking through conceptual realities. The consequence of this is that the 'status both of the subject and of objective reality is thus put into question' (Dolar, 1991, p. 6). The appearance of the double quashes any means to assess legitimacy or authenticity.

The reader privileges Paul because he is the narrator, ostensibly the original version of himself because he appears first; the story starts with that version of him. In this way, it is the reader's relation to Paul that makes him seem authentic, rather than because there is a reliable or objective reason to believe he is. If the older temporal double is a copy of Paul, it suggests that the present Paul is a copy of previous selves—a copy of a copy, a simulacrum. Paul's acknowledgement of his doppelgänger signifies the point at which Paul loses grasp of his unified sense of self, disappearing into the simulacrum of memory and suffering his postmodern death. He loses all sense of who he is because his present 'I' has been so radically undermined. He may as well not be real, since an older version of himself appears who is also him and also appears real (and presumably preceded his existence). Paul loses the ability to differentiate reality from artifice, past from present, memory from reality—self from other. This is further developed through his identification with both Mark and Christian Ellis. As in the simulacrum, an inability to

differentiate between these concepts leads to an eradication of the differences delineating them. Self becomes other, in this example, and the temporal double, indeed all doubles, functions as a symbol of this exchange. Dolar writes that ‘reflections constitute our essential selves’ (Dolar, 1991, p. 12), implying a centre of identity external to, and thus other than, the subject. The temporal double is particularly pertinent in the context of simulated memory because it evokes the self-alienation resulting from a radical undermining of personal narrative, memory, history and temporality.

The temporal double makes literal the notion that the past is made in the present, and is so thoroughly interconnected with it that they are essentially the same thing. By bringing elements of the past into the present, the novel demonstrates this notion—that they exist at the same time and are part of each other. Even more radically, the temporal double actually aligns past, present and future in one moment. The temporal doppelgänger is the subject’s future manifest in the present; likewise, the subject is the temporal double’s past manifest in the present. Differences between past, present and future are effaced. Memory images sit alongside one another, as immediately accessible yet unreliable constitutions of the past, and also alongside imagination, with equivalent claim to reality. There is no stable ground, so both original and copy are undermined by their own definitions. Is the temporal double the original or the copy? Within the simulacrum, there is no way to answer the question.

Ilana Shiloh argues that doubling no longer ‘convey[s] meaningful dichotomies, such as those between normalcy and deviance, or between representation and reality’ (Shiloh, 2011, p. 35). Instead, postmodern writers employ variants to suggest ‘ambiguity, duplicity and the conflation of ethical distinctions’ (Shiloh, 2011, p. 35). Likewise with the function of the simulacrum, which allows no certain signified, no stable meaning; with the uncanny, which emerges in the uncertain space between familiar and alien; with memory, which resides somewhere between narrative, imagination and the act of forgetting. The double embodies the

pluralistic nature of postmodern realities. Tropes that could once highlight meaningful points can now only draw attention to their problematic nature and arbitrary foundations.

The double, associated with the split personality and the automaton (Faurholt, 2009), has potent connections to Freud's notion of the uncanny. Repetition is central to both the uncanny and the postmodern simulacrum; it is no surprise that elements of each arise in the other. During a process of radical self-othering, such as that of memory as simulacrum, an uncanny effect arises. This has been represented variously in *I'm You*, in terms of setting and structure. While the temporal double may be the most explicit example of an uncanny effect in the novel, the house Paul finds also creates an uncanny effect, as does the very structure of the novel.

## The uncanny

Freud's essay, 'The Uncanny' (Freud, 1955), centres around an analysis of ETA Hoffman's story 'The Sandman' (1817), of which Freud writes that 'the author creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know ... precisely whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one' (Freud, 1955, p. 230). In 'The Sandman', Nathanael is disturbed by a violent visitor to his home, whose identity is ambiguous. By the end of the novel, the alienated boy finally woos the object of his affections, Olympia, only to find that the visitor has killed her, removing her eyes, and also telling Nathanael that she is nothing but an automaton. Uncanny tropes abound in the story, such as the themes of eyes and eyelessness, automata, misaddressed letters, confused names, and so on. Similar uncertainties abound in *I'm You*. I want to focus on the ambiguity surrounding the description of Paul's house and, subsequently, its status as part of the 'real world', or as part of a 'fantastic one'—or, in terminology more suited to this thesis, a remembered one.

During his suburban wanderings, Paul stumbles across an empty house. He first describes it in this way: 'Eventually I came across a double-block house resembling my own childhood home. The house itself formed a wall onto the road, brick gone soft and orange with age' (Smith, 2015, p. 40). It is ambiguous whether the physical description of the house refers to the childhood home or the present one. Of course it describes both, since they resemble each other, but the novel never clarifies Paul's subsequent actions (entering the house) temporally. A sense of uncertainty imbues this space from the beginning, not unlike the uncertainty which Freud describes. The reader is sure whether Paul inhabits the world of memory or of present-day reality. Near the end of the novel, Lana, the young woman he has met and formed a friendship with, vanishes and the space becomes simultaneously one of absence and belonging. Lana's absence

comes to define the space for Paul, yet Paul has also imbued it with his personal meaning, established a sense of home there. As ambiguously both nostalgic and new, in its dual state as childhood home/new home, remembered home/present home (even as public/private space), the house can be seen to evoke the tension implied by what Freud describes as the uncanny. It is worth noting that Freud's use of the term *unheimlich* has been widely misinterpreted in psychoanalysis as meaning 'un-homely', while its actual meaning is 'un-secret' (Collins, 2015). This term still embodies the uncertainty and undecidability of the misinterpretation of *unheimlich*.

Paul's house is uncanny in that it is neither childhood home nor new home, rather somehow both, and its uncanny presence undermines the potential familiarity and comfort of a childhood home: it is there, as the childhood home, but its spectral nature emerges, so it becomes uncanny in its simultaneous presence and absence. Like everything else in a system of simulacrum, the childhood home becomes ill-defined, undifferentiated from other categories of home. As such, each category emerges and recedes, creating an uncanny effect: that which resembles the object but is not, which is paradoxically familiar and unfamiliar, self and other, subject and object. Dylan Trigg discusses the spectral nature of returning to old spaces in *The Aesthetics of Decay* (2006). He conflates memory and space, noting that 'as the reality of the original memory becomes an object external to us, so the spectral quality of past experience becomes lucid' (Trigg, 2006, p. 53). In this way, all spaces are both idealistic and realistic. Revisited spaces, moreover, have this 'spectral quality'—the gap, the anxious space, between past and present, between temporal selves, yawns, becomes definitive.

The novel also evokes the uncanny through the repetition of surface-oriented elements: images, phrases, objects, amongst other things. In describing Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Rubenstein argues that as the narrative 'doubles ... back on itself ... it generates, repeats and cancels out a related cluster of ideas, images, and themes ... the narrative strategy further allies it with both the uncanny and the postmodern' (Rubenstein, 1998, p. 260). The irrational

reproduction of images, people, settings and events common to postmodernism and the uncanny manifest most profoundly in the notion of memory as a system of simulacrum, which could also be conceived of as a kind of postmodernisation of memory. Locating the troubling duplications and reproductions within the subject itself, memory as simulacrum weds postmodern simulacra and the uncanny to demonstrate how individuals and their histories become othered from themselves, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

*I'm You* employs many repetitions and recurrences: people and objects appearing in places Paul would not expect them to, for example, or the repeated motif of people disappearing without explanation. Ellis' letters to Paul end up functioning as a synecdoche for the broader novel, containing most of the major elements of Paul's story including certain types of characters, events and consequences. It is through these letters that Paul begins to experience the uncanny alienation described above.

## Ellis' letters and the mirror structure

One third of the way into the novel, Paul and Lana check the mailbox of the house Paul is inhabiting to find a letter addressed to a former soldier named Lynton Ashby. After some deliberation they decide to read it, only to find that it is the first letter in a long and complex confession. The letters are presented in their entirety, detailing events that occurred in Adelaide during World War One. Christian Ellis, author of the letters, is relating to Ashby the manner in which he seduced and corrupted the soldier's young fiancée, Sophie. The letters are presented as an uninterrupted narrative that acts as a synecdoche for the broader novel.

The letters' inclusion as a virtually unbroken narrative has important consequences for the meaning of the novel, as does their placing in the work. Their position at the centre of the book forms a kind of distorting mirror surface—the nature of Paul's world on each side of the letters resembles the other, yet is fundamentally different. Similarly, I intend this technique to evoke a sense of the uncanny for the reader, as they emerge from the world of the letters, as if from a dream or memory, to find the original world of the novel transformed in subtle ways. This transformation is vital yet irrational. It signifies the point at which Paul slips into simulacra yet provides no rational causal means for this transformation—why should just reading someone's letters disturb his own world so profoundly? This section of the exegesis will explain the significance of these letters as a framed tale within a framed tale; as forming a mirror-like structure in the novel; and as a catalyst for the dominance of the simulacrum. The subtle, disturbed reflection of Paul's world in that of the letters is what ties these three aspects together. There are significant synchronicities between the world of the letters and that of Paul's manuscript, which I will cite as they become relevant.

## Frame within frame

One function of the letters is as another framed narrative within the manuscript that Lana is reading, which is the bulk of the text. They function to further destabilise the levels of conceptualisation out of which a story (or any discourse) is constructed. Beyond this, they imbue the novel with a more profound ambiguity and raise serious questions about the reliability of Paul's narration. Disregarding whether the events of the letters, or Paul's narrative, are real or verifiable, the letters serve to emphasise and elucidate elements of Paul's personal narrative and to further indicate the significance they might have upon him as a character in both senses of the term (as a literary device and as a person). We should not read the events of the letters in an attempt to precisely determine where they lie alongside other events of the novel—the novel appropriates the simulacrum on the level of structure, and such distinctions become impossible to determine. We should instead read the events of the letters as relating rhizomatically to other events of the novel, connected through motifs—thematic, imagistic and situational resonances—rather than through rational or temporally linear networks.

This reading is encouraged through the use of parallels in both the world of the letters and in Paul's world. Ellis and Paul are similarly isolated, and share a relationship pattern with a man and a woman who are intimately involved. In this configuration, Paul and Ellis share a position, Klara and Sophie share one, and Lynton and Mark share one. Ellis manipulates these people for his own benefit, suffering an absorption into a simulacrum of memory (demonstrated by his inability to die), while Paul is at the point where he could manipulate the situation, but still has to make that choice. The difference for Paul is Lana, a sympathetic character who tries to

help him, to act as a point of reference when Paul loses his bearings. One hallmark of the simulacrum is a lack of difference, so Lana attempting to provide him with a point of reference could re-establish certain useful distinctions. Ultimately, Ellis' letters function as a representation of Paul's own situation and also show the possible consequences to come from it.

One of the major similarities between the two characters is that both imitate the other male member of their triangular social configuration in their correspondence with the female member. Ellis becomes a simulacrum of Ashby, functioning as him without resembling him in essence, while Paul does the same thing—performing the role of Mark without being him. The literal death of another character traumatises both characters; both develop unusual, socially-inappropriate relationships with female characters; both live outside of conventional society. These 'deliberate patterns of repetition' (Rubenstein, 1998, p. 246) indicate to Paul the extent to which his identity is dispersing; the extent to which he is being absorbed into simulation. It is this that terrifies him, the possibility of disappearance, realised through patterns of repetition, and which ultimately leads to his desire to break with repetition and hopefully establish himself independently. Likewise, these repetitive patterns indicate to the reader that the narratives are connected and are to be read against each other. Similar connective techniques occur in Auster's work, David Mitchell's novels *Ghostwritten* (1999) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1998), and Beckett's trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable* (1951-53).

An important consequence of the ontological instability of the embedded frame narratives arises in relation to the uncanny. Nicholas Royle cites mistakenly addressed letters, such as those received by Paul, as uncanny phenomena (Royle, 2003). In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), Tzvetan Todorov describes the authorial hesitation in revealing whether the events of a fantastical work are real or a misunderstanding. Either way, he concludes that the hesitation is impossible to uphold and that, eventually, the author must offer an

explanation (Todorov, 1973). Dolar argues that the uncanny can only ‘subsist in the narrow middle ground that exists before the uncertainty as to its nature is dissipated’ (Dolar, 1991, p. 21). Since the irrational causal structures that link the two narratives are never resolved rationally in my novel, they maintain this tension, this ‘narrow middle ground’.<sup>36</sup> An ultimately unresolved ‘hesitation’ in *I’m You* or other works of fiction may exist between the reality statuses of its constitutive parts—the narratives, in this case. The uncanny is that ‘uncertainty’, that ‘narrow middle ground’. The simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity is apprehended. If the uncanny effect would disappear when that is resolved, then the novel must defer that resolution somehow, buck the reader’s efforts to define its status. *I’m You* attempts this through an essentially illogical causality, deep ambiguity and a rhizomatic system of repetitive patterns.

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<sup>36</sup> This ground, this uncertainty, is echoed in Derrida’s notion of ‘play’, which advocates movement between two terms, lest privilege come to reside in one and enable its dominance. Baudrillard also addresses this issue—the simulacrum is a phenomenon that constantly defers a stable meaning or referent.

## Mirror structure

One of the primary reasons for the inclusion of an extended break from the main narrative was to form a mirror-like structure in the book. In her seminal work *Fantasy: Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson describes mirrors as ‘presenting images of the self in another space (both familiar and unfamiliar) ... provid[ing] a version of self transformed into another, becom[ing] something or someone else’ (Jackson, 1991, pp. 85-87) The first third of *I’m You* represents reality in a realist manner, becoming less realistic in later chapters. Following the metaphor of the mirror, the first third is the object in front of the mirror (the original object). The central section (Ellis’ letters) is the surface of the mirror itself, the thing that creates the doubling or transformational effect. The final third is the reflection, which resembles the original in appearance but not in essence, transformed as it has been by the function of the mirror.

The three-part structure of the book’s most obvious function is as a structural metaphor for simulation. At least initially, the events in the first third are more or less real, while the final third constitutes a precession of simulacra. The virtual mirror-image is equivalent to Baudrillard’s copy which is equivalent to the final third of the book. The original exists, unquestioned as the reader begins the book. At that point there is nothing to compare it to, no reason to doubt its authenticity or reality. The mirror is an apparent break from this, seemingly unrelated, until certain events, characters, ideas and images emerge in the mirror narrative that echo those in the first section. Finally, returning to the main narrative (the reflection, if you will), the reader is aware that things have changed, that the original world has become somehow illusory, or unreal. A shift in mood alerts the reader to this change, as does the appearance of irrational events, absences, artificialities and imitations that creep into the world of the narrative. The reflection appears identical to the original—same places, characters, concerns, behaviours—but is

fundamentally different. The first part of the narrative, the world that seemed stable and reliable, is now called into question. Why should the first have been taken as authentic, just because it appeared first? There are no means by which the reader may determine which is more valid than the other—there is no standard of reality by which the reader can orient themselves within the various parts of the narrative and thus determine which has meaning and which is false. The copy of the original undermines its reality status. The ontological hierarchy has been levelled and one cannot be deemed more legitimate than the other.

A secondary purpose of the mirror-like structure is to provide the reader with an experience something like the literary equivalent of emerging from a dream or from deep reflection upon the past (or revisiting an old space), once they move through the mirrors and into the final third of the novel. The central section is almost entirely self-contained and is removed both temporally and stylistically from the primary narrative. As discussed, however, it does bear subtle relations to the narrative it is embedded within. By taking the reader into a consistent and fleshed-out text world separated from but related to the primary narrative, lulling them into the logic and style of that world, and then reverting to the exterior narrative, I hope to create an effect not unlike emerging from a dream or other similar mental space. This has another resonance in the novel since the acts of sleeping and waking are of importance to the plot, and are related to many of Paul's realisations.

The subtle and irrational connections that link the embedded narrative with the primary one are not unlike those that link dreams with reality or our memories of events with the present. Favoured images, ideas, places, people and feelings emerge in dreams, and seem to provide irrational, inconsistent, yet ineffably profound connections to the various levels of reality that construct subjective life. Freud refers to these images and memories as 'latent dream content' (Freud, 1900), elements of a subject's internal life which appear in dreams yet are only visible upon interpretation. Indeed, this literary technique relates closely to the notion of latent dream

content described by Freud. One peculiarity of memory arising in dreams is that the dream ‘makes a selection in accordance with principles other than those governing our waking memory, in that it recalls not essential and important, but subordinate and disregarded things’ (Freud, 1900). The first point, that the selected memories and sensations are drawn on for purposes unlike those we value in waking life, relates to the irrational causality implied by the connections between the central and exterior narratives. Everyday living values rationality, linearity, clear and consistent causality, but these things disappear within the logic of the dream, preceded by rhizomatic networks of sensation, association, imagination. Consequently, irrationality, inconsistency, doubling, and convergence subvert and replace linear causality. Secondly, regarding the ‘subordinate and disregarded things’ (Freud, 1900), the importance of the connections between the sections lies not in connections of plot, character, theme or symbols, but in surface-orientated features of the narrative—situations, objects, phrases, imagery, and so on. Elements of a narrative that may appear superficial become significant.

There is no causal link between the events at the centre of the novel and the transformation of the exterior world. Rather, it is the symbolic and structural parallel resonances between this section and the others that suggest links. By irrationally linking the centre with the outer sections, the reader is forced to connect these parts of the novel. The reader thus creates an irrational causality in which events have effects without objective or linear causal structures. Implicitly positing the reader, or viewer, in a role of granting meaning to a text is analogous to the way individuals construct meaning in everyday reality, indeed, in any human reality whatsoever. It stresses the role of the subject in constructing mental conceptualisations of reality rather than accessing reality directly. As argued elsewhere in the thesis, it seems impossible to isolate human realities (the social, conceptual structures such as economics, politics, cultures, nationality, etc.) from the subjectivities of those involved in their construction. There is no objective basis to these constructions—they are productions of human conceptualisation. My conception of memory

highlights its similarly conceptual nature. It does this through the attempt to divorce memory from the necessity of a foundational truth or anchoring reality. This literary technique of irrational causality between sections connected through motifs and parallel structures is an attempt to stress the subject-created (reader-created) nature of human conceptual systems (narratives).

A final consequence of the mirror-like structure is to turn Paul's own identity into a non-original repetitive function, a hallmark of the simulacrum and broader postmodernism. Paul's behaviour in the third part of the novel mirrors that of Ellis' in the central section. Despite surface differences (their ages, names, social positions, and so on), they serve identical functions in their worlds: to imitate someone's beloved. Furthermore, the presence of Paul's doppelganger suggests that his position and history are not unique. These elements of the narrative render Paul's individuality null and void, situating him in what Maria Beville describes as a 'perpetual present, dominated by repetition, simulation and the already experienced' (Beville, 2013, p. 609). The terms of Paul's life, after the intrusion of Ellis' letters, are no longer his own. Functionally, he operates as a reproduction of Ellis, and as a reproduction of his older temporal doppelganger, even as a version of his deceased friend, Mark. Identifying characteristics such as memory, his position in a system, even his future, are no longer unique to Paul. He becomes difficult to differentiate from other characters, his identity 'reduplicated in the repetition of faces of the multitude' (Beville, 2013, p. 609). This is one of the primary ways in which I have sought to express the dispersal of self under memory as a simulacrum. If identity is constructed out of simulated images, it cannot be said to be other than a simulation itself; the total dispersal of boundaries intrinsic to simulacra also occurs in the subject. The lack of differentiation between Paul and other characters, as well as the implication that he is not even the original 'Paul', is a primary means by which I have attempted to depict this.

## Conclusion

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This thesis set out to determine whether episodic memory can be construed of as a form of postmodern simulacrum. It traces the simulacrum from Plato, through the contributions made by idealist philosophers such as Kant and Schopenhauer, before touching on Nietzsche and his contributions to what would eventually become postmodernism. The simulacrum becomes a focus of postmodern theory in the mid to late twentieth century, with scholars such as Baudrillard, Jameson, and Deleuze exploring its ramifications in contemporary culture. It also makes the case that issues of representation have become more relevant since the advent of mass reproduction in the early twentieth century. The thesis identifies similar precursors in psychological studies into reconstructive memory, beginning with Frederic Bartlett's experiments in the early to mid twentieth century, and culminating in a theory of reconstructive memory as it is now understood. The thesis also establishes literary precursors to my creative work. While the main influences are postmodern, other literary texts have explored issues of representation and simulation. Nineteenth-century works, particularly gothic ones, provide some influence, such as Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Some of Jorge Luis Borges' proto-postmodern short stories are also relevant, most notably 'Funes, His Memory' (1944), and 'The Circular Ruins' (1944). Samuel Beckett's trilogy of novels, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953) also exert an influence on the thesis, primarily through their fragmented, circular structures and depiction of a decentred self.

The thesis then moves to situate the simulacrum in a new context—that of episodic memory. It identifies key attributes of the simulacrum and explains how episodic memory shares them. Since Baudrillard has written a significant amount on the function of the simulacrum and its effects on Western consumer culture, his work provides a rough guide for this section, as well as suggesting possible consequences of memory as simulacrum. The consequences Baudrillard

identifies are only loosely related to those in the thesis, though, since he is discussing the simulacrum as it affects an entire civilisation as a product of external technologies, and this thesis discusses how it affects an individual as a product of internal sign structures and narratives.

The postmodern simulacrum and episodic memory share two vital characteristics: that a copy becomes more real than its model; and that the original model is indiscernible amongst its many copies. The exegesis' first chapter concludes that episodic memory and the simulacrum function identically, and that this situation is most apparent when the subject is seen to construct its identity through self-narrative. The subject draws their sense of self from material known to be profoundly unreliable. Subsequently, they experience a decentring of self, and a sense of alienation from the reality of their past. These effects are similar to both the atomised, postmodern subject, and the uncanny, described by Freud. The profusion of potential selves results in a repetitive yet unverifiable stream of possible explanations for identity, which prompts an uncanny experience. Literature depicts similar situations: the self as innately fragmented; the dominance of simulacra; and temporal non-linearity are cited in the thesis as three primary means by which an author could represent the effects of the memory simulacrum.

Current literature (critical, philosophical, and literary) does not use the simulacrum as a framework for exploring episodic memory or its effects on the subject. While Jonathan Lethem's 2009 novel *Chronic City* does touch upon the idea, it is only mentioned briefly. *Chronic City* is certainly about simulation, but it does not depict memory as such. No fiction I have found explores the idea as its key theme or seeks to embody that particular conception. Other novels do make related points about memory, however. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is suffused with instances of mistaken identities, characters with the same names, illusions of the past, profound uncertainty, and so on. The most relevant event of the novel is the plague of insomnia that strikes the town of Macondo. The longer the citizens go without sleep,

the more of their memories they lose, until their pasts dissipate entirely and they lose even their own identities, stuck in the stupor of the present:

the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past (Marquez, 2000, p. 45).

My thesis novel, *I'm You*, is similar in that memory forms the basis for both individual and collective identities. In the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however, the dissipation of the subject is the result of a total loss of memory. *I'm You* portrays a similar consequence but by means of an overabundance of potentially artificial memories. The close similarity between the consequences of these situations clarifies one of the major points of the thesis: that an overwhelmingly simulated memory has the same consequences as a total lack of memory. The novels also share subjects, such as the cyclical nature of time, radical uncertainty, and a lack of differentiation between dreams, waking life, the subject's past, and the pasts of others. The similarities between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and my novel are most clear in the case of the 'staggeringly old' (Marquez, 2000, p. 250) Ursula, who 'confus[ed] present time with remote periods in her life' (Marquez, 2000, p. 333), and Arcadio Segundo, whose oldest memory is 'not from his childhood' (Marquez, 2000, p. 267), and becomes clearer as he ages, somehow bringing him closer to the past as time moves in a circle, simultaneously moving both towards the future and the past. These examples, and others, demonstrate how although *One Hundred Years of Solitude* does not express the notion of memory as a simulacrum, Marquez is exploring similar territory and representing similar subjective situations. Most significant is that *I'm You* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* present these subjective situations as stemming from very different sources: the profusion of simulated memory on one hand, and a lack of memory on the other.

The thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge as it extends Baudrillard's simulacrum beyond the postmodern era with which it is most commonly associated, using it as a framework for investigating phenomena: episodic memory, in this case. There is no reason why the simulacrum could not be applied to other areas such as literary adaptation, or the study of cultural memory. The thesis also makes the case that the term 'memory' should be adapted to acknowledge that the act of remembrance is not so similar from that of forgetting. My argument states that memory images appear without an accessible referent, so there is no way to assess their validity. This means that if the images change, then the individual will not notice, and will not be able to verify their accuracy if they do. Forgetting is a form of absence, but remembering is a way of obfuscating absence, rather than constituting a legitimate presence. The difference is that memory may falsely represent presence when none exists. This observation adds to the literature promoting the idea that memory need not 'conform to certain limits of accuracy' (Martin & Deutscher, 1966, p. 166), and also provides a coherent philosophical stance that aligns with psychological research into reconstructive memory.

The novel and exegesis work together to make additional points. First, the thesis as a whole builds on the traditional figure of the doppelgänger, depicting a temporal double that performs different aesthetic and theoretical roles. The book also implements a three-part structure, in which the main narrative of the novel is broken by another narrative.<sup>37</sup> While this is not in itself original, the structure serves two purposes. First, it is the second framed narrative of the book (a story within a story within a story), drawing attention to the layers of conceptualisation that occur when structuring knowledge. Second, the middle section irrationally provokes a shift in the events of the exterior narrative. This suggests both an unknowable logic operating beneath the surface of understanding, and also works to depict a shift from the world of reality to simulacrum. Finally, the book places the cause of typically postmodern effects

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<sup>37</sup> This is similar to the H-like structure of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, in which two long sections are joined by a very short one. The difference here is that Woolf's central section is explicitly linked (through character, setting, and causality) to the outer ones.

(ambiguity, fragmentation, etc.) within the subject itself, suggesting that these are not unique to the postmodern era but more deeply rooted within the self. In this regard it is similar to Beckett's work.

Earlier authors have used the image of the doppelganger to disturb the relations between self and other, or to represent the divided nature of the self. *I'm You* resituates the doppelganger to express the repetition and temporal nonlinearity of memory as simulacrum. By obscuring the means of the doppelganger's appearance but making it clear that the figure shares the same history as the protagonist, the temporal double depicts the multitudes of self (or selves) that occur under memory as a simulacrum, while also foregrounding the repetition inherent both to the simulacrum and the uncanny. Also evoking a sense of alienation and repulsion in the protagonist, the temporal double succinctly expresses the core themes of the thesis.

Building on postmodern novels that incorporate framed narratives—notably the work of Paul Auster and Haruki Murakami—the mirror-like structure of the novel performs an unusual action in *I'm You*. It expresses the conceptual foundations of the thesis through its irrational influence on the latter third of the novel, stressing the arbitrary manner in which memory narratives are constructed and linked, while also demonstrating that the referent of many memory images are lost to the subject. Furthermore, the structure creates a dramatic experience for the reader. After the generally realistic first third, the letters constitute an abrupt change in setting and tone. When the reader returns to the final third of the book, the world is familiar, yet somehow altered. This is when the surreal elements of the narrative come to the fore; the structure thereby creates the effect of moving between states of consciousness to find the world altered, such as waking from a dream or revisiting old, meaningful spaces. This also functions as moving from the world of the real and into that of the simulacrum.

*I'm You* focuses on the details of its narrator's subjectivity and emotional state, but it employs this focus in the service of postmodern notions of the structuring and ordering of

reality. It is common (although not universal) for postmodern authors to cite the causes of these effects as external—advertising, communication technology, the digital image, language—while *I'm You* is more in line with modernism (and Beckett), placing the subject's inner life as the cause, and that this is the nature of self for everyone. Postmodern literature, on the other hand, commonly presents this nature as stemming from a historical situation (postmodernity). Postmodern novels often represent subjects decentred by the radical shifts taking place in the world around them.<sup>38</sup> *I'm You* is different in this regard, demonstrated by the absence of mass media common to postmodern literature. Paul is living outside the hyperreality of the postmodern era, yet the things that happen to him are decidedly postmodern. Perhaps the simplest way of putting it is that the novel asserts that the subject has internalised postmodernism, so to speak.

This thesis focuses solely on episodic memory because other forms of individual memory do not contribute to the subject's sense of self (Mastin, *memory\_types*, 2010). The thesis does not address cultural memory, but the framework could be applied to it. Since cultural memory manifests most clearly as external cultural products (oral and written narratives, monuments, traditions, etc.), it may even be easier to apply my framework to that form of memory, since the issue of representation is already apparent. Furthermore, research into reconstructive memory is also contemporary and continuing, suggesting that the idea is of sustained relevance. My use of idealism as opposed to realism functions more to elucidate points about memory rather than providing the grounds for them. Besides, Baudrillard would argue that distinctions between real and conceived, such as those that idealist principles make, are irrelevant in the context of the simulacrum. The thesis' framework could be applied to the study of cultural or historical memory. Scholars could also adapt the idea to different critical methodologies, using the simulacrum of memory as a tool in Marxist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic or feminist studies. For

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<sup>38</sup> See Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), or Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991).

example, Marxists have looked at the means by which capitalism appeals to cultural memory through advertising; adopting the memory as simulacrum framework could shed new light on how advertisers construct an illusory sense of cultural identity through this practice.

Memory is involved in every human endeavour, and this thesis provides a framework by which to investigate its function as a process of identity creation. It could be said that the memory as simulacrum framework is pessimistic. It implies that the essence of personal identity is at best inaccessible or, at worst, accessible yet untrue in any traditional sense of the term. Even if one is not convinced of the meaninglessness of their life, the process by which they come to this decision is still shown to be unreliable. There is simply nothing to be certain of. In *Chronic City*, Perkus describes memory as an illusory ‘sugar mountain’ (Lethem, 2009, p. 388) that disappears if we ever look back at it. Perhaps his decision is the only way out: that it is better, like Orpheus, to not look back, to carry on and simply ‘imagine you feel its weight at your back’ (Lethem, 2009, p. 388). Memory as simulacrum highlights the ambiguity in the appearance/reality dichotomy, likening it to that of presence/absence. Episodic memory incorporates both dichotomies; memory as simulacrum shows that neither can be so neatly ordered, and that the terms actually help comprise each other. What appears to be present is absent, and what appears to be solid dissipates. As unreliable as the simulacrum may be, it incorporates this logic, and it is only by probing deeply into the evasive nature of memory—acknowledging its inherent ambiguity—that it can be properly apprehended. That is, if something so mutable may be apprehended at all.

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