

Stranger

A creative writing researcher immerses herself in the Uncanny

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Abstract

This thesis asks a research question: what might an immersion in the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny, through creative writing as research, look like?

The answer is a case study of an immersion, through creative writing as research, into the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny. The Uncanny is a sense of feeling not at home while at home; the destabilising effect of the unfamiliar in the familiar. Deeper, at the heart of the theory, are ideas about the relationship of the self to the not-self as double and as stranger. These ideas about self and not-self offer contemporary creative writers new ways of seeing and writing. The key to creating writing in response to the theory of the Uncanny is to remind the reader of the anxieties of existence and the instability of identity, and this can be achieved by exploiting language's ability to make the ordinary strange.

The thesis blends critical and creative work, in a form representative of the entangled relationship between creative practice and theory. The braided essay of the thesis interweaves three narrative threads, each dispersed into short sections throughout the thesis. The first thread in the braid is a critical discussion of the Uncanny, with discussion on a diverse range of topics close to the Uncanny: the birth of the Uncanny in Traditional Gothic, the Gothic localised in Australian Gothic, finding the Uncanny in contemporary literature, the significance of doubles to the Uncanny, and ourselves as strangers. The second thread is a fictional narrative, titled *Stranger*, which is a tale of the unusual travels and random encounters of life. The Uncanny dislocates the narrative and the story is ambiguous. The third thread is a series of travel essays, each a braided essay that combines creative nonfiction with local historical information and also critical theory around creative writing, ghosts, and the experience of being a stranger. The braided essay form fragments the narrative while also unifying the broader discussion of the thesis. This structure invites the reader to co-create the meaning of the narrative.

I establish some useful ideas for creative writers. I show how the Uncanny is relevant to contemporary ideas of self and our ways of interacting with the world. I propose an immersive engagement with theory, through reading, until the theory becomes so familiar that it changes the self and the writing. I discuss how the braided Lyric essay form provides a useful tool for writers to create fragmented narratives connecting disparate ideas in new ways. I suggest that reflexivity helps writers to adopt a position between the self and the not-self, to bring home and the writer's position in the world into creative writing. As a reflexive researcher, taking an explorer approach to research, I recognise my position as writer in the text. I hope this thesis generates more research questions than answers, inspiring future research into immersion in critical theory and reflexive creative writing practice involving the Uncanny.

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.

.....

Katrina Finlayson

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Introduction

In late 2007, a half hour plane flight away from my hometown of Adelaide in the nearby city of Melbourne, while catching up with an old friend over a couple of days, I attended *Nick Cave: The Exhibition* at the George Adams Gallery of The Arts Centre. I can't claim to have been any more than a part-time and second-hand fan of artist Nick Cave's work up to that point. The exhibition displayed various forms of Cave's work: excerpts from his published writing; pages of scrawled lyrics and musings from his private notebooks; artefacts from his house; audio recordings of Cave's deep voice musing on both the small and the significant aspects of life; and photographs of Cave taken by Anton Corbijn, their bright colours intensified by deep shadow.

Some of Cave's work responds in a playful yet melancholy way to his experience with depression, some of his work expresses a deep and passionate love for his wife, and some his feelings of love for his children; some tends more to simply scream rock and roll into the face of a very human isolation. A common element across all of the pieces is a sense of darkness, and a suggestion of something brooding just beneath the surface. Cave's work speaks in a distinctly Gothic voice.

What struck me, as I wandered through the exhibition, was that this Gothic flavour seemed so fitting for the place which still claims him, his home for much of his life. Cave's Gothic voice is somehow so very Australian. I had never before thought of Australia in relation to the Gothic, but the more I thought about my response to the exhibition, the more appropriate the Gothic influence seemed. Australia has a dark and violent history in the

colonial treatment of its first nations' peoples, and, I thought, perhaps the Gothic's ability to speak from the margins could be of use to writers who want to write about contemporary Australian life from a new perspective.

A couple of years later, early in my research for this thesis, I read an article in *Overland* by Russell Forster, which questions why Nick Cave's work has not been more widely acclaimed in Australia; he receives much greater recognition overseas.¹ When writing a Gothic novel, Cave chose not Australia as his setting, but America's Deep South.² Forster's basic surmise is that 'the decimation of indigenous peoples, the brutality and savagery of penal settlement, all point to an evil past, but there is too little vernacular awareness for it to be much use to an artist of Cave's ilk.'³ And Australian art, Forster concludes, does not have to be about football and 'Ayers Rock'... 'it can and should be about us in all our complexity, our fear and guilt and desire.'⁴ In discussing Cave's work, Forster articulates my response to the Nick Cave exhibition: 'There is a darkness in the Australian psyche that rarely reaches daylight, a darkness we can't afford to ignore if we are to know ourselves better.'⁵

I began this project looking for a way to represent these darker undercurrents of the psyche and the unsettling feeling when things seem familiar and yet strange, but in the end this was just a jumping-off point, a spark to ignite my research process. What I found, following a trail of research breadcrumbs on an adventure through creative practice, via the traditional Gothic, is the theory of the Uncanny.⁶ Digging deep into this theory, engaging in an immersive relationship so intimate that the theory has become part of me, I continued in my research travels and uncovered so much more. I learned that central concerns of the

¹ Forster, Russell 1997 'The Bad Seed from the Bad Seed Bed' in *Overland* 149 (Summer), 60-63

² Cave, Nick 1989 *And the Ass Saw the Angel* London: Black Spring Press

³ Forster, p62

⁴ Forster, p63

⁵ Forster, p60

⁶ As both starting points and also texts to which I have returned again and again are Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny* trans. David McLintock, London: Penguin Books; Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The Uncanny: An Introduction* Manchester: Manchester University Press; Heidegger, Martin 1953 *Being and Time* Albany: State University of New York Press

Uncanny are to do with the anxiety of the instability of self and identity. From this, I learned the importance of doubling to the Uncanny,⁷ and from there, the significance of the not-self, the stranger. Exploring ideas about the position of stranger led me back to creative writing and critical theory about reflexive practice. This discussion suggests ways in which creative writers can locate a useful in-between space and situate their creative writing practice and research in that space. Engaging in reflexive practice, writers recognise the self as subject in relationship with writing.⁸ An immersion in theory, acquiring new knowledge, changes not just the writing, but the writer, too, and the filter through which the writer views both the self and the rest of the world. This thesis advocates the value for writers to engage in an intimate conversation with the Uncanny, situated in a space between self and writing. By treating writing, the self, and the ordinary as uncanny strangers, writers can learn to see, and therefore write, in new ways. Gerry Turcotte asserts that postcolonial writers and women writers are ‘linked by a similar concern with dis-covering, re-creating or re-inventing an authentic voice through which their specific concerns may be articulated’, and that the Gothic offers some writing remedies for these concerns.⁹ This thesis argues that the Uncanny, a concept born within the house of the Gothic, can provide useful concepts and writing tools, especially to writers like me: contemporary Australian women writers.

This thesis invites the reader to join me in just such an immersive engagement, through creative writing as research, with the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny. The thesis is presented as one artefact that integrates critical discussion and creative writing sections into a braided narrative.¹⁰ One reason the braided essay form has been selected is because it suits the dislocating, fragmenting nature of the Uncanny. But also, in this form, the

⁷ Freud, p143

⁸ Derrida, in Royle 2003, p129

⁹ Turcotte, Gerry 2009 *Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Canadian and Australian Fiction* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang

¹⁰ Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola, eds. 2012 *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* New York: McGraw Hill, p148

thesis embodies my understanding of the interwoven relationship of creative writing theory and practice. Segments of writing connect into three main threads within the overall work: a critical discussion, a work of fiction called *Stranger*, and a series of creative nonfiction pieces in the form of six braided travel essays. The sections are arranged such as to balance but also disrupt the other threads, creating room for the reader to contribute their own meanings. I am both the creator of each individual ‘artwork’ and the curator of an exhibition of writing pieces that aims to give the reader an experience greater than the sum of its parts.

This thesis presents a form of case study in response to a simple research question: what might an immersive engagement in theory on the Uncanny, through contemporary creative writing as research, look like? As Julian Meyrick writes, the case study approach is a valuable methodology and is these days a ‘refined and reflexive tool of investigation’.¹¹ Positioning myself as a reflexive researcher,¹² I write from both inside and outside the discussion throughout this thesis, revealing my position as writer-as-subject in some sections and creating distance from myself in others. To explain the method behind the arrangement of fragments in the reading experience of the braided thesis that follows this introduction, I will summarise each of the three threads of the woven narrative: the critical discussion sections, the fictional work *Stranger*, and the creative nonfiction collection of six braided travel essays.

The Critical Discussion

The critical discussion thread of this thesis takes, as a starting point, the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny. Travelling back to the Victorian era to witness the birth of the Uncanny, I demonstrate the significance of Gothic literature and early psychoanalysis to the

¹¹ Meyrick, Julian 2014 ‘Reflections on the applicability of case study methodology to performance as research’ in *TEXT* 18.2 online at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct14/meyrick.htm>, accessed 01/12/2016

¹² Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson 2006 *Writing: self and reflexivity*, 3rd ed. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp1-5

history of the Uncanny. And then, to bring the Uncanny closer to my home, the writer's home, I take a brief look at the history of Australian Gothic.

With this historical context established, I discuss the Uncanny in greater depth. Perhaps the most well-known critical treatment of the Uncanny is Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay '*Das Unheimliche*'.¹³ By the end of his essay, Freud has compiled a list of ingredients for uncanny writing: doubles, the death drive, automatons, people alive we thought were dead, déjà vu, as well as others. The shared meaning beneath this list of elements concerns identity, our relationship to the self-as-other, our double, and our experience of making our way in the world. Freud explores ideas about the dual familiar-and-unfamiliar nature of the Uncanny, in the home-and-yet-not-home space it occupies. From Freud's exploration, the reader grows to understand the Uncanny as a disruptive force, able to shock us into seeing the world as strange. Freud proposes that literature is best equipped to enable us to experience the Uncanny and can provide a useful way into exploring the theory.¹⁴

The thesis discussion connects Freud's ideas on the Uncanny to Heidegger's theory that existence (*Dasein*, as Heidegger calls existence, or being-in-the-world) is, itself, uncanny.¹⁵ We engage with the world as though we have one stable, unified identity, but this is an illusion we create in order to function every day. Certain experiences remind us of the instability and multi-faceted nature of identity and being in the world, and we feel strange, and, through that strangeness, we see past the illusion of a stable self: this is the Uncanny, and the experience can be terrifying.¹⁶ The Uncanny also relates to Lacan's mirror stage theory, when a small child first experiences a doubling of the self, as the Uncanny

¹³ Freud

¹⁴ Freud, p157

¹⁵ Heidegger, p54

¹⁶ Heidegger, p54

momentarily returns us to a time before we knew ourselves as separate from the world.¹⁷ This thesis proposes that the destabilising nature of the Uncanny can offer writers a position from which to take a new look at the ordinary at times when they may have become complacent in the idea of a stable self and stable home.

It is useful to look at examples of the Uncanny found in other creative texts, to provide context for this discussion, and that is where I take the discussion next. The thesis looks to Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972),¹⁸ Mitch Cullen's verse novel *Branches* (2000),¹⁹ and Elizabeth Jolley's novel *The Well* (1987),²⁰ for examples in literature where the Uncanny can be seen emerging at a catalyst point, at which point in the narrative circumstances become uncertain and identity fragmentation occurs.

Not just content, but also form, should be considered in the writer's toolkit when seeking ways to engage with the disruptive influence of the Uncanny. Writers writing back to a dominant status quo from new perspectives can find value in identifying forms which fragment to create narrative spaces, which enable the writer to destabilise traditional ways of thinking. Braided essays, a form of Lyric essay, can provide the fragmentation of form appropriate to express this approach to writing and a discussion of the braided essay form is included.

At the heart of the Uncanny lies the double.²¹ The reader or writer is situated simultaneously outside and inside both the self and the text at once: the reader or writer is doubled, in the act of reading or writing.²² After a discussion of doubling, the conversation moves to the double as not-self, as the stranger, and this thesis advocates physical or

¹⁷ Lacan, Jacques 2006 (1949) 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function' in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W. Norton & Company

¹⁸ Atwood, Margaret 1972 *Surfacing* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited

¹⁹ Cullen, Mitch 2000 *Branches* Sag Harbor: The Permanent Press

²⁰ Jolley, Elizabeth 1987 *The Well* Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd

²¹ Freud, p142

²² Schwenger, Peter 1995 'Uncanny Reading' in *English Studies in Canada* 21.3, 333-345, p340-341; Derrida, 1992, p153, in Royle, p127, and in Hunt and Sampson, p5

psychological travel as a way of positioning the writer self as stranger. The nature of reading and writing as Uncanny situate the answer to the thesis question as related to a theory of reading and writing. Reflexivity theory articulates the doubling position of the writer, where the writer is aware of their position in relation to the narrative, appropriate to an engagement with the Uncanny.²³ Contemporary writers can find useful spaces to inhabit through an active immersion in theory, through reading. Kevin Brophy's view on acquiring knowledge is that writers should develop an intimate relationship with theory, such that the theory becomes part of the unconscious; creativity then involves choices writers make based on the knowledge gathered there.²⁴ Brophy notes that our creative writing decisions grow to seem like an unconscious choice but this is actually the result of absorption of knowledge, combined with our ever-growing experience in creative writing. This knowledge and experience becomes a subconscious toolkit through which we view the world, and therefore a kind of filter through which our writing emerges.²⁵ This suggests that theory is most useful to our writing once we have become so familiar with it that it has become part of our frame of reference on everything we experience.

This is the path the critical discussion takes, as it unfolds throughout the thesis. The thesis structure is intentionally fragmented and through this fragmentation, connects a range of different expressions of the Uncanny and explores ideas about the Uncanny, both through critical discussion and creative work, intended to complement each other and create a greater conversation as a whole and in the context of existing literature.

This thesis proposes that writing created in response to theory on the Uncanny can work very successfully to remind the reader of the anxieties of existence and the instability of

²³ Hunt and Sampson, p5

²⁴ Brophy, Kevin 2010 'Planting higher order skills in the unconscious: a speculation on the role of the unconscious in education' in *Strange Bedfellows: Refereed Conference Papers of the 15th Annual AAWP Conference*, online at <http://www.aawp.org.au/publications/the-strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers/>, accessed 20/12/2016

²⁵ Brophy

identity. This can be achieved by exploiting language's ability to make the ordinary strange. Within Uncanny narratives, writers have the ability to destabilise the reader and to invite the reader to think in new ways about the ideas and voices within the text. In a time when discussions around personal, social, and national identities, borders and belonging, and home and displacement are so relevant, the Uncanny offers invaluable resources to writers at both a personal and political level, as this thesis illustrates.

The Fiction: *Stranger*

The series of creative sections that make up *Stranger* present a weird fictional narrative about a young woman, Elise, whose relationship and stable home have recently left her life. Disconnected from these sources of stability in her identity, she is unsure of herself and sets out on a solo road trip to spend some time reflecting. The woman comes across a dazed and injured young man on an isolated highway and they become lost together, ending up in a remote backwater town somewhere in rural Australia. Strange things happen in the night in this ordinary-seeming little country town. The woman feels instantly familiar with the strange man, despite the odd events swirling around them. The next morning, the woman wakes on the side of the road, dazed and injured.

She travels back to Adelaide, her hometown. She tries to resume a new life but eventually feels an overwhelming compulsion to set off in search of the strange man. She travels to San Francisco but finds only a hint of a ghost. She is about to abandon her search when she receives a pile of envelopes addressed to the strange man from someone in London. She travels to London, to the address on the envelopes. Rolling into a London share house, she is given a new lead, the name of a girl in a band.

She finds the girl in the band and develops an immediate crush. She tries to talk to the girl, but when she mentions the name on the envelopes, the girl freaks out and leaves. The next day, she tracks the girl down at a picnic to talk to her, but that conversation only leads her onwards. This time, she must travel to Glasgow, Scotland. Elise resolves some things in her mind about her previous relationship as part of her travels, spending time with an old friend in Edinburgh along the way.

Once she reaches Glasgow, Elise spends time with the band night woman, Audrey, but the relationship between them is awkward and the story ends with a sudden and somewhat cryptic resolution, and without a clear conclusion on the future of the protagonist.

This work of fiction serves as an example of contemporary realistic writing involving the Uncanny, and created in response to an immersion in theory of the Uncanny. Motifs of the Uncanny feature heavily, including submerging (a well), loss of home, uncertainty, doubles, strangers, estrangement, and the destabilisation of the self as a stranger. As in the work of other contemporary writers in which the Uncanny appears (as discussed in detail later in this thesis), the Uncanny is present as a destabilising force in the narrative that is *Stranger*. Vertigo and anxiety feature heavily throughout, as well as a scarcity of information about the protagonist Elise's identity.

The Creative Nonfiction: A Collection of Five Braided Travel Essays

Can some forms of travel writing tell a kind of contemporary ghost story? In a collection of five creative nonfiction travel essays, the thesis conversation springboards from the Uncanny into a broader critical discussion of ghosts of home and distance, the strangeness of language, place, borders, death, and the position of the storyteller in creative writing. This is enacted in a series of short creative nonfiction pieces, all variants on the braided essay form, which are a

hybrid mix of critical and travel writing, part essay and part memoir. In braided essay form, each piece weaves critical theory with creative text to converse with the ghosts of place and situate my personal travels within a broader historical context at each site. When I travel, I become a stranger, invoking the distancing effect of the Uncanny. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva writes of the experience of the stranger, and of how isolating unfamiliar language can be.²⁶ Each of the five creative travel pieces embodies Kristeva's theory and weaves a personal essay on travel to an unfamiliar place with ideas about being a stranger, and ideas about death, and about the familiar and unfamiliar: central themes of the Uncanny.

The first piece explores summertime Brooklyn. The essay tells of my experience of travelling alone while a loved one back home undergoes treatment for a life-threatening illness, linked with Joan Didion's writing on her feelings of distance and grief after her husband's death.²⁷ That day in Brooklyn, I connected with her writing as a reader, and this affected my interactions with people I met. This piece uses theory on the Uncanny,²⁸ as well as Heidegger's ideas of the extraordinary ordinary to add texture to the piece.²⁹

In the next braided essay, I travel around New York and converse, in my mind, with fragments of old interviews and autobiographical writing from surrealist artist Dorothea Tanning, and we discuss her painting *Birthday*.³⁰ Creative writing theory, including Julia Kristeva's ideas on the experience of being a stranger,³¹ is woven through the text and used to disrupt the narrative with closely related ideas. I articulate another way of seeing the subway, the art galleries, and the experience of the search and of being a stranger.

²⁶ Kristeva, J 1991 *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. L Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press

²⁷ Didion, Joan 2005 *The Year of Magical Thinking* New York: Vintage Books

²⁸ Freud

²⁹ Heidegger, p54

³⁰ Tanning, Dorothea 1942 *Birthday*, Oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, at <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/93232.html> , accessed 27 November 2014, 1942

³¹ Kristeva

In the next essay, my travels as a stranger in Paris become a narrative thread within which to explore some spaces of the unfamiliar. I write of the experience of distance; both physical distance from home and the distance inherent in navigating an unfamiliar language. The essay links my personal travel story to historical events back home in Australia: the deposition of the first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, and her historic parliamentary speech on misogyny. Both threads are grounded in the history of place through a third narrative thread, which tells the story of local artist Rosa Bonheur, a queer feminist pioneer of the mid-1800s.

Another essay tells of my visit to a New Orleans cemetery and an encounter with a solo travelling stranger and with the ghost of a voodoo queen, Marie Laveau. From Hélène Cixous, we discover the paradox that we want to die in order to write about the one experience we can't know.³² An engagement with theory fragments the essay, creating space within which to explore ideas about death, creative writing, and acts of contested memory.

The final piece in the series is written around a visit to small village in the Scottish Highlands to a place called *Eilean Munde*, near Glencoe. This essay further explores ideas about death and the ghosts in our lives and in our writing, drawing on theory such as Michael Mayerfeld Bell's writing about ghosts of place,³³ and Derrida's idea that we learn to live from death and must converse with ghosts.³⁴ This essay involves historical accounts and poetry describing a local massacre of 1692. Themes of contested memory and layered identity feature heavily.

³² Cixous, Hélène 1993 *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* New York: Columbia University Press, p34

³³ Bell, Michael Mayerfeld 1997 'The ghosts of place' in *Theory and Society* 26, 813-836

³⁴ Derrida, Jacques 1994 *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge Classics, pxviii

Methodology

This thesis utilises the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny as a starting point from which to springboard into a broader discussion of the idea of self and how this relates to the world and the not-self or the stranger, our doubled self. But it employs theory from a variety of fields (psychoanalysis, feminism, post-colonialism, psychology of place, and formalism, to name a few) as needed, to construct its arguments. The thesis presents itself as a case study in an immersive engagement with theory, including a discussion of ideas around the central research question of how an immersion in the Uncanny, through creative writing as research, might look, and how this might be of value to other writers seeking to embark on a similar path. By the end of this thesis discussion, I will have established some specific suggestions as to how creative writers might engage the spaces of the Uncanny in their own writing. But for now, at the start of this exploration, I will briefly discuss the history and merits of the case study methodology.

Julian Meyrick asserts that qualitative case study methodology has a long and rich history, and he writes that ‘the case study is a flexible approach, able to extract from the singular experiences of the phenomenal field, research objects that are plausible, comparable, and about which valid conclusions can be drawn.’³⁵ In addition, Meyrick asserts of the case study: ‘as a well-established research approach it offers an epistemological framework allowing PAR [Practice As Research] room to grow convincing examples of best practice.’³⁶ This thesis provides such an example.

Meyrick writes that ‘the case study has as part of its deep motivation a desire to produce accounts adequate to reality and not simplified versions of it that have little empirical

³⁵ Meyrick, Julian 2014 ‘Reflections on the applicability of case study methodology to performance as research’ in *TEXT* 18.2 online at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct14/meyrick.htm>, accessed 01/12/2016

³⁶ Meyrick

purchase'.³⁷ This thesis traverses a discussion of the Uncanny but arrives back at a series of recommendations for creative writers, testifying to the value of the case study approach. Meyrick proposes that the case study is a style of research which allows for a number of competing emphases and that, at the heart of the case study, is the 'close examination of an empirical referent by way of a broader conceptual schema.'³⁸ This ideally suits the mosaic-like form of this thesis, which seeks to present multiple focal points as individual ideas, joined by overall themes and argument to the thesis. Meyrick asserts that an ideal case study is both uniquely situated in time and space as well as being representative in its 'claim to be an example of a certain kind of problem'.³⁹ This approach supports what this thesis seeks to do: to find ways to speak with and for both the political and the personal, and both the familiar and the unfamiliar, in contemporary creative writing.

I have used the form of the braided essay to illustrate central ideas about the Uncanny as a dislocating and unsettling force, by example. The braided essay creates both a unified narrative structure and a form that disrupts the narrative through fragmentation. This contributes to the uncanny effect of the inherent position of the reader position as both inside and outside of the text,⁴⁰ which reflects the duality inherent in the Uncanny, as explained later in this thesis.

The thesis offers itself as a case study in creative writing research and practice within the context of an existing body of creative writing knowledge. It proposes new methods with which to create writing that reflects contemporary life experience, particularly where the writer seeks new ways of seeing around ideas of home, identity, strangers, travel, and borders. This thesis suggests that, if creative writers want to engage the Uncanny, a

³⁷ Meyrick

³⁸ Meyrick

³⁹ Meyrick

⁴⁰ Schwenger, p5

productive way is to write fiction that is realistic but twists into strange places, where the Uncanny may be found. In presenting a case study on these ideas around the Uncanny and creative writing, the thesis fulfils Harper and Kroll's description of creative writing practice as a means of creating new knowledge. It is:

an approach to a subject based on knowledge acquired through the act of creating. This knowledge is not superficial. It results from sustained and serious examination of the art of writerly practice and might include not only contemporary theoretical or critical models but the writers' own past works as well as predecessors and traditions.⁴¹

In encounters with any new knowledge, such as when I first read critical theory, I begin with the theory as unfamiliar. To gain new knowledge, I must read and understand a text, and I must engage myself with words to make those ideas familiar to me. The more I become familiar with them, the more I know those ideas, and the more they will seem as though they have always been known to me. They will affect the filter through which my conscious and unconscious acts of creativity view the world, in accordance with Brophy's ideas on creativity.⁴² I have used a method of reading theory and then writing both theory and creative sections of the work within the same timeframe, bouncing the ideas in each section off the other sections to create a whole that is fragmented but unified. In some parts, the creative writing process has been led by research, and in others, the research is led by practice, and both methods involve practice as research.

The product of this approach is a thesis which expresses the Uncanny in its structure as well as in the content of the creative and critical discussion sections. The thesis provides examples of contemporary creative writing that creates an uncanny experience from within which it may be possible to explore critical and creative ideas from a new perspective. The various forms and segments of writing in this thesis stand independently but also link

⁴¹ Harper, Graeme, and Jeri Kroll, eds. 2008 *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, p4

⁴² Brophy

together as a series in order to weave a story about exploration and practice. My immersion in relevant theory has provided a framework to ground this diversity and to bind the thesis into a whole artefact. I am aware that readers may experience a sense of unease while reading the thesis, perhaps akin to seasickness, or maybe even homesickness. Deep engagement with the Uncanny and its strange themes, and the resulting structural fragmentation beneath the surface of the narrative, may be unsettling. This is expected. Regardless, I trust that the reader will travel willingly with me to strange places in an exploration and experience of the Uncanny.

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1: The radio cuts out

The radio cuts out a little way past Tailem Bend, marking the beginning of nowhere with a sudden grey line of crackling static. The bleak sky creeps into the car. Crackling static is the voice of the highway, telling her how far she has come and how far she has yet to go.

Crackling static is the voice of the mallee trees bent sideways by fierce winds. Crackling static is the homelessness of the stones in empty fields beyond a thin patch of trees that lines the road. She fidgets with the clear hard plastic case of the *Best of Frank Sinatra* cassette tape. Frank seems inappropriate for this drive, on her way to friends and beers in Brunswick Street bars, but she swore to herself to buy a servo tape for this pilgrimage and, of the moment, in the Caltex Murray Bridge, Frank seemed a better choice than the *Greatest Hits of Abba* or something by Hot Chocolate. She wrangles the tape from its cover with one hand and then shoves the black rectangle into the tape deck, in between glances to check she's still where she should be, according to the lines on the highway. The tape slides forward and then drops down into the slot, clunks into place, whirs. The car fills with the soft static of the recording process, and then Ole Blue Eyes starts singing about Mack the Knife. And, as the song gets rolling, she absent-mindedly taps away with one finger on the steering wheel, and sings along beneath her breath.

At first, she sees only a darker dot in the road haze of the distant horizon. But as she speeds towards it, it elongates, and then grows legs and a head.

When that shark bites, pearly teeth, dear...

The figure of a person, still too far ahead for detail, sways, lurches into the far lane, and then back to the centre of the grey highway again. She eases her foot off the accelerator, even though a small part of her is screaming at her to cut and run. Closer now, she can start to make out some features. Black jeans, a plaid shirt, messy dark hair. Mid-twenties, maybe. Staggering down the middle of the highway in the middle of nowhere.

Jesus, what kind of insane person would do that? They'll get themselves killed. The travel buzz and her far-away thoughts dissolve and now she is right here in the middle of nowhere on an empty highway and everything is suddenly sharp-edged clear in her vision and her stomach feels heavy and sick. The hangover from last night begins a dull knock on the inside of her skull.

She slows to a crawl as she nears him; pulls the car off the road and onto the crunchy yellow sandy siding. Braking about ten metres from him, she sits, engine idling, hands on the wheel, sudden memories of her grandfather teaching her to drive in a suburban shopping centre carpark one overcast Sunday afternoon: ten and two.

No sign of a car, no other people around, just this guy staggering down the middle of the road towards her. Okay.

He's on drugs. Hardcore drugs. Crazy by drugs and he wants your... what?

What does he want? Money? Your car? Sex? Your life? Anything he wants?
Everything he can take?

She flashes back through every movie she has ever seen involving a girl alone with a deranged man. Like her life flickering before her eyes, a thousand scenes play in colour in an instant.

He'll come creepin' around the corner. Could that be Mack the Knife?

It never ends well. Moving with half a thought, she presses Stop on the tape player. The whirl of the wind cuts through a gap in the window seal and screams in a quiet, high whistle into the newborn silence. It must be windy out here most of the time; all of the trees lean in distorted angles, pointing crooked fingers back in the direction she has come. *Run away. Go home.* But she has no home.

They usually have a decoy. Someone faking it, pretending to need help. And then when you stop, as any half decent person would, all of their horrible mates come rushing out from behind the trees and rape you and bash you and then drive off in your car.

She looks and looks but she can see nothing but road stretching in either direction, lined by scraggly windswept trees, and beyond that, just dry, stone-dotted paddocks, all the way to the pale grey horizon. The wind whistles again.

When she notices the blood on the side of his head, she's out of the car and slamming the door shut before she knows what she's doing, and she's halfway towards him, keys in hand, by the time she hesitates. She stops, turns back towards the car, turns back towards him, unsure. Is it her life or his on the line right now? She tucks a lock of hair behind her left ear, but the wind snatches it back straight away and plays with her, flicking it into her eyes.

She walks down the road, towards the boy.

'Uh...' her voice doesn't come out. She swallows and tries again.

'... Hello? Are you okay?' she manages to ask, the words falling out louder than she expected. Hoping she's close enough that he can hear her above the wind.

His head tilts up and vacant eyes turn towards hers. He looks confused and... worried. Really, really worried... scared, even. The blood seems to be congealed, smeared from somewhere above his hairline, down the side of his forehead. *At least it's not running:* the

thought shoots into her head. She holds her left arm out to him as he slowly veers towards her. She touches him gently on his shirt sleeve, and then presses her fingers against and around his arm, closing her grasp into a firm grip and she pushes him away slightly, to turn him towards her. He freezes. Searches her eyes with his. Deep brown eyes, glossy and dark and reflecting back at her, whispers of the pale dead sky and the teasing wind. Still that confused expression. She steers him towards the side of the road.

‘Come on; let’s get you off the road. Over here.’ She is almost yelling to be heard above the wind that carries her words away across the dry paddocks, tucks her words deep into secret places under the lonely stones. She realises she has no plan of what to do with him, and she leads him off the bitumen and presses gently downwards on his shoulder, urging him towards the ground.

‘Sit here for a moment.’

He tries to sit and his knees crumble beneath him; he stumbles and rolls to one side, tumbling onto the ground. She stands, and turns sharply to look for rapist mates emerging from behind the bushes, crouching herself down low and ready to run, her heart and head pounding. Nobody in sight. *Nothing*, screams the empty highway. *Nothing*.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asks the boy.

Just that blank expression.

She squats beside him in the grit, then reconsiders and folds her legs beneath her, to sit cross-legged on the gravelly ground before him.

He finally speaks, his words slow. ‘Um, I don’t really know.’ His voice is light and smooth, with a lilting accent she can’t quite place. The wind twists the sound but there is an unfamiliar twang around his words. America? Ireland, perhaps?

‘Were you in a car accident? Were you with other people? Do you remember?’

He hesitates. Slowly shakes his head.

‘Okay. I think we’d better get you to a doctor. You’ve hurt your head. You need help. Reckon you can walk to my car?’ She gestures.

He looks in the direction of the car.

‘Uh, yeah... sure.’

He starts to scramble to his feet, and she does too, moving faster than him, so that even as he starts to fall, she is able to catch and steady him. She tucks an arm under one of his and around his back and they shuffle like an elderly couple to the car. She takes him to the passenger side and fumbles with the keys in one hand to unlock the door. Trying to support him as best she can, she struggles the door open and somehow manages to fold him in and down towards the seat.

Once they are both in the car, she pulls her phone from her pocket. *No signal*, her phone informs her and the standard screen text becomes a tiny, mocking voice. *Nothing*, the sky laughs. They have fallen off the edge of the world. She slides her phone back into her pocket and starts the engine. She watches as he raises his hand to his head and winces, a frown gliding across his forehead as his fingers come away sticky red. She checks the side and rear-view mirrors and pulls out onto the empty road, indicating even though there’s no one around. Good habits, her grandfather said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Elise reassures the dark-haired boy, out of the corner of her eyes, as the car starts to pick up speed. ‘We’ll get you help, soon.’ *Just please don’t be a fucking mugger*, she adds, in her head.

Essay 1: Brooklyn

On this particular afternoon of my New York summer days, in July 2013, with the long heatwave days melting the sky onto the streets, I catch the G line across Brooklyn from the Bergen Street stop to Metropolitan and I walk under the Expressway and along the hot footpath, past corner dive bars and vintage clothing shops, towards Bedford Avenue. All I know about Bedford Avenue is wrapped in a vague mention on a guidebook website that defines hipster as a dirty word. But I wander that way and I stop on the cracked pavement of a tree-lined street to look through thick, old glass at a pair of brown lace-up shoes. The late afternoon summer air carries the sounds of cars and skateboards on the bitumen and people talking about life in cafes.

He has set up a small table on the side of the street, a makeshift stall, the back of a van its stock room, second-hand books spread across the table top, some standing upright at the back. People mill around, and they pick up the books, turning them over in their hands, and then put them back down. And soon enough, what catches my eye is a book of beat poetry, but then I see Joan Didion's name on a cream book cover next to it, printed with such an unassuming name for the woman and the book, both unfamiliar to me, but ringing a distant bell in my mind. The siren song of the ghosts of memory threads. Familiar. I pick it up and scan the back cover.

'Oh, that's great,' the young bookseller says, tucking a straggler of dirty blonde hair behind one ear. He slouches behind the table proprietarily, hand-me-down brown slacks creasing gently with the movement of his hips, and he gestures with a relaxed arm and a lazy forefinger. The afternoon heat and an exaggerated nonchalance slow everyone around me down.

A girl with long summer hair, holding a paperback about an artist's life at a casual angle in her left hand, tilts her head slightly and decides to weigh in. She nods agreement. 'Yes, it's really good. The writing is really good.'

'I just finished reading it,' the stall holder continues, his voice pleasant and unhurried. No need to make a sale, definitely not in a hurry. 'It's really good if you are going through hard times.'

I pause, frozen, my expression carefully left blank, noncommittal. How do they know I am going through hard times? They couldn't know. I exhale silently. Although, I wonder if I even am going through hard times. Here, wandering alone in New York in the middle of summer, with nowhere to be and nobody to answer to. It is only back home that hard times exist. I have outrun them; put so much distance between me and them that the bitter lump somewhere deep inside me isn't cold any more. I swallow back my thoughts and shrug a little.

'Okay, I guess I'll take it. I need something to read.'

He takes the book from me, momentarily, while I find six American dollars in my purse, his eyes wandering across the back cover fondly. I imagine him reading it in a white claw-foot bath late at night, in an empty apartment. The tap doesn't stop dripping a slow drip, just every so often.

'Thanks.' He smiles at me as he takes the money. I smile back, awkwardly, and walk away, and he turns to his other sidewalk customers.

I walk in through the doorway of the next shop I find, licked by air conditioning as the wooden door swings shut behind me, but my greeting to the bored woman behind the counter is absent-minded and I can barely concentrate on the racks of colourful vintage dresses and

coats and shirts. I take a brown leather handbag down from a high shelf but place it back in its spot almost immediately.

The coffee shop across the street from the bookseller is busy, and the wiry woman with a shaved head and tattooed shoulders behind the coffee machine gives me a hurried flicker of a smile as she directs me to cup lids and straws. This stranger reminds me of a friend from back home, in Adelaide, Australia. Familiar.

Out the front, two late-twenties women are playing some kind of word game at one of the small wooden tables. Tousled black hair on the woman nearest me, tied back, and she picks a word from some kind of plastic gadget and they begin composing collaborative poetry in response to the word. As I watch, pausing by the door frame, she disagrees with the other woman and lights a cigarette. The disagreement is passionate but not angry, and the second woman runs her fingers through short dark hair and frowns with intensified creative concentration. A thin young man sitting at another small table taps away at a tiny laptop and darts his eyes nervously across the street from time to time. The spare table I had spied through the window has been taken by two sporty types, their perky ponytails and overly tanned skin incongruous with the thick hipster atmosphere of the street. I ask a woman with a floral dress at another table if I can sit in the spare seat opposite her and she smiles up at me and says, simply, 'sure'. One easy word and we are no longer strangers. I open the Didion and I suck at the cool, bitter coffee, past the lid, and I let myself fall into the book.⁴³

The ordinary instant, Didion calls the moment when the biggest life changes occur. 'It was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from

⁴³ Didion, Joan 2005 *The Year of Magical Thinking*, New York: Vintage Books

truly believing it had happened, absorbing it, incorporating it, getting past it', Didion writes.⁴⁴

Heidegger proposes that the ordinary is extraordinary, Uncanny;⁴⁵ what this means for writers, in search for extraordinary moments with which to generate writing saturated with the flavours of the Uncanny, is that sometimes writing is just about recognising the strangeness of ordinary moments. For writers, this can lead to creative exploration and writing which displays an inextricable entanglement of the familiar with the unfamiliar.

'I had to believe he was dead all along,' Didion recalls, of her request for an autopsy after the death of her husband John. 'If I did not believe he was dead all along I would have thought I should have been able to save him. Until I saw the autopsy report I continued to think this anyway, an example of delusionary thinking, the omnipotent variety'.⁴⁶

Freud proposes that this kind of thinking, magical thinking, is a return to the narcissistic thinking of an infant at the stage before they recognise they are not one with the entire world, when we believe we are all-powerful.⁴⁷

'Grief has no distance.' Didion's voice is clear and true across time and context, from her writing to my mind, and it feels like a conversation with an old friend. 'Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mentions this phenomena of "waves"'.⁴⁸ This 'dailiness of life', the ordinary, is disrupted by grief.

Two chapters in and crying silently behind my sunglasses and passive expression, I see a sign that says no smoking, ignored by the wordplay women but enough for me to give a second thought to the idea of lighting up a cigarette. I shift in my seat, fidgeting with the

⁴⁴ Didion, p4

⁴⁵ Heidegger, Martin 1953 *Being and Time* Albany: State University of New York Press, p54

⁴⁶ Didion, p22

⁴⁷ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny*, London: Penguin Books, p143

⁴⁸ Didion, p27

corners of the pages. I sneak a glance at the girl across from me. A jean jacket, a soft face and long straight hair, sitting alone, flopped casually in her seat on a warm afternoon. She looks up and catches my glance; flicks a smile across the table to me.

‘What’s the book you’re reading?’ I ask her.

She tilts the book slightly to better show me the cover. A colour photograph of an elephant, with a woman holding its trunk. Something about elephants in the title.

‘I’m obsessed with elephants,’ she explains, her words tumbling out in a long sigh. ‘This book is about a woman who goes and lives with elephants, and it’s about her relationship with one particular elephant.’

‘Well, for someone who’s obsessed with elephants, that seems like a pretty perfect book,’ I say, trying to fake charming through the watery, thin veil of my grief. ‘Is it good so far?’

She shows me, her fingers peeling back a chunk of pages, where she is up to in the book: about a third of the way through. ‘I haven’t got up to the part with the elephants in it yet,’ she says, a hint of sadness in her voice, ‘but I’m sure I will soon.’

I nod.

There isn’t anything else to say, so we leave the immediacy of the street behind and go back to reading our books.

Didion catches me up in her grief again, tangles me in the strong web of her marriage, her love for her daughter, the incomprehensibility of death, and I once again fall through the minutes of the afternoon. Nowhere to be, except right here, in this seat, eyes full of tears behind large round dark lenses, and escaped strands of hair. Didion quotes e.e. cummings:

*and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueyed boy
Mister Death⁴⁹*

I wonder about another blue-eyed man, enduring cancer back home: whether he is reading today, whether he is thinking about me, whether he is warm in his faraway winter. Strangely enough, for the first time in a long time, I don't feel anxious. Have I outrun grief? Am I supposed to be right here, right in this place at this time? Is everything ordinary and all okay?

The afternoon slides past and it's a while later that the girl across from me closes her book and tentatively stands up. I look up at her. She glances away, across my head and up the street.

'I might be back and I might not,' she says to me, hesitating.

'Well, in case you don't come back,' I say, as warmly as I can, my spinning emotions snagged in the pages of the book on the table before me, 'it was lovely to meet you, and...' I hesitate, clumsy, fumbling to bring the words out of my head and into the afternoon. 'I hope you get to the bit with the elephants soon,' I say.

She smiles shyly and leaves. The bookseller across the street is packing books away into cardboard boxes in the back of an old white van.

'Why did I keep stressing what was and was not normal,' Didion asks, 'when nothing about it was?'⁵⁰

I finish another chapter, and when I look up again, the light scent of the afternoon has turned into the heavier air of dusk. So I put the book in my bag and wander down the street and into the first corner bar I find. A blackboard easel outside says 'today's soup is whiskey'. I order a pint of Brooklyn Lager.

⁴⁹ Didion, p40

⁵⁰ Didion, p83

She looks late forties, bottle blonde hair with dark roots and tattooed shoulders and her crooked teeth are beautiful. I want to say that her name is Daisy, but I can't be sure now that the moment has gone and I didn't write it down. She smiles at me and I settle onto a bar stool and take the Didion out of my bag. At the end of the bar, some young guy is buying shots for a grinning woman, his eyes fixed on hers as he keeps the conversation lively and hilarious, and he brushes his fingertips across her dark skin as she rests one forearm on the bar.

I place the book on the top of the pint glass, covering my beer. As I lay it flat across the circle of glass, I think of days when I was the bartender and served the old diggers beers in pubs back home in Australia, and I hope she understands now. I walk out to the tiny concrete landing outside the front door, to lean against a post and smoke a cigarette and watch the dusk people on the street.

When I come back inside, she grins at me.

'I thought you might have left, and then I saw your book like that, and I *knew* you hadn't.' She points a finger at me and grins, as I sit back down.

Soon after, the couple at the end of the bar get up and go, giggling and walking close together. I wait for the silence to settle into the space they leave behind, but the air conditioning is cold on my skin and so I soon move to the very last bar stool. I am now the only customer in the place. The woman I want to call Daisy comes over and leans in to talk to me, resting strong stringy arms against the bar, pointing a long bare fingernail towards the cover of the book.

'*The Year of Magical Thinking*, huh?' she asks.

I nod slowly.

‘Magical thinking? I like that. It’s good to do some magical thinking. We all need it.’
She hesitates. ‘What does it mean?’

‘Well, in this case,’ I try to answer, ‘I guess it means that way of thinking where, if you think about something enough, you can make something happen.’ Or I could have explained right away that magical thinking is mostly about fooling yourself. But actually, you know, she might be right. Surely, we can all use some of that thinking from time to time, to shudder off any doubts, any feelings of inadequacy and helplessness and vulnerability, and to become omnipotent, even if only in our own minds, for just a few brief moments here and there. Where’s the harm?

‘I like that,’ she grinned in her broad Brooklyn accent, ‘and let me tell you, I have to do some magical thinking. Otherwise, when that horse stepped on me, I could have thought that was the end of my life. But it didn’t kill me.’

‘A horse stepped on you?’

‘Yeah, right here,’ she points to a place on her upper ribs. ‘And, after that: got caught in a bad place on the street one night, and I survived that too. Magical thinking. That’s alright.’ She chuckles, shakes her head. ‘You look like you’ve seen some hard times, too.’

‘Well, hey, hasn’t everyone?’ I don’t know what else to say.

‘I don’t know about that, but here’s to you and me and our magical thinking.’

I raise my glass to her and don’t let the homesickness reach my eyes.

‘Anyway, watch the bar for me for a minute. I’m gonna go out the back and smoke.’

She opens the heavy steel back door and steps out into the dusk. Beyond her, I glimpse a small bare yard, some old chairs, and a tall chain-link fence.

I return to Didion and my beer, and she soon returns to the bar and her thoughts, but when I leave a short time later, the woman whose name I am convinced is Daisy yells ‘magical thinking!’ as a farewell salute just before I walk out of the door and we both raise one arm in a shared brief moment of victory.

In this moment, Freud isn’t relevant; none of my creative writing research on the Uncanny and its possibilities for contemporary creative writing is relevant. What could a 1919 psychoanalytical theory have to do with a stiflingly hot Brooklyn evening and my friend Daisy? Or, perhaps, my research was a significant precursor to every moment that day. At the end of the day, Freud’s essay, ‘Das Unheimliche’, arrives at an uncertain conclusion as to the cause or effect of the Uncanny. The only certainty we are left with is that the unsettling sensation of the Uncanny is tied up with notions of familiarity and unfamiliarity, linked with an act, deliberate or accidental, that causes a sudden jettison of the idea of a stable identity, our daily certainty about ourselves sliding away across dark waters like a small boat from a neglected pier.⁵¹ And the Uncanny involves anxiety and the dissolution of the illusion of language as a reliable medium for communication.⁵² Perhaps that Brooklyn afternoon would have meant something entirely different to me without the filter in my head implanted by hours, days, months, years, of research into the Uncanny, and long nights spent writing under its influence. But, because my head was full of thoughts about the Uncanny, I remember these conversations, including their misunderstandings and things left unsaid, as perfect expressions of the Uncanny and the way it plays with our ideas of home and familiarity. In unfamiliar places, far from home, we can unexpectedly find ourselves suddenly more free to explore the uncertainties sleeping deep in the heart of our sense of self.

⁵¹ Freud, p159; and Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The Uncanny* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p109

⁵² Heidegger, p183

I arrive home, Adelaide, after seventeen hours of time travel from Friday night Los Angeles back to the future, in the middle of a Sunday morning. The sky is grey and the bitterness of the winter chill in the air makes my tanned skin seem like a statement. I fight to keep my eyes open throughout the day, until a reasonable local bed time, and then I sleep for many hours. When I wake to the bleak early morning light, in my house elevated above the plains of Adelaide, its back nestled into foothills and its eyes open to the sea, I lie in bed for some time, half asleep and half aware of my surroundings. In this in-between state, I have no doubt I am in Los Angeles, and so I then become confused at the realisation I am really in Adelaide. I give in to the confusion and drift back to sleep, to wake again a little later, again thinking I am in Los Angeles, the grid of houses stretching from the Hollywood hills down to Venice and Long Beach. I remember, again, that I am in Adelaide and in my mind I try to shrink the imagined Los Angeles down to a miniature version the size of Adelaide, in order to somehow reconcile the two into one location, to rescue myself from my mental limbo somewhere in between the two. Again and again, the repeated experience of waking to a later time in the morning, body not in Los Angeles, and mind not in Adelaide. The word 'jetlag' helps to give this sensation a place but not an explanation. *Sense of physical place is an illusion, not a geographic reality*, my half-asleep brain mutters over and over as the morning gradually yawns. So much for a stable idea of home; theory on the Uncanny is difficult to articulate.

Three weeks later, I wake one sunny morning apparently in San Francisco; another illusion painfully reconciled in the moments after waking. My happiness at thinking I am home in San Francisco, a city I have only ever briefly visited for a few days and never have called home, fades, as the real location of my morning creeps into my consciousness and I gradually accept that I am in Adelaide. The sunlight and something in the air of that morning, or something deep in my head or my heart, insist my body is in San Francisco and in the

moments of letting go of that idea I experience the most profound grief. Homesickness is love, or heartbreak: love lost.

That morning is the first time I realise something has broken somewhere on the roads of my recent travels around the world. Something that made Adelaide the place I call home, the safe place I belong, strange. Or perhaps it had already broken by the time I left, in some other moment, such as in the doctor's office a year earlier, when an oncologist told the blue-eyed man I live with what all those medical terms mean and how short life really can be. Cancer has a way of changing things, twisting life so you can never look at ordinary things and see the same shape again. Creative writing research, too.

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Traditional Gothic and the Birth of *Das Unheimliche*

According to Margot Northey's working definition, the Gothic elicits a

subjective view of the dark side of life, seen through the distorting mirror of the self, with its submerged levels of psychic and spiritual experiences. Non-realistic and essentially symbolic in its approach, the gothic opens up various possibilities of psychological, spiritual, or social interpretation.⁵³

To write fiction with a Gothic mood is to invoke a sense of something dark lurking beneath the surface. The darkness of the Gothic speaks of the complexity of human existence, creating weird kinks in reality to allow room for all of the grotesque beauty that is part of being human. Through the Gothic, we create a space in which we can explore difference, and re-examine ourselves and our fears and desires, our repressions and our taboos. The Gothic allows the strange, terrifying and wonderful to co-exist, and the Gothic mode enables us to explore submerged aspects of life and the human psyche that realist fiction can find difficult to accommodate.

The traditional Gothic atmosphere evokes a sense of mystery, suspense, and fearful anticipation; a sense of being in the presence of the strange.⁵⁴ Isolation and persecution weigh heavy. Sin and death are dominant motifs.⁵⁵ The supernatural often features, but just as often is given a likely explanation of hysteria-induced hallucinations or madness. Perpetual twilight is common.⁵⁶ The meaning of time and space is reduced to a matter of perception through events such as blackouts, swooning, and collapsing from terror.⁵⁷

⁵³ Northey, Margot 1976 *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p6

⁵⁴ Day, William Patrick 1985 *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p27

⁵⁵ Northey, p8

⁵⁶ Day, p27

⁵⁷ Day, p27

The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, was published in England in 1764.⁵⁸ A discussion of the social, political and ideological environment around that time provides some insight into the roots of the traditional Gothic novel and helps to construct a definition of the Gothic in literature, and to illustrate the heritage of Gothic writing. In England and Europe of the eighteenth century, an era of thought known as the Enlightenment focused on deductive reasoning as a valuable guiding principle. Rational and logical thought and science were praised, and the Enlightenment banished the supernatural from polite conversation, deeming it part of an immature, child-like culture.⁵⁹ The late 1700s and early 1800s saw rapid social change. The Industrial Revolution, a period of intense technological progress, radically altered the basic way of life for many people, particularly rural folk.⁶⁰ Thanks to this rapid technological innovation, people who had previously worked from dawn to dusk found themselves with some free time on their hands. Hungry for entertainment in an increasingly urban and technologically complex society, the emerging middle-class created a new market for fiction.⁶¹ Fortunately, the new technological advances included new methods of mass publishing, which helped meet this new demand. But, at a time of rising esteem for realist writing in aristocratic literary circles, the new middle-class readership demanded a re-imagination of writing.

Around the same time, Romanticism emerged, a way of thinking about the world positioned in reaction to the Enlightenment. In contrast with the Enlightenment view that reason should be held above all other values, Romanticism espoused strong emotion and a belief in the power of imagination, looking to untamed nature as both a source and expression of great passion. Romanticism cautioned against rapid scientific and technological progress,

⁵⁸ in Morrow, Bradford, and Patrick McGrath, eds. 1991 *The New Gothic* New York: Random House, pxii

⁵⁹ Botting, Fred 2008 *Limits of Horror* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p7

⁶⁰ Day, p3

⁶¹ Day, p3

and from its anxieties was born its alter-ego: a dark Romanticism, known as the Gothic.⁶²

Characters which were the flawed inverse of the Romantic hero or heroine struggled against isolation and persecution brought about by action and progress, and often science, only to find, again and again, they were trapped by the structures of their environment. Castles, vaults, and dungeons featured heavily.⁶³ The weird and mysterious returned from the Enlightenment's exile, only this time it featured not in a religious and unattainable context, but at home, within the heart of the culture that created its stories.⁶⁴

Gothic fiction's popularity peaked during the French Revolution, a violent time from which, similar to the Industrial Revolution, there emerged a rearranged social structure and an economically upwardly-mobile bourgeoisie. Immediately after the French Revolution, in 1800, De Sade wrote from his prison cell that he considered the Tale of Terror a product of revolutionary upheaval, and surmised that people had suffered so much in the past four or five years that 'Hell itself must be called on to raise interest.'⁶⁵ The Gothic provided an appropriate mode of fiction for a society familiar with fear and the darker side of humanity.

As the Gothic novel evolved, its focus on the external environment as a source of persecution shifted. In the 1830s, in the work of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, the Gothic turned its gaze inward and the psyche became the central source of fears. Castles and exotic locations gave way to a 'geography of madness, interior entropy'.⁶⁶ The line between visible and invisible, real and imaginary, blurry to begin with, became even more fluid.

Gothic literature addresses its concerns in response to its cultural context, and changes over time, acting as a mode of expression for the anxieties and disturbances raised by the

⁶² Novak, Maximillian E. 1979 Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque' in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 13.1, p50-67, p51. Novak notes that some writers on the Gothic propose that Dark Romanticism would be a better term when applied to literature, as Gothic 'merely evokes images of ghosts, demons, trapdoors, castles.'

⁶³ Morrow and McGrath, pxiii

⁶⁴ Botting, p7

⁶⁵ in Morrow and McGrath, pxii

⁶⁶ Morrow and McGrath, pxi

changing ideologies of its surrounding culture. Slavoj Žižek suggests that it is the ghosts and other subterranean inhabitants of a culture that really tell us about that culture:

Perhaps the best way of encapsulating the gist of an epoch is to focus not on the explicit features that define its social and ideological edifices but on the disavowed ghosts that haunt it, dwelling in a mysterious region of nonexistent entities which none the less persist, continuing to exert their efficacy.⁶⁷

The emergent Gothic novel received much negative criticism in literary circles, where its critics denounced it as low art, and suggested Gothic novels were written and read by people of low moral standing. The Gothic was not only demoted out of the realms of literature and into the snubbed world of popular culture, but was specifically deemed nothing more than a shallow form of amusement for impassioned women.⁶⁸ Bradford Mudge notes a definite gendering around the Gothic, in that the majority of Gothic novel writers and readers were women, and he draws attention to the political significance of this ‘feminisation of popular culture’.⁶⁹ Mudge illustrates parallels between the criticism applied to Gothic writing and attitudes towards prostitution during the same period; both were described in the language of the abject, using terms of disease, sewage and filth. He suggests that the Gothic novel, in its questioning of gender roles, was seen to pose a threat to the domestic ideal of the time, similar to the threat seen to be posed by venereal diseases transmitted by sex workers.⁷⁰

A recurring and central theme in traditional Gothic is the nature of masculine and feminine identity, and the characteristics of the family that shapes this identity. This (cis)gendered exploration of masculine and feminine identity involves difficulties with sexual desire, and, at best, awkwardness in the relationship between desire and identity. The

⁶⁷ Žižek, in Botting, p8

⁶⁸ Mudge, Bradford K 1992 ‘The Man with Two Brains: Gothic Novels, Popular Culture, Literary History’ in *PMLA* 107.1, 92-104, p93

⁶⁹ Mudge, p95

⁷⁰ Mudge, p94

traditional Gothic suggests androgyny as the only possible, yet unattainable, solution to the problems of sexuality for people in nineteenth century social roles.⁷¹

The traditional Gothic novel offers a story of fractured identity, a parody of the realist novel.⁷² Where the realist novel gave the new urban, middle-class, nineteenth-century readers a definition of their social reality, and an accompanying narrative about their public identity, the Gothic fantasy gave them definitions of the reality they felt and experienced internally, which often resulted in a misfit with the social narratives of public life.⁷³ In its unravelling tale of plummeting towards an inevitably fragmented identity, the Gothic novel articulates fears and anxieties about the fragile and vulnerable nature of being human.

Typically, the protagonist of the Gothic novel becomes enmeshed in pain-based relationships with the Other, and the protagonist therefore plays the role of either sadist or masochist. Traditionally, if the protagonist is female, she will play masochist to her sadistic male villain. She is passive, finding strength only in endurance, and might find a way out of the persecution maze if she is able to suppress her desires. In contrast, the male protagonist, an antihero, similar to the Romantic hero but fundamentally flawed by egotism, attempts to solve his predicament through action. However, his action is invariably ineffective, and the more he tries to assert power, the more he moves towards his own destruction, eventually becoming a victim to his own desires. He traditionally inflicts suffering on the world, but also on himself in the process, and he will often appear opposite a double, another male character that plays masochist to his sadist and vice versa.⁷⁴

In addition, the theme of doubling is a strong convention in traditional Gothic. The Gothic uses a variety of devices to demonstrate an inversion of the society or world in which

⁷¹ Day, p10

⁷² Day, p10

⁷³ Day, p10

⁷⁴ Day, p15

it exists, and this inversion is often illustrated through its characters. In one example, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)⁷⁵ binds the two doubling personalities in one body.⁷⁶ Metamorphosis and transformation are key elements in the Gothic; everything contains and eventually inverts to become its opposite, as the familiar self becomes the strange Other and vice versa. As the tale of the protagonist Mr Hyde unravels, eventually he can no longer tell what is self and what is Other, and whether this distinction matters.⁷⁷

Often, the traditional Gothic tale will reach its end with nothing much resolved, and with only death and destruction as its denouement. Maximillian Novak suggests the structure of the Gothic novel should arouse curiosity; and therefore it should be 'essentially semi-circular, twisting, repetitive, open-ended'.⁷⁸ When it is, the structure reflects the complex identity puzzle at the Gothic novel's core. Even when all loose ends seem to have been tied, as Dani Cavallaro notes: 'one is left with the feeling that a pervasive malice rules the world through seamless self-preservation.'⁷⁹

A common axis in defining the coordinates of the traditional Gothic is the distinction between horror and terror. Horror is related to identifiable objects, often of the body; it is concerned with the corporeal, the abject, and the Grotesque. Terror cannot be connected with a physical object and it therefore disturbs us through its indeterminacy; David Punter describes terror as 'the trembling, the liminal, the sense of waiting'.⁸⁰ Terror makes us anxious. Terror is concerned with the psyche, the mysterious, the Uncanny and the Sublime. To further illustrate the contrast between horror and terror, I will provide a brief definition of the Grotesque, the Uncanny and the Sublime.

⁷⁵ Stevenson, Robert Louis 1992 (1886) *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and other stories* London: Everyman

⁷⁶ Day, p15

⁷⁷ Day, p15

⁷⁸ Novak, Maximillian E 1979 'Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque' in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 13.1, 50-67, p66

⁷⁹ Cavallaro, Dani 2002 *The Gothic Vision* London: Continuum, p2

⁸⁰ Punter, in Cavallaro, p2

The Grotesque derives from art of the fifteenth century, from the depiction of monstrous and unnatural Pagan forms such as half-human, half-animal creatures. The Grotesque combines comic and horrifying elements. Margot Northey offers a useful definition:

The Grotesque emphasises incongruity, disorder, and deformity, and arises from the juxtaposition or clash of the ideal with the real, the psychic with the physical, or the concrete with the symbolic. It presents a distorted picture of the world.⁸¹

Northey is concerned primarily with establishing a working definition in order to analyse Canadian Gothic, but American Southern Gothic provides some of the best known examples of the Grotesque's focus on bodily horror, such as the work of authors like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Anne Rice. The Grotesque expresses a very physical, body-related, fear.

The Gothic draws on the language of dreams and nightmares, suggesting uncontrolled urges and dimly realised human desires.⁸² At the turn of the twentieth century, Gothic literature received a new understanding when Sigmund Freud, among others, began to assert that the mind has a structure formed of basic drives, and its own complex internal workings.⁸³ Previously, the cause of nightmares was thought to be an external force: either the work of a world of spirits or else a nocturnal madness of the soul.⁸⁴ Now, the dominant themes, actions and even setting and other constructions of atmosphere in Gothic fiction could be explained in terms of the psyche.⁸⁵

With Sigmund Freud's writings on psychoanalysis came one of the earliest explorations of the Uncanny. Freud offers an understanding of the term Uncanny, via its origins in the German words *heimlich* (familiar) and *unheimlich* (unfamiliar), to describe a

⁸¹ Northey, p7

⁸² Day, p27

⁸³ Northey, p5

⁸⁴ Novak, p64

⁸⁵ Northey, p5

sense of feeling simultaneously at home and not at home.⁸⁶ The Uncanny is ‘when familiar circumstances unexpectedly acquire unfamiliar connotations without our being able to ascertain how or why this has happened.’⁸⁷ But the Uncanny is so much more than this. As Nicholas Royle establishes:

The Uncanny, then, is not merely an ‘aesthetic’ or ‘psychological’ matter ... [it is] bound up with analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called ‘everyday life’. This applies not only in relation to issues of sexuality, class, race, age, imperialism and colonialism – so many issues of potentially uncanny ‘otherness’ already evident in the nineteenth century – but also, for example, in relation to notions of automation, technology and programming.⁸⁸

As in Victorian England, the Uncanny is related to broader psychological and political issues. Male and female interactions and their power dynamics feature as central factors, as well as the historical and political experiences connected with social structures of class, race and age, and the ‘fear of what is brought back from colonial adventures’.⁸⁹ The emotional effects of the Uncanny are terror and anxiety.

The aesthetic concept of the Sublime can only be defined by the idea of something so great as to be incomprehensible, defying scientific measurement, and is often, but not necessarily, experienced in extreme nature. Immanuel Kant, writing in 1790, expressed the Sublime as a property of the infinitely great (such as an imposing mountain) or the infinitely active (such as a raging ocean).⁹⁰ Philosopher Edmund Burke offers a definition of the sublime: emotions which are engendered by anything capable of conveying ideas of terror and pain to the mind without actually endangering the physical self.⁹¹ By this definition, the sublime freezes the person experiencing it into a state in which the mind is totally absorbed by one irresistibly powerful object. We hold our breath in suspense. In the presence of the sublime, we are so overwhelmed that reason gives way to the imagination. Jean-Francois

⁸⁶ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny* trans. McLintock, David, London: Penguin Books

⁸⁷ Cavallaro, p4

⁸⁸ Royle, p23

⁸⁹ Smith, Allan Lloyd, in Royle, p23

⁹⁰ Cavallaro, p5

⁹¹ Cavallaro, p4

Lyotard suggests the sublime evokes both pleasure and pain; in the sublime, pleasure derives from pain.⁹²

At the heart of novels intended to provide diversion and entertainment, nineteenth-century readers found themselves abandoned in oubliettes with the very fears from which they ran. And they delighted in this experience. The great power of the Gothic stems from its capacity to transform these fears into pleasure.⁹³

Moving forward from the social context of nineteenth-century England, to current times, we can identify what the traditional Gothic and its core of fear and desire have become in contemporary life and contemporary literature. Recent Gothic literature stands testament to the fact that the Gothic remains relevant. As one study of contemporary Gothic writing notes:

Though no longer shackled to the conventions of the genre, the themes of horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil and weird sexuality strongly manifest the gothic sensibility [in contemporary gothic writing].⁹⁴

Contemporary Gothic leaves behind the scenery of the nineteenth century, and ideologies have changed, but the central concerns of the Gothic as a genre enable it to persist in contemporary culture: fragmentation of identity; the potential of a darker side to life lurking beneath the surface of a supposedly unified and stable society; the duality of desire and fear, and the effect this has on the psyche. These concerns remain pertinent, and the Gothic novel readily adapts to its new environment; evidence that the Gothic is a fun-house mirror reflecting the fears of its host culture, rather than a timeless escapist fantasy detached from reality.⁹⁵

⁹² Lyotard, in Cavallaro, p5

⁹³ Day, p5

⁹⁴ Morrow and McGrath, pxiv

⁹⁵ Cavallaro, pvii

Our psyche's deepest fears and desires are not only the stuff of nightmares, but part of our waking reality. They give clarity to and reflect back to us our repressed fears and also the broader reasons behind those fears. As Cavallaro writes:

entering the circle of fear does not mean relinquishing reality in pursuit of an imaginary world. In fact, it means confronting what threatens us most acutely, and the reasons for which we perceive it as a threat. Fear [...] wakes us up.⁹⁶

While Gothic fantasy does still often come under fire as escapist popular culture, we can also understand that the traditional Gothic provides us with a useful literary toolkit. In giving us ways of exploring ideas outside of the agreed ordinary of our surrounding culture; the Gothic gives writers the ability to engage

a cultural discourse that utilises images of disorder, obsession, psychological disarray and physical distortion for the purposes of both entertainment and ideological speculation.⁹⁷

There is a powerful opportunity for social reflection and change tied up with this ability. Devendra Varma notes that this becomes particularly significant for times of unrest: the Gothic is most popular in times of cultural shifts, 'in periods of cultural death and disintegration, or in response to a political and religious insecurity of disturbed times'.⁹⁸ In these times, the subterranean rivers of cultural fears and desires run close to the surface. We are reminded of the fragility of social constructs and the potential for change we usually repress in favour of the illusion of stability. Cavallaro explains that our illusion of stability is disrupted by fear, but that this is because fear brings a reminder, rather than an unfamiliar idea. As Cavallaro writes:

Fear is not disturbing because it intimates that the fabric of our lives, an apparently orderly weave, is being disrupted or is about to be disrupted, but because it shows us that the fabric has always been laddered and frayed. 'What is aberrant is not the disconcerting sensation of dread but rather the fantasies of order superimposed upon life to make it look seamless and

⁹⁶ Cavallaro, p6

⁹⁷ Cavallaro, pvii

⁹⁸ Varma, in Northey, p110

safe'.⁹⁹

We have, for the most part, changed our ideas about monsters since the nineteenth century. We have brought our traditional Gothic monsters in from the margins and we have even commercialised them.¹⁰⁰ We have experienced the dangers in identifying differences of body and ideology as evil, although it seems some still sometimes forget. But, like nineteenth century readers, we fear an imposing dominant force that would try to normalise us all, and that would seek to stop us from exploring the darker, individuating, aspects of our existence. We can turn to Gothic as a way of deliberately positioning narrative on the margins in order to critique the threat of a dominant perspective. With its ability to grant us a fresh perspective, and a way to articulate the shape of the fears and desires we carry, the Gothic continues to offer us useful ways of discussing our social experience, as individuals in relationship to our social context. Perhaps now we need the Gothic more than ever:

Perhaps another possibility is that by probing beneath the surface of life, gothic and grotesque literature helps engender a fresh frame of meaning. Perhaps its strange and disturbing configurations of experience contribute to the reordering of our perceptions which, many would argue, is at the base of cultural revitalisation.

Those works which appear so death-ridden and frequently disintegrative may be considered catalysts of regeneration. Death and decay are good compost for new growth.¹⁰¹

In navigating this place of creative writing where we want to access the familiar and unfamiliar, the Uncanny can provide a useful theoretical starting point. As we have already established, this is the very nature of the Uncanny. By looking more closely at the Uncanny, and exploring it through an engagement of writing involving critical discussion, fiction, and creative nonfiction writing, it might be possible for creative writers to use the Uncanny to better understand this space of writing, and also to create some writing in the process. In order to do so, we need to explore the Uncanny at a greater depth.

⁹⁹ Cavallaro, pvii

¹⁰⁰ Botting, p9

¹⁰¹ Northey, p110

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2: The white house and the town

The driveway springs out on the side of the road so suddenly that she almost drives past.

Almost. She manages to slow down and turn in to the left, just in time, the tyres scrunching and sliding out on the gravel. The driveway winds between the roadside screen of trees and then straightens out for a while, and then trails up a small rise with dry paddocks on either side. She crawls the car cautiously along the rough surface, veering slightly to avoid a large pothole, trying to keep the tyres in line with the smooth worn tracks. Help for the boy might be as close as the end of this driveway, and so she hurries, too.

Soon, they're in front of the house. It's a shabby little place, white paint peeling from the weathered wood, full heads of arrow-shaped seeds bulging on long stems of overgrown grass. Not completely neglected though, just as though it's a bit out of reach for the owners to keep pace with the wilderness creeping in. A rainwater tank to one side of the house, a large corrugated iron shed to the other, a smaller shed beside that. And the long grass, poking dry fingers up among it all.

The shadowy verandah gives her the impression that the house is looking out at her from under a heavy brow, crude lattice work dangling like a fringe long overdue for a haircut. She parks the car on a careless angle on bare dirt in front of the house and hunches her shoulders to stretch them as she sits for a moment, sizing up the house. From the initial impression, the house looks deserted, but she noticed the tray of a white Toyota ute, jutting out slightly from behind the house, as she was driving in.

‘Maybe you should just wait here and I’ll see if anyone’s home,’ she says. She has her Confident Elise voice on. It does not match her heart.

He looks across at her and nods slowly in agreement, eyes wide and dark.

She walks up the three wooden steps onto the verandah, sturdy footsteps to announce her presence, like stamping to warn away snakes in thick scrub, and she knocks on the frame of the screen door, before she has time to hesitate and feel fear. What she does feel is the chill air of the white sky above closing around her; she nestles her left hand into the pocket of her hoodie. No response to her knock.

She knocks again. Turns back to look towards the car. He is leaning against the window with his head in one hand, fingers curled across his forehead.

They must have two cars and they’ve gone somewhere... the nearest town perhaps? How far is that, anyway? How far is it back to the last one she passed, how far back to... what was the name again?

The sturdy wooden front door opens half way but the screen stays shut. She can just barely make out the figure of an elderly man in the darkness of what seems to be a hallway, mostly empty except for a large wooden hallstand.

‘What do you want?’ he asks. His tone is not friendly.

‘Um, hi there,’ she says, wondering whether she is also shadowed in the verandah and whether he can see her awkward smile, a gesture of friendship falling flat in the moment.

‘My, uh, friend has had a bit of an accident and needs some help. I think he’s cut his head.’ She gestures towards the car, at her own head. ‘Um, I was wondering if you might

have any bandages or something, or if we can call a doctor? I'm not really sure how bad it is and I'm not sure what to do.'

'No.'

The answer falls abruptly through the closed screen door.

'I can't let you in. My wife is ill,' the old man says.

She is taken aback, now realising she had expected to shortly be sitting in a farmhouse kitchen with a cup of comforting tea and possibly even something warm and home baked while they took over the problem and sorted out whatever local medical help is available. The homesteading picture dissolves into shadows in her mind.

'Oh, uh, well then, would it be okay if I just used your phone?'

'No. My wife is ill. You can't come in and use the phone. You'll have to go somewhere else.'

She is fast becoming irritated by the bluntness of his reply. The home baking might very well have been a ridiculous flight of fantasy, but what kind of person would deny someone any help in an emergency, even a stranger?

'Well, could you just call for us?' she tries again, suppressing her frustration. 'Please.'

But he shuts the door in her face; a firm click as the latch drops into place.

She knocks again, but only the wind answers.

And as she climbs back into the driver's seat, she realises she's quite shaken by his refusal. Even the grey afternoon light seems suddenly harsher around her, the paddocks more bleak. What is this place?

But she resolutely starts the engine and reverses the car a little, then puts it into first and turns it around to face back down the driveway. She drives the car slowly back towards the main road, across the crunch of stones, the white house against the grey sky framed in her rear view mirror.

The driveway seems longer than before, and seems to be winding away between the paddocks in a direction other than where she remembers the road to be. But then, she wasn't paying so much attention on the way in, intent on finding help for the dark-haired boy. She drives on for a while, the silence broken only by the whistles of the wind outside the car as it tries to creep long fingers in. Some distance further, she again begins to wonder whether this was the way they came. She slows and then stops the car to try and get her bearings. She can't see the house any more in her rear view mirror; the road seems to have curled around past a small rise, blocking the road they have just travelled. But the line of mallee trees marking the main road is there, off to her right, as expected. So they must be almost at the road. *I guess the driveway just curves back around to the main road further on than I remember*, she thinks, *and I wasn't kinda distracted on the way in*. She begins to drive again. But the road doesn't curve back on itself further along; in fact, it curves away from the line of trees. No, wait. There's *another* line of trees up ahead in the distance, slightly off to her left, trunks bowed down in the direction of the wind, but arthritic mallee fingers curled towards the sky, pointing fingertips back towards what might be another road or might just be a slip of the eye. Glancing between the trees ahead and the trees to her right, she quickly realises they look very much like the same line of gnarled, wind-warped trees. It is hard to tell the two apart. And the dry paddocks all around are featureless. She shivers slightly, and hunches forward. *At least I'm pretty sure I'm on the right track now*, she thinks, and she laughs, inside, at her own feeble unintentional pun about the dirt road she is following. *Gee, those*

trees could be very confusing. A girl could get lost. She lets the wheels roll on. But still the main road doesn't appear.

She slows the car to a halt and takes her phone out of the small satchel bag in the back seat and she clicks on the cheerful coloured Maps icon. Global satellites and clever technology engineers have made it impossible for anyone to ever get lost. No matter where in the world you are, you can find yourself. And once you've found yourself, you can find your way back or forwards to where you're meant to be. The tiny ticking circle of the loading sign on the grey featureless background of the Maps screen laughs mockingly at her certainty about her location in the world. Only one signal bar on her phone tells her she has strayed to the very edges of cyberspace, or at least, beyond the edge of useful telephone reception range.

Elise wonders whether she should turn back. She sighs with resignation and looks for somewhere to turn the car around so she can head back to the house. She hates the idea of that old man peering at her out from the windows of a dim room with his imaginary invalid wife maybe or maybe not by his side, watching and no doubt laughing at her acting out the part of a stupid city slicker. Cranky old fucker. But the dirt track, dull greyish brown bits of rock crunching under the car tyres as they drive, is narrow and bordered by fences on each side and she'll have to keep going for a while. And then, just as she spots somewhere she might be able to chuck a three-pointer, she notices that the road is turning back towards the original line of trees. She veers around that corner and there is that straight stretch of driveway she remembers, and the trees up ahead, and, beyond that, the main road. Her heart leaps with the feeling only lost-and-then-recovered people know, and she lets out an involuntary cheer when they reach the main road. As they pull out onto bitumen she accelerates hard and gives the driveway and the old man and the whole fucked up situation the finger. She glances at the boy but he is still staring out silently out of the window, his eyes unfocused on the unkind scenery sliding past beyond the glass.

Soon, the little old white car is skimming along between borderlines of mallees, the wind finding its way into gaps again, and Ole Blue Eyes is back on for the noise so she doesn't have to try to start up a conversation with the boy, and the distance between weirdness and help is steadily receding. Now, she's sure she'll soon be sitting somewhere with a glass of wine and looking back at this and shaking her head, and she hums snippets of *Mack the Knife* to herself.

She grimaces with relief when eventually the road delivers on its promises and an 80 sign appears to signal a town up ahead, and she reads the name out aloud just moments later, a little further down the road: 'Hawley'.

The Lions Club and tidy town signs are merry in their gaudy clamour and she takes note of the white bed symbol on one sign's blue background: there's a motel up ahead.

~

The key is stiff in the forgotten lock and Elise wriggles it for quite a while. A garish orange plastic oval with a giant black 23 dangles from the key ring and clatters against the door as she finally manages to turn the reluctant key. A few more jiggles and she opens the door to the musty gloom of a country motel double room. A double bed with a polyester bed spread, beige and orange geometric patterns. A chunky wooden television cabinet, varnish peeling. A brown vinyl folder rests on a slightly scuffed and battered side table, beside a beige rotary telephone. She lugs her canvas overnight bag inside and slings it down beside the bed. She collapses, starfish, across the bed. The springs resist but sag.

'So,' she says to the boy, to the room, 'here we are.'

He walks into the dim room and pouts, sullen and quiet and ugly, as he sits slowly onto one corner of the bed, fingers folding defensively into clasped hands.

Elise lurches up off the sagging bed and unzips a front pocket of the pack. She removes a white paper bag and begins to extract a DIY traveller first aid kit, really just an assortment of bits and pieces she has become accustomed to including in her personal equipment check. Klutz life. Disinfectant, cottonwool swabs, Band-Aids. She finds a stubby white porcelain coffee cup on a tray of coffee and tea supplies on the TV stand, fills it halfway with warm water from the tiny ensuite bathroom, where the memory of wet towels and showered bodies lingers on pale green tiles. Wrestling with the childproof cap on the disinfectant bottle, she slurks a generous amount of disinfectant into the cup. Dunks a cottonwool swab from her kit. She squeezes out most of the cloudy white disinfectant water and gestures towards the boy with her arms, hoping the wet clump and her worried face offers enough of a silent bargain of trust.

‘Okay, this is guaranteed to hurt. And I’m sorry, for my clumsiness, in advance.’

She sits on the bed beside him and gingerly pushes at the straggly hair hanging across his forehead, searching for the source of the blood. The hair is matted with blood and he winces as it snags and pulls. Apologising frequently in yips, she gently smooths back the hair from his forehead and dabs at the caked blood with the wet swab. He clenches his hands tighter together and his shoulders stiffen. She perseveres. Gradually, the crimson blotches break up and start to come away in bright red smears on the swabs, but there’s enough that she has to go back to her kit for backup. Closer to the source of the blood, she becomes even more hesitant in her dabbing, but soon she can see it’s only a tiny split in the skin just below the hairline. Bruised around it, though, and it’s obviously very tender because right now he is gritting his teeth, lips tight, jaw clenched.

‘Not too much more to go now,’ she says, and reminds herself of her mother. She flushes slightly and keeps talking to brush away the matronly tones. ‘Is it very sore? I mean, it looks a little bruised already. Oh, and there’s a decent lump starting to form there.’

She twists to face him straight on and scans his eyes.

‘I wonder if you have concussion. Um... maybe you’d better not sleep for a while, and I’ll keep an eye on you.’ She wonders if that’s what you’re supposed to do for concussion. Just keep an eye on them? An eye for what? What will he do? Just close his eyes and drift away into death? Or could it get more violent than that? Might he start convulsing? She pictures him thrashing on the carpet with his eyes rolling back, her, helpless again, watching a stranger die.

She reconsiders the decision not to take him to a hospital, or whatever local country doctor arrangement they have out here. She should probably try again to encourage him to see someone. He’d looked anxious when she had mentioned the idea of finding a doctor, so she’d simply left him in the car, slumped down under his black sweatshirt hood, when she went into the dingy reception area at the motel.

The heavy glass door swinging shut behind her, shutting the wind outside. A large woman behind the desk had raised one eyebrow and looked out at her across spectacles, the motion causing ripples in her thick tan make-up.

‘Travelling alone?’

She’d mumbled something about a brother, sliding her credit card across the desk. An orange plastic disc in return. Room 203.

‘We’ve only got doubles left,’ the woman had said, Elise confused by the statement combined with an empty carpark. ‘You’re right down the end. Tea and coffee in the suite.’

The local pub's at the end of this road and they do a good counter-y,' gesturing, 'And if you need anything else, be sure to let me know, okay, love?' But she didn't seem like she actually wanted to be let know, and Elise wasn't planning to push her luck unless she really, really needed something.

With the blood cleaned away, she fumbles with the lip of the Band-Aid packaging. It flicks out from beneath the edge of her thumb. Fip. She tries again. Fip. She eventually manages to get a firm grip on it and peels back the packaging.

She smooths the tiny brown fabric strip over the cut, a balancing act between applying enough pressure that it will stick and avoiding pushing so hard that it hurts him. The boy seems instantly better once it has been applied. It's as though the body's healing processes have taken over as soon as that brown rectangular symbol has been activated, white blood cells rushing, in tiny rippling waves, to the site. She scrunches the small white waxy paper slips and walks to the tiny bin in the bathroom. She hesitates before throwing the scraps away, as if it's evidence, might somehow give them away. She shakes off the thought; they're not fugitives.

Elise sits on the bed beside the boy again. She looks deep into his dark brown eyes. He looks back at her, eyes studying her face. She feels she has known him, for a long time. But he is a stranger, and, even though sitting next to him feels so familiar, they only met an hour or two ago. What happened to him out there on the highway? What if the tiny cut beneath the bandage is the only sign of a serious head injury? What if he does start having some kind of fit? Behind that tiny cut, in the warm dark dome of his skull, he could have a brain haemorrhage right now silently swelling, full of blood, pressing against his brain, on the way to killing him at any moment. She feels he somehow belongs to her now, at least temporarily, and she can't take the weight of responsibility that comes with it, Elise with no

medical knowledge, in a town she has no doubt driven past many times before, on the way to Melbourne, but has never before visited.

Elise's stomach reminds her she's had nothing to eat since a roadhouse about an hour out of Adelaide. A meal she called lunch but which was actually just a greasy, overly salty hash brown from a melancholy bain-marie, and a bitter and watery black coffee made palatable, just, by adding extra sugar. Food is on the list of things to do urgently. But first, she really needs to get him to a doctor, and the afternoon light tells her the day won't stop for anyone.

~

The doctor's office is in the front section of a pink weatherboard house, one street back from the main road at the far end of town. The motel lady's directions were simple, but enough, and Elise had managed to persuade the boy that he needed to get things checked out, just in case of something serious. He'd said very little in reply but that frightened look crept back into his eyes, if it had ever left.

As they step out of the car, the wind whips Elise's hair across her cheeks, into her eyes, into her mouth. She faces the wind and shakes her hair away from her face. The low white chain-link gate whines as she guides it open with one hand. They walk together down the cracked concrete path to the entrance of the surgery, where the boy hangs back behind Elise as she opens the white wrought-iron door.

The reception area is an empty desk and a row of ancient mustard-coloured vinyl chairs. There are no magazines on the small side table, just a cardboard stand stuffed with yellowed pamphlets about snake bites, a bible, and a dog-eared copy of *Wuthering Heights*.

She wonders whether the whole town is well versed in the first chapter of the book, whether anyone has been ill enough to read the whole thing.

The doctor appears, an elderly man with snowy hair and bushy eyebrows, in grey cardigan and slacks, and he ushers the boy through a door and into his consultation room. At the last moment, the boy darts his hand out to grab hers, bringing her with him.

She watches from the corner of her eye as he fills out the form, but she already feels she is an intruder just by being in the room and she fidgets in her seat, tries to act disinterested, gazing past the boy at a painting on the doctor's wall. It is a landscape painting, presumably of somewhere near here. In the foreground, an old barbed wire low fence, three strands of wire stretched between heavy weathered wooden posts. Beyond that, a dun coloured field stretches all the way to a distant horizon. The top two thirds of the painting are sky, which the painter seems to have attempted to make more interesting by adding the impression of some swirling grey clouds against a pale grey background. The field is almost featureless, apart from some rocks and stumpy tufts of dry grass, and one lone dead tree at mid-distance between the fence and the horizon. But behind the tree, far away on the horizon, the textured smears of paint suggest the tiny form of a white house. Possibly a white weatherboard house, very much like the one where she tried to find help. She cranes her neck forward, trying to make out a dark shape in the smudge of a painted window. Is it the old man?

The impatient note in the doctor's voice brings her back to her seat beside the dark-haired boy. The boy and the doctor are both staring at her. She suspects the doctor might have already asked her the question.

'I asked whether you are family,' the doctor says.

‘Uh no, I’m... not,’ she stammers awkwardly.

The doctor frowns at her.

She glances at the boy beside her.

He shrugs, tilts his head towards the door for a moment. ‘Maybe you should wait outside for me. I’ll be fine.’ More American than German, that curled sound to his words, she thinks, absentmindedly.

She stands, crosses the carpet, and leaves the room, pulling the white wooden door softly closed behind her.

As she enters the waiting room, an old dark blue Holden sedan drives past the windows, and a small child with a floating mess of white blonde hair turns its head to look from the gloom of the back seat in her direction, bored eyes showing no reaction to the world beyond the window frame.

Elise sits a chair in the corner of the room and picks up the copy of *Wuthering Heights*. She opens it at a random page and begins to read.

~

The mozzarella is melted and stringy in that good way and the tomato sauce is juicy and the chicken is juicy and this is probably the best meal she’s ever eaten. And she doesn’t even usually eat meat. *Who am I*, she asks herself? But she’s just that hungry that, right now, she doesn’t even care much about anything other than the next bite. He seems to be enjoying it, too. They sit silent, hunched over their meals, scoffing down mouthfuls almost too hot to handle, breathing through the burning heat, soaking up stray blobs of parma juice and cheese

with their chips, taking a sip of beer every so often. The awkwardness between them is slowly dissolving around the edges.

The pub around them, falling silent at first, when they swung the heavy wooden door open, has resumed a steady hum of noise; the clink of glasses and a low, rumbling chatter. It's not exactly a friendly atmosphere, but at least they don't seem to be the centre of attention any more. Some cowboys at the bar, with dry, straw hair and wide field faces, are discussing a recent spotlighting adventure. They're laughing at an absent friend, Batesy, who, so the tales goes, couldn't hit a startled rabbit with a bullet if his arse was on fire and he needed the rabbit to put it out. Roars of laughter, ruddy cheeks, fat fists raising glasses to swill beer like tomorrow doesn't count.

She nudges her plate to line it up more neatly with the edge of the table. On her next slurp of beer she places the glass on a diagonal line with the plate and her unrolled cutlery serviette, forming a neat grid pattern, noticeable to no-one else but comforting to Elise.

She notices the pool table in the corner, its red felt water-damaged, presumably by careless beer drinkers, over the years. A few crappy thick cues lean against a wall in the corner, a triangle rests on a small shelf nearby.

'Do you play 8-ball?' she asks the boy, watching him down the last of his beer. 'Sign of a misspent youth,' she adds, forcing a wry chuckle, trying again to push past his silence with a chipper, friendly tone.

'Uh, yep,' he replies. His accent is still hard to pin down. Maybe Canadian? Maybe Irish? His teeth flash as he gives her a fleeting cheeky grin. 'I could beat you, I reckon.'

She smiles, less forced, this time.

'Oh really? I don't know about that. Maybe we can have a game after this?'

She doesn't really feel like playing pool with the eyes of the whole pub constantly sliding across them and away again but it would at least give them something to do. Keep the hands and mind busy and all that.

~

And then it's all on.

'What the fark you lookin' at, mate?' And the thick-necked guy is moving across the room to get into the dark-haired boy's face before she can really grasp what's going on. Swaggering. Snarling. She senses the boy bristle beside her.

'Hey, no need to get so worked up,' she says, the sound of her own voice high-pitched and unfamiliar in her ears.

'You farking starting something with me, are ya?'

'We're not starting anything,' she says, but the reddening, broad face isn't talking to her, isn't including her in the conversation.

She flicks a glance towards the dark-haired boy, sees eyes big and round, but something else, too. Some kind of annoyance is creeping into his face, gradually narrowing his eyes and firming his lips, jaws steadily clenching. He stays seated but his fists are curling into balls and he looks more like a cat every second.

'You've just blown into town from... wherever, and I don't give a flying hoot where you're from, actually, fa fark's sake,' Red Face spits. 'And now you're causing trouble. Abusing me, abusing this fine establishment,' and he slurs wetly onto them, 'with that stupid farking face of yours. Well, you know what I reckon?' Towering over the table, he plants one

hand on the edge of the chipboard tabletop, for emphasis, leaning in towards them. ‘I reckon why don’t ya go fark yourself? What do ya think about that, hey?’

‘We really didn’t mean to offend you in any way,’ she splutters.

Red Face continues to direct the conversation to the boy. ‘Cat gotcha tongue, huh? Need your girlfriend to answer for you, do you?’

‘I’m not – he’s not,’ she begins, but she realises it’s probably not going to help and decides to stop there.

In one motion, the boy pushes his chair away from the table to stand, his face very close to Red Face’s. With his body drawn up to its full height, he is only an inch or two shorter, although Red Face’s bulk still looks as though it could flatten him at any second. He begins to speak, softly, so that only Elise and Red Face can hear.

‘Listen,’ says the boy, ‘we are just trying to have a quiet meal and then we’ll be gone and your town will be back the way it was before we got here. You could fight me, but it would probably be more fun if you and I both have another beer. How about I buy you one, buddy?’

Red Face looks as though someone has thrown a glass of water in his face. Time stalls. But it seems sometimes a big man likes having a glass of water thrown in his face. Red Face scratches his head and a smile begins to creep at the corners of his mouth. The room seems to exhale around them, air rushing back into a vacuum. Elise exhales slowly, silently.

‘You know what? Ha! That’s what I say. Ha! I guess maybe you’re alright,’ the big man says to the boy.

And she is still sitting there, stunned and silent, still confused as to what has just happened, while, somehow, the charm works, like magic, and the two men are off together, walking towards the bar, Red Face slapping the boy heartily on the back and calling him mate again, but in a whole new way.

~

They call it a draw after too games to keep count, although Elise's wins feel more like luck than skill. They bid farewell to their new acquaintances at the bar and they wander drunkenly along beside the empty road, back towards the motel, gravelly dirt crunching underfoot and the stars looming close above them. Domesticated gums in the main street throw wildling shadow fingers across their path, but she feels alive and brightly lit and invincible, like the moths dancing strange twisting paths around bright orbs of streetlights, skimming out through the hazy golden edges of the light to disappear into the velvet darkness beyond, only to very quickly reappear again, flying fast and direct and frantic towards the centre of the glow.

And now it seems the boy can't stop talking, all the anxiety vanished in a pool of beer and their growing sense of familiarity, and they are laughing laughing laughing as they retell each other parts of their pub story in splutters and starts. How Red Face ended up becoming their new best mate, leaning conspiratorially on one elbow on the beer ledge in the corner and packing a corn cob pipe with cherry tobacco as they hit sticks onto the white ball, planning out geometry on the red mat. Red Face, who it turned out was actually called Cameron, drawled to them at length about his sheep station, about ten kays out of town, dirt roads stretching all the way to the endless dry horizon, tracing fences built to contain dusty fields of land grazed dry, to the bones, by sheep. He told them how, sometimes, the long, solitary hours could slide into days, how each week's trip into town to the pub marked intervals of time that soon became sprawling months, and then years of his life, fragmented only by

infrequent trips to Adelaide for weddings and funerals. How the weekly trips became strange in their uneventful repetition, each trip so similar that he sometimes wondered whether he had slipped into the confusion of solitude, set out on his journey on the wrong day. He told them how he spent long stretches alone on the farm, painting. She pictures him, sitting in the sunroom of a weatherboard farm house late into the night, small winged insects carving lunatic circles in the still night air around the sharp fluorescent lights. Leaning in to slick another detail onto the rapidly drying surface of his latest painting. He told them he painted with acrylic paints, on pieces of board from around the farm. He always paints the same subject: the Mad Max Interceptor. The one from Mad Max 2: the best film of them all. The corners of the sunroom stacked with past efforts, various sizes and dimensions of pictures of the Interceptor. Filling up the room and the night and a home and a life with the man's big love of a strong engine and sleek metal lines and the endless Australian outback road, the great joyous beauty of it all filling up all of the space on the farm and spilling over into the sky with the enthusiasm of a giant burst of steam from a boiler pipe.

‘And I wonder,’ says the boy, ‘if he started off by watching the movie a few times, and then painting a new picture every time he watched it. Or did he watch the movie a lot, and then once he started on the paintings, he just couldn't stop? And I wonder if they have changed a lot over time?’ They laugh and their feet catch on nothing and they stagger down the road.

The motel room smells of dusty acrylic curtains and road trip transience but she is too tired to care about anything other than a locked door and a bed. She pushes off each canvas shoe at the heel, using the toes of the other foot, and she curls her bare toes against the squeaky tight acrylic fleece of the carpet. The towelling bedspread is soft beneath her fingers. Homely.

They slip into bed with murmurs and a contented tiredness.

She snaps off the bedside light, and it should be awkward but the haze of beer softens all of the edges until she's not sure where the personal space line is anyway. And something seems to draw her closer to him in the almost-darkness, something warm, magnetic, a thing without words. His knees tuck up behind hers, his chest flat against her back. They form a double zigzag. He reaches one arm across her body, curling it to cup her left breast. She freezes momentarily, but it all feels so comfortable, as though his body is just an extension of hers. It is the most familiar, welcome touch she has felt in a long time.

Elise feels her body softening, relaxing into the cocoon of the dark-haired boy's skin against her body. She listens to his soft breathing just behind her neck. He sighs once, deeply, and she listens in the dark as his breathing gradually slows and becomes more regular in its rhythm. She lies awake in the dark for as long as she can, but before long, she feels herself drifting away from the room, away from the town, drifting into sleep. The little spoon.

Australian Gothic

It is impossible for me to describe the kind of country... dreariness of the view... here and there a stunted gum-tree, or a gloomy cypress, seemed placed by nature as mourners over the surrounding desolation. Neither beast nor bird inhabited these lonely and inhospitable regions, over which the silence of the grave seemed to reign.

- Charles Sturt, *Two Expeditions into the Interior of South Australia* (London: Smith, Elder, 1833) I.xv.

South Australia, my home, is a place of margins and dualities. Its capital city, Adelaide, rests between hills and the beach, the desert and the sea, and its residents know it along the line of a strong north-south division of suburbs. Much of the population lives on the plains in the intersection of all of these divisions. On a sunny day it is a peaceful place. You might sit on a picnic rug in the back yard of your home and write. Drifting lazily through thoughts among apricot trees and sunshine, you might wonder about the relevance of the Gothic to Australia, wonder whether Australia has the Gothic woven into its past or not. But 'Australia...' writes Gerry Turcotte, 'is Gothic to its very bones.'¹⁰² While this thesis does not aspire to offer a survey of national literature, it is useful to pause here for a moment and consider the literary context within which my writing, and particularly the first section of *Stranger*, exists, and that is the context of Australian Gothic.

At the same time as the Gothic tradition skyrocketed to a peak of popularity in Victorian England, European colonists arrived in Australia.¹⁰³ It might therefore be expected that the Gothic is a recognised feature of Australian writing. But, notes Turcotte, supported

¹⁰² Turcotte, Gerry 1993 'How Dark Is My Valley: Canadian and Australian Gothic' in *SCARP* 22, p26

¹⁰³ Turcotte 1993, p27

by other theorists such as Ken Gelder and Andrew Ng, there are often murmurs of surprise that the Gothic has such deep, strong roots in Australian literature.¹⁰⁴

‘The Gothic is a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the colonial experience, in that each shares with the other common characteristics,’¹⁰⁵ comments Turcotte. For instance, both the colonial experience and the Gothic reside in an uncanny space, familiar and simultaneously unfamiliar. Both the Australian colonial experience and the Gothic express cultural anxieties about an unknown threat, both describe challenges in defining identity, and both speak to the challenges of trying to survive in an unfamiliar and harsh environment. Lindsay Petti draws attention to the fact that ‘land controversies are a major source of themes in Australian Gothic literature’, making this body of literature an ideal ground for geocriticism, which Pettee defines as a field which ‘aims to explore the spaces created in literature through the interaction between reality and fiction’.¹⁰⁶ Petti notes that both the Gothic and geocriticism are concerned with borders and liminal spaces, key concerns of writing in an Australian context and are relevant to discussions of decolonization and neocolonization.¹⁰⁷

European colonists both used and resisted the Gothic as a mode of writing Australian literature. Central to the Gothic are motifs of ruin, disintegration and alienation, and themes of the triumph of chaos over order, and of nature over human. But descriptions of an idyllic new-country life seemed a more optimistic mode of expression for dreams of a brand new nation, even if it was an artificial reflection of the unfamiliar environments and unsettled sentiments of the time.¹⁰⁸ ‘Colonial Australian Gothic fiction often intervenes directly in the

¹⁰⁴ Turcotte 1993, p26; see also Gelder, Ken, and Jane M. Jacobs 1998 *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* Carlton South: Melbourne University Press; and Ng, Andrew 2007 'The Wider Shores of Gothic' in *Meanjin* 66.2, 149-56

¹⁰⁵ Turcotte 1993, p27

¹⁰⁶ Petti, Lindsay G. 2015 *Terra Australis Incognita: A Geocritical Analysis of Australian Gothic Literature*, Masters Dissertation, University of San Diego, p2

¹⁰⁷ Petti, p3

¹⁰⁸ Turcotte, Gerry 2009 "The Kangaroo Gargoyles: Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script," in *Arts Book Chapters* (Paper 1), online at http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_chapters/1, accessed 22/12/2016, p354

process of nationbuilding, of settlement and home-making in the New World' Ken Gelder comments.¹⁰⁹

Where colonial writers did opt to express the fears and fragile hopes of the new arrivals, the Gothic was embraced as an appropriate literary mode through which to voice feelings of alienation, dislocation, conflict, and oppression by the environment.¹¹⁰ As Gelder notes, 'colonial explorers went on to reproduce Gothic tropes almost as a matter of course, as they accounted for what they saw'.¹¹¹ Australian desert seemed as ancient and foreboding as anything out of British Gothic literature, bringing endless wide-open space and the claustrophobia of confinement uncannily together.¹¹² Writers imposed familiar Gothic scenery onto the Australian landscape, describing the landscape in terms of ruins and castle buttresses. Australia's original inhabitants were quickly relegated to a marginal position as the Other, often featuring in stories in cahoots with the landscape as a mysterious and threatening force.

This was a somewhat superficial treatment of the Gothic, merely transplanting it to a new setting while continuing to externalise cultural fears, projecting them onto a convenient Other. Imagining Australia through the familiarity of the traditional Gothic genre tropes avoided any confrontation with 'deeper fears about finding an empty heart at the interior, the failure of the new colonies to survive, the violence being seeded into the psyche of a fledgling culture, or the fact that the colonists might themselves be the monstrous Other'.¹¹³ As Turcotte elaborates, often what terrorises us out there was created within us.¹¹⁴ Gelder notes the prevalence of the description in Australian Gothic writing of the Australian wilderness as strange:

¹⁰⁹ Gelder, Ken 2012 'Australian Gothic' in *New Companion to the Gothic*, ed David Punter, Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, p381

¹¹⁰ Turcotte 2009, p355

¹¹¹ Gelder 2012, p379

¹¹² Gelder 2012, p380

¹¹³ Turcotte 2009, p353

¹¹⁴ Turcotte 2009, p353

‘The “weirdness” of the Australian bush becomes a commonplace evocation for the Australian Gothic, a way of expressing the landscape’s capacity for generating darker colonial sensibilities amongst settlers, such as melancholy, anxiety, and dread.’¹¹⁵

H. P. Heseltine, writing in 1962, suggests a deliberate avoidance of the true Gothic themes is related to the origin and the prominence of ‘mateship’ in Australian literature:

In the nineteenth century a persistent and single-minded investigation of the horror of primal experience simply could not be tolerated. The first duty of a frontier society is physical survival; hence evolved that most famous of all Australian survival techniques, the concept of mateship.¹¹⁶

Mateship emerged as a survival technique and as a result became a common and revered trope in writing. But the Gothic spoke to a darkness creeping in at the edges of the mateship myth, adding a sense of intensity to the real Australian experience. For writers such as Henry Lawson, Heseltine argues, realist writing:

was a necessary defence against the kind of experience which most powerfully laid hold of his imagination. If mateship bulks so large in the canon of Lawson’s writing (as indeed it does), it was because behind and beneath it was an even more compelling awareness of horror, of panic and emptiness.¹¹⁷

Heseltine accuses Henry Lawson of contributing to attitudes he says has resulted in a superficial literary heritage, as he asks:¹¹⁸

Is our tradition, after all, to be summed up in this or that single word – Mateship? Landscape? Nationalism? Is what we have received from our literary past so *thin* that the simple labels do, indeed, suffice?¹¹⁹

Is this why the Gothic has been marginalised within Australian literature? Andrew Ng suggests that by ignoring the extent of the Gothic influence, we are also able to ignore the influence of colonialism in Australian literature:

¹¹⁵ Gelder, in Punter, 384

¹¹⁶ H. P. Heseltine 1962 ‘Australian Image (1) the Literary Heritage’ in *Meanjin Quarterly* 88.21, p41

¹¹⁷ Heseltine, p41

¹¹⁸ Heseltine, p36

¹¹⁹ Heseltine, p38

Australian literature boasts a rich history of narratives focussing on distinctively Gothic concerns: identity fragmentation, psychic and bodily disintegration, difficult liminal states, transgression of boundaries, and spatial oppressions. Perhaps the peripheral status accorded the Gothic in Australian literary studies is an unspoken strategy for resisting the 'colonial' presence in the nation's literary heritage, or reflects an oblique deference to the original English models that cannot conceive of their transplantation elsewhere.¹²⁰

Ng suggests that Australian writers use elements of the Gothic all the time, but Australia simultaneously cannot acknowledge its influence, lest it should admit to a terrible colonial history.¹²¹

This relates to the questions of Nick Cave's work raised at the start of this thesis, posed by Russell Forster: why has Cave's work failed to earn the levels of recognition in Australia that it has overseas? And is this a symptom of a wider cultural issue? As McEvoy notes, Ian Johnston, writer of *Bad Seed*, the biography of Nick Cave, specifically denies that the music of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds is Gothic.¹²² But Nick Cave is not just Gothic but excessively Gothuc, McEvoy proposes:

It is not merely in the realm of the verbal or the consciously literary that the work of the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds is Gothic. The very performativity of the band is Gothic. The band, and especially Cave, do not only sing of the fractured Gothic self, they also stage the fracturing of the Gothic self as event.¹²³

Van Elferen points out that Cave's work contains discomfoting expressions of the Gothic dualities of fear and desire:¹²⁴

The Birthday Party's early lines 'Horror bat/Bite!/Cool machine/Bite!/Sex vampire/Bite!' invoke and – perhaps unintentionally – comment on the overtly Gothic tone of Bauhaus' work and the Gothicized references to the Bible, John Milton and other texts illustrate Cave's self-aware positioning within established literary traditions.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ng, Andrew 2007 'The Wider Shores of Gothic' in *Meanjin* 66.2, 149-56, p149

¹²¹ Ng

¹²² McEvoy 2007 p79

¹²³ McEvoy p79

¹²⁴ van Elferen, Isabella 2013 'Nick Cave and Gothic: Ghost Stories, Fucked Organs, Spectral Liturgy' in *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays*, ed John Baker, Bristol: Intellect Books Ltd, p179

¹²⁵ Elferen, p179

Both Van Elferen and McEvoy connect Cave's work directly with the Uncanny through the inherent intertextuality of music, which invites the listener to bring their own personal connections to the experience of listening and thereby instantly brings in the Uncanny's home and not-home duality and the temporal collapse of the Gothic. As Van Elferen notes:

Musical ghosts are much more effectively uncanny than literary ones, not only because auditive perception has a more direct effect than textual, but more importantly because tempo and rhythm, melody and harmony, vocal and instrumental timbre underline and intensify what is being expressed¹²⁶

McEvoy reminds us of music's ability to summon Gothic pasts in those times when the listener identifies other musical styles in the current piece and connects the music with places and their significance.¹²⁷ Perhaps Nick Cave's work is not traditionally Gothic, Van Elferen proposes, but his 'exploitation of the uncanny potential of mediation does justify popular perceptions of him as a Gothic narrator'.¹²⁸

Russell Forster, offering an answer to the questions he has posed, claims that, in comparison with America, Australia has not done the work of reconciliation with its past which enables America to tap into the culture of the American South, from which has grown the complex and rich history of Blues and Roots music:

Australia refused to speak with its colonial ghosts sufficiently for them to be of use in the art of the nation. While America managed to repress its slave guilt and swept itself into the euphoria of New World fever, Australia kept its lid tightly on. Overburdened with the notion of Empire as both prison and moral custodian, we never had the war of independence we needed in order to sing confidently.¹²⁹

Forster's speculation offers an incomplete answer, as he omits comment on America's relationship with its First Nations peoples, in favour of a focus on America's history of slavery in the South and on the penal colonies of Australia, as these are significant settings for Cave's work. Gerry Turcotte's discussion of the similarities between Canadian and Australian Gothic provides further insights into the postcolonial hauntings in literature from

¹²⁶ Elferen, p179

¹²⁷ McEvoy, p80

¹²⁸ Elferen, p186

¹²⁹ Forster, p61

these two nations, discussed later in this thesis, which contributes more on this point.

However, Forster's discussion of Cave's work provides useful insights on contemporary creative writing and its relationship with identity and difference:

Current debates about the question of violence in cultural expressions, and whether they lead or lag society, rarely take into account the question of identity. As the world we inhabit is increasingly mediated, difference, which is a function of identity, is increasingly threatened [...] Our growing predilection for violence in cinema, literature and pop music may well be a response to the suffocation such sameness creates.¹³⁰

This resonates with Heseltine's illumination of both historical and ongoing undercurrents of fear and constraint in Australian writing, where 'Australia's literary heritage is based on a unique combination of glances into the pit and the erection of safety fences to prevent any toppling in.'¹³¹ Heseltine suggests this duality is a central concern in Australian literature. While the canon of Australian writing 'presents a facade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness', Heseltine writes, at the heart is one central concern: acknowledging 'the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers'.¹³²

This presents some interesting questions for contemporary Australian literature: what might a postcolonial and postmodern Gothic look like? How might an updated approach to the Gothic tradition be useful in expressing voices from beyond a colonial perspective?

I need to quantify the term 'postcolonial' in these questions because much written on the Gothic in contemporary Australian literature aligns with postcolonial theory, but specifically where postcolonial theory applies to the unique situation of Australia as postcolonial nation. In doing so, this discussion adopts the definition of Diana Bryden and Helen Tiffen, to view postcolonial not as a distinction between colonial and post-

¹³⁰ Forster, p63

¹³¹ Heseltine, p40

¹³² Heseltine, p49

independence, but as part of a continuum, or, as they would define it, ‘the persistence in the present (and sometimes the invention and reinvention in nationalist contexts) of colonialisms both old and new.’¹³³

There are dangers in proposing a nationalist, reductivistic formula for Australian literature; dangers of marginalising or even silencing some voices in favour of others. Australia’s contemporary culture is formed by so many different voices, the interstices of so many different cultural backgrounds, and each voice represents an important contribution to the discourse. But we all share a culture soaked with the darkness of the violence in its past, and there are many ghosts with which we have not yet conversed. And perhaps the Gothic can provide the necessary introductions. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, in discussing the Uncanny in Australia today, suggest that the Gothic creates a vital space which can give expression to ‘a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.’¹³⁴

Katrin Althans notes that it is difficult to ignore or escape the influence of colonialism in Aboriginal Gothic literature.¹³⁵ In Althans’ survey into Aboriginal Gothic, she notes the duality in the relationship of Australia’s First Nations peoples to the introduced species of the Gothic: ‘Aboriginal authors, who both loathe and love the Gothic, have engaged with it in numerous ways’¹³⁶ Althans advocates for a reading of Aboriginal Gothic in terms of both a negotiation with the traditional Gothic but also a consideration of this literature in the context of Maban reality, where writers write about the contemporary situation of Aboriginal people in Australia.¹³⁷ ‘Resembling a shattered mirror of its original self,’ Althans elaborates, ‘the Gothic surfaces in several different forms, including an imitation of colonial Gothic patterns,

¹³³ Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, 1993 *Decolonising Fictions* Sydney: Dangaroo Press, p8

¹³⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, p42

¹³⁵ Althans, Katrin 2013 'White Shadows: The Gothic Tradition in Australian Aboriginal Literature' in *Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, ed Belinda Wheeler, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer

¹³⁶ Althans, p144

¹³⁷ Althans, p144

a reversal of conventional Gothic roles, a strengthening of Aboriginal culture and identity, and the expression of Gothic realities.’¹³⁸

The Gothic, and specifically the Uncanny, is highly relevant to contemporary Australian culture, as writers seek ways of creating spaces which support healthy polyphonic discourse. As Andrew Ng writes, ‘Gothic spaces discomfit their inhabitants’ sense of coherence and stability; they acquire an excessive dimension that disturbs security and familiarity because this ‘excess’ is precisely unspeakable, unknown or unknowable.’¹³⁹ The excess he refers to relates to the Sublime, where, in a frozen moment of overwhelming anticipation, anything is possible, and anything can be discussed. The Gothic delays and denies an ending wherever possible, which works to keep this discussion open. Gerry Turcotte notes that: ‘The point of the Gothic is not to provide answers or comfort, but to raise questions and to trouble.’¹⁴⁰ By taking up a position which denies a dominant central perspective, the Gothic creates a freedom through which alternative viewpoints can be explored. The Gothic enables different ways of looking at the ordinary: ‘the Gothic allows us to enter into the ordinary to see how artificial, how constructed, our notion of the every day actually is’, Turcotte states.¹⁴¹ In doing so, the Gothic creates a kind of gateway into the unknown, explained by Beth Yahp in this way:

The Gothic allows one to cross the barrier between ‘us and them’ in a heightened, exaggerated way. It opens up a space, a chink in the wall, between us (what’s known) and them (the unknown) [...] Bataille calls this opening effect ‘une déchirure’ – a tear or wound laid open in the side of the real, through which the other, the outsider, the unnamed and often silent ones, may enter.¹⁴²

Writers are not afraid to attempt to enter spaces of the unknown through writing, despite the inherent difficulties in returning with adequate words to express the experience. Lionel

¹³⁸ Althans, p152

¹³⁹ Ng, p150

¹⁴⁰ Turcotte 1993

¹⁴¹ Turcotte 2009

¹⁴² Yahp, Beth 1994 ‘Write in Fright’ in *Australian Author* 26.4 (Summer), p14

Trilling (in Heseltine) suggests that writers are inherently explorers: 'In exploring the primal energies, the artist is likely to discover that they can command horror as well as delight, yet he will continue his exploration with unabated fascination.' Trilling proposes that writers will travel to the darkest places of human experience, to the roots of the human soul, in preference to maintaining an illusory social façade. 'Is this not the essence of the modern belief about the nature of the artist,' asks Trilling, 'the man who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring the reality of this hell to the bland lies of the civilization that has overlaid it?'¹⁴³

The Gothic remains relevant to contemporary Australian writers because of its ability to look beyond the ordinary, into our deeper lives and our fears and desires. 'When your life is most real, to me you are mad,' begins the third section of Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*, which, H. P. Heseltine argues, might well describe some of the best Australian writing.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Heseltine, p39

¹⁴⁴ Heseltine, p47

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3: The well

She stares at the orange line for some time before she realises she's awake. How long? Maybe only a moment, maybe longer. Her mind gradually wraps itself around the idea of the orange line. Like her, the line is horizontal. Shadow below it, rough surface above. Bright in the darkness. The line transforms from the horizon of a land in which she is a stranger, steadily focuses into something closer to her. Her body remembers that it is lying down.

The covers restrict her movement; the sheets tucked in at each side and at the end of the bed seem to have trapped her legs in a starched cotton prison. Fighting to hold onto thin threads which still anchor her to the softness of sleep, Elise wriggles slowly and kicks and wriggles some more, and frees one foot. She uses her foot and shin to gradually tug the sheets out from under the mattress. She shoves the covers down towards the foot of the bed, relief as the smothering heat swiftly leaves her body.

As the cotton wool strands of sleep drift away to the sides of her consciousness, in her half-awake state she lazily, slowly, becomes aware of the edge of the window: a thin line of orange light created by a slim gap just above the curtain rail. The rough pebbly surface of the stucco ceiling illuminated for a few centimetres before fading back into gloom. But wait, her mind murmurs through the haze of alcohol and sleep. Listen, listen to me now: it wasn't the light that woke you. Shuffling noises at the end of the bed. She senses emptiness beside her.

Without much further thought, she fumbles around the bedside table for the lamp switch, finds it, clicks it on. Soft yellow glow from beneath the ugly floral patterned shade. She turns towards the end of the bed and freezes, now wide awake.

The boy stands facing her, his eyes open but not quite aware, glazed and distant. There is something cruel about the jagged edge of the blade on the steak knife he is holding, arm outstretched towards her. His feet make shuffling noises on the synthetic carpet as he inches around the bed, navigating by peripheral touch, his shins bumping against the bed.

‘Wha... what are you doing?’ She shrinks back against the scuffed varnished wooden headboard.

His lips start to move; murmurs. Faster now, forming words she can’t hear. Aren’t bad things supposed to happen if you wake a sleepwalker? Well, bad things seem to be happening anyway and she figures she had better risk it.

‘Hey! You’re sleepwalking. Wake up!’ she says. Clearly. Loudly.

As his shuffling brings him around to her side of the bed, she scoots quickly across to the vacant side of the bed, further away from him. He pauses for a moment, tilts his head slightly as if to consider, and then drops the knife. It lands without a sound among the ridges of the cotton bed cover piled at the foot of the bed. He raises his hands to rub his eyes. He looks around the room, looks at her with new eyes.

‘What am I doing here?’ he asks softly. She’s not sure whether he means the ‘here’ of this room or the bigger, harder to explain, ‘here’ of this town. She says nothing but instead she moves across the bed towards him and reaches out slowly to take his arm, drawing him down towards the bed, to where her arms circle around him. He curls into her embrace and lies there silently as she gently strokes his arm. She feels his body shivering.

~

She doesn’t intend to sleep but she wakes again, maybe much later, to the universe spinning above her. Cold and black. The space between the stars presses heavy and empty. Damp,

chilled earth curving away beneath her back and her thighs. Her body has tried to conform to slight hollows in the ground and her torso is twisted and the left side of her neck cramps with pain as she tries to straighten it. Has she been here for some time? She is bewildered, fear coiled cold and sick in her stomach. Lights a little way off at the corners of her vision. Tufts of grass above her. Why is she lying on cold grassy ground in the night? She doesn't know and this suddenly terror overwhelms her and she begins to sob, hot tears that quickly become icy on her cheeks. She senses someone beside her and turns her head sharply to look; winces from the pain in her neck this movement triggers. He is lying there next to her. She can't tell if he's awake or asleep in the dark, but he is very still.

Elise pushes herself up, jolting herself awake. They are in a field. She quickly realises they are only a few hundred metres from the edge of the motel car park, but the orange lights provide no comfort with their institutional, alien light. She hears the hissing and clicking of irrigation sprinklers somewhere in the distant darkness and the chirping whir of a cicada, and in the distance she hears a car's tyres squeal into the night. Her head is fuzzy; she is unable to think clearly, to remember what happened. She reaches across and touches the dark-haired boy lightly on the arm. She must have woken him, but there's another slip in time or in her memory before he stirs and sits up, not leaping to life as quickly as she had hoped. She drags herself to her feet, drags him up beside her. He looks confused and scared, panicky, but she guesses that might be what her face looks like, too. Elise takes the boy by the hand, feeling with the tip of her thumb and finding, unexpectedly, the abrupt curve of his thumb, just above where it connects with his palm. She grips her fingers tightly around his and she starts to walk, slowly and cautiously at first, and then faster and faster, back across the field to the motel room.

~

She comes around to consciousness after another time of not knowing, and this time she realises she is leaning forward onto a stone wall, rough rocks and the cement binding them gritty and damp beneath her outstretched fingertips. Cold seeps through her clothes, rests hard against her stomach. Elise stares again into that space between the stars, only this time she feels the pull of gravity drawing her face into the depths of a void. She is leaning on the edge of a well, staring down into the darkness, cold and empty stale breath from stone depths rising into her face. She stares at her own reflection for a long time before the idea finally settles into her mind that the well is empty and she can't really see anything down there. She pulls her head up, and leans back from the well edge, with some difficulty, her body curving down towards the darkness with the same instinctive urge as the desire to jump from the edge of a tall building. *You will fly through darkness and time into a beautiful dream*, her mind whispers, but she tells herself it is cold and dark and pain and madness and possibly even the end of everything. She remembers an illustration from a long-ago childhood book: Alice falling down the rabbit-hole, jars of marmalade on shelves in the walls around her. The clarity of falling, the vertigo of that in-between place.

Blinking to dispel the lure of the empty space, Elise turns towards the boy at her side, takes his hand and jerks him sharply away from the well edge. They are in the same field as before. But is 'before' a minute ago? She can't be sure, but it seems they are standing a little further away from the plastic land of orange lights and carpeted rooms than the place she last remembers waking. A strong pull in her legs tells her they have to make it back inside, out of the seeping cold of the night and out of this haze and back into sleep and then forward into tomorrow. She puts one foot in front of the other, an action much harder than she had anticipated, and she lurches forward and almost falls to the side. The momentum of dragging the boy by one arm, behind her, helps her balance herself, and she takes another unsteady step, and then another, across the tilting, cold earth.

~

Morning seeps in around the thick brown curtains and wakes them gently. They are wrapped together and tangled in the worn cotton sheets. She feels she has hardly slept, remembers vaguely some strange dreams that make her shiver with cold. Her neck is stiff and sore. And through the discomfort of waking in this strange place, she realises with a sting that she doesn't want them to part. She tells herself off, tells herself sternly not to be so goddamn sentimental. They've only just met, and she is in a messy place in her heart and her head and her life and it would be stupid to get attached to someone so strange and in this situation. She will have to talk to him, have to see if he wants to travel with her to Melbourne, because that's polite, but maybe he has his own plans, has somebody waiting for him to arrive, and she can't go getting all weird and clingy when she's known him less than twenty-four hours and practically kidnapped him from the side of the road.

They shower separately, but when she comes out with the rough white towel wrapped around her dark hair and piled on her head like a turban, he tenderly removes the towel and dries her hair roughly, treats her like a kitten rescued from the rain. They don't talk much. She tries to think of the right words to say but nothing comes, and so she says nothing.

The large woman at the hotel reception desk has been replaced by a mouse man with wiry hair and a nervous nose. He scuttles around behind the desk, twitching over paperwork and timidly accepting the key from her hand. She leaves him to his dim mouse-hole office and crunches across the gravel to the car. They get in the car, silent, and they drive to the far end of town, where there's a roadhouse she spotted on a brochure in the tiny motel foyer.

Roadhouses along the Adelaide to Melbourne highway invariably have tables covered in brown or orange Laminex, a kickback from their golden days in the seventies before air travel became cheap, when more people on road trips stopped to eat. Except, perhaps, the

fancy ones, which instead fill up their dining rooms with vinyl tablecloths in nightmare patterns, although this is not one of those. Breakfast will always be standard or worse, but the roadhouses arrive out of the horizon or spring up on the ragged edges of small towns just when food is needed most, and for that they are forgiven all trespasses.

The roadhouse is mostly empty, except for two grizzled truckers eating large plates of steak and eggs and baked beans at one of the orange plastic tables.

Elise orders for them both, orders like people who've just come in from days lost in the wilderness. Eggs, tomatoes, juice, black coffee, extra toast.

The lady behind the counter pushes a strand of greasy blonde hair back behind her ear and scrawls their order on a tiny off-white notepad, each page the size of another person's story.

The coffee revives them somewhat, but she still feels uncertain about her memories of the night. She wants to sleep for days, but after just one night, this town is starting to become a crawling sensation just beneath her skin. And her anxiety about losing him is growing. She can't shake the feeling they are meant to know each other, meant to stay together, that they've already always been together, but actually, he's a stranger and she doesn't even know what life he has to get back to. She is too afraid to ask him what happens next. The words keep trying to come out of her mouth but something sticks them to her tongue. She watches him stare at the bottom of his empty coffee cup and words finally stumble out into the space between them.

'I'm going to Melbourne,' she manages.

'Okay,' he says, and that seems to settle it.

In the car, he leans towards her as he clips the seatbelt into place. He looks up from beneath his messy dark fringe and gives her a small smile from his eyes and one corner of his mouth. She feels her heart leap in a way it hasn't in quite some time, feels her cheeks flush slightly, hopes it's not obvious.

As the sixty zone becomes eighty at the crumbling edge of the town, and then a hundred and the scenery starts to slide in the background, Elise puts her foot down on the accelerator and she narrows her eyes and the road opens up before them.

~

Waking alone to an empty roadside and wind whipping mallee scrub to a frenzy, she staggers inside her mind. Sharp daylight and her head feels strange. Thick. Fuzzy. She senses something cool and sticky on her forehead. Reaches up and comes away with blood on her fingers. She fights the seatbelt to look at her reflection in the rear-view mirror, lightly pressing fingertips to a raised swelling just above the hairline. Seems she has somehow hit her head, in almost the same place as the dark-haired boy. She looks around her at the car but sees only the empty interior, her jacket lying abandoned across the back seat, a used paper coffee cup on its side in the passenger footwell. She becomes aware of a mechanical whirring sound, a quiet undertone to the growls and screams of the wind outside the car. She presses the Eject button and the Frank Sinatra tape jumps out with a loud click. The car is parked on the gravel roadside, perfectly aligned with the road. With great consideration, she unclicks the seatbelt lock. She hesitates on the door handle, and then steps outside to look at the car.

She narrows her eyes against the sharp light and walks all around the car slowly. There's no damage that she can see. The wind whips her hair into her mouth and her eyes and she feels so far away from anywhere. She crawls back into the safety of the car interior. Her head throbs with a dull ache.

Okay, just pull yourself together, Elise tells herself sternly. Deep breaths, wide and blinking eyes.

Once her hands have stopped shaking and her head has cleared a little, the pounding of blood in her ears quietening down from stormy to calm sea, she starts the car and pulls out onto the highway. She accelerates the hell out of there, following her instinct to flee flee flee, to outrun anything, even her confusion. The sky is iron and closer than usual. The mallees bend mockingly in the wind. The car tyres eat the road in sliding metres punctuated by rectangle cat's eye reflectors.

The rhythm of the road and the car passes an unknown amount of time but eventually there is a sign by the side of the road, dark green and white, telling her where she is, and she exhales loudly. Elise grips the steering wheel a little more tightly and follows the road from one green sign to another, and then another, all the way back to Adelaide.

Das Unheimliche: The Uncanny

The Uncanny, its origins closely tied to early Gothic fiction, is a psychoanalytical theory most notably developed by psychologist Sigmund Freud, in his 1919 essay '*Das Unheimliche*'.¹⁴⁵ To experience the Uncanny is essentially to experience a sense of feeling not at home when at home, to sense an anxiety that something once familiar has become unfamiliar, or that something which was supposed to be hidden has been revealed.¹⁴⁶ The Uncanny is a contested and slippery concept, particularly around what causes us to experience this sensation, but it is useful to at least attempt to establish a working definition for the purpose of further discussion. What we can confirm early on is that the Uncanny produces a sliding, out-of-the-corner of the eye sensation that things are perhaps not quite as we thought.¹⁴⁷ The common thread across uncanny moments is a shift in our certainty of perception about our identity and the anxiety this causes us. The Uncanny can be a useful theory for creative writers to engage with, and it is from this position that I will embark on an engagement with the Uncanny, with a focus on Freud's essay, as it twists and turns through his musings on the subject.

Unheimlich heimlich

As a starting point from which to make sense of the Uncanny, Freud examines the linguistic origins and meaning of the word, in the German word *unheimlich* and its conjoined twin *heimlich*. *Heimlich*, Freud informs us, roughly translates to familiar, as of the home, or homely. *Unheimlich*, encompassing *heimlich*, contains the idea of home while also meaning

¹⁴⁵ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny* trans. McLintock, David, London: Penguin Books

¹⁴⁶ Freud, p152

¹⁴⁷ Freud, p159; and Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The Uncanny* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p109

its opposite, unfamiliar, out of place.¹⁴⁸ This inclusion of home in the idea of being not-at-home, the familiar in the unfamiliar, speaks of unease at the heart of the Uncanny, and to an inherent duality in the nature of *das Unheimliche*, in its ability to encompass and simultaneously create a tension between opposites. Robin Lydenberg writes, of this dualistic tension, that ‘What is most intimately known and familiar, then, is always already divided within by something potentially alien and threaten-ing’.¹⁴⁹ Even as it describes an experience which gives us a sense of the strange, *unheimlich* refers to the familiar. This idea of unfamiliar is, therefore, not strange as in never-met but as in the uneasy sense of something which once was familiar or should be, but is no longer. This suggests a past or present situated position and also a sense of moving away from that position; a kind of distancing, a space between. As he defines the Uncanny as what it is and what it is not, the home and not-at-home, Freud defines the concept of *unheimlich* as both presence and absence.

‘The Sandman’ and Ernst Jentsch

Freud next turns to literature in which the Uncanny can be found, illustrating his ideas through a critical reading of ETA Hoffman’s short story ‘The Sandman’.¹⁵⁰ In a 1906 essay titled ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, preceding Freud’s work, German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch also wrote about the Uncanny, and he also writes of Hoffman’s story.¹⁵¹ Jentsch writes about the Uncanny as an experience of intellectual uncertainty, the undecidable. While Jentsch’s essay was written first, Freud’s later essay is more widely recognised as an origin of the Uncanny and has arguably been more influential in critical discussion of the Uncanny. Freud partly uses his essay and its analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’ to write back

¹⁴⁸ Freud, p126

¹⁴⁹ Lydenberg, Robin 1997 ‘Freud’s Uncanny Narratives’ in *PMLA* 112.5, 1072-1086, p1073

¹⁵⁰ Hoffmann, E. T. A. 1992 (1816a) ‘The Sandman’ in *The Golden Pot and Other Stories*, trans. R. Robertson, New York: Oxford University Press, 85-118

¹⁵¹ Jentsch, Ernst 1997 ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)’ in *Angelaki* 2.1, 7-16

to Jentsch's ideas, and specifically, to suggest that intellectual uncertainty is not, as Jentsch suggests, the main premise of the Uncanny. Freud states that 'the notion of intellectual uncertainty in no way helps us to understand this uncanny effect'.¹⁵² Hélène Cixous points out that there are strong similarities between Jentsch's essay on the Uncanny and Freud's;¹⁵³ Cixous notes that both look to 'The Sandman' as a text within which to find examples of the Uncanny, and she comments that Freud seems to take Jentsch's idea of uncertainty but ascribes it to rhetorical instead of intellectual uncertainty, which almost seems as though Freud is splitting hairs.¹⁵⁴

Andrew Barnaby suggests that Jentsch is not writing about the Uncanny as uncertainty about a person or object, but rather that the Uncanny causes us to question our impression that a unified self forms part of our existence.¹⁵⁵ While the Uncanny lies at the heart of psychoanalysis, Freud seems unable to make sense of this clue and leaves us with only a rough draft of a discussion of the Uncanny, as Mladen Dolar suggests.¹⁵⁶ By the end of his essay, Freud's own apparent uncertainty and resultant lack of clarity leaves room for Jentsch's thesis of uncertainty as fundamental to the nature of the Uncanny. From the multiple double acts of: Freud and Jentsch; Freud and his displacement from his position as psychoanalyst into the role of creative writer; and Freud and his own uncertainty in his writing, we might conclude, as Royle does, that the Uncanny has something to do with uncertainty.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Freud, p138-139

¹⁵³ Cixous, Hélène 1976 (Spring) 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "uncanny")' in *New Literary History* 7.3, 525-548, 619-645

¹⁵⁴ Cixous, p534

¹⁵⁵ Barnaby, Andrew 2015 "'After the Event": Freud's Uncanny and the Anxiety of Origins' in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 84.4, 190-205, 982

¹⁵⁶ Dolar, Mladen 1991 "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny' in *October* 58, 5-23, p5

¹⁵⁷ Royle, p19

In *Das Unheimliche*, Freud nominates E.T.A. Hoffman as ‘the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature.’¹⁵⁸ As well as discussing Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’ in his essay, Freud mentions another E.T.A. Hoffman work, the novel *The Elixirs of the Devil*.¹⁵⁹ Freud points out that Hoffman’s text uses ‘a whole complex of motifs to which one is tempted to ascribe the uncanny effect of the story,’ but he elects the motif of doubling as the most prominent cause of an uncanny effect in the novel.¹⁶⁰ Further accentuating the effect of a replicated identity, Hoffman’s doppelgänger is a double with telepathy. Freud notes that, in doubling, ‘a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own.’¹⁶¹ Doubling, Freud writes, is associated with the duplicate, divided and interchanged self, and with repetition. And with Freud’s claim on doubling as uncanny, the Uncanny is again related to uncertainty about the self.

The Uncanny Relates to Writing

Throughout his essay, Freud links the Uncanny to literature, and specifically, to the craft of writing. At the start of his discussion, Freud states that *Das Unheimliche*, the Uncanny, is a matter of aesthetics (an idea he also touches on later in the essay). His claim is that, for a reader, the emotional effects of writing can be independent of the subject matter, and depend on the writer’s creative decisions; as Freud notes, writers can ‘produce very different effects from the same material.’¹⁶² Writers can engage with the idea of the Uncanny and then create writing in response to, or in some other way embracing, that idea.

The Uncanny can offer writers a useful way into thinking about in-between spaces and ways of exploring uncertainty. In embracing the Uncanny, writers can use the skills of their

¹⁵⁸ Freud, p141

¹⁵⁹ Freud, p141

¹⁶⁰ Freud, p141

¹⁶¹ Freud, p142

¹⁶² Freud, p158

craft to alter their writing, creating more or less room for the Uncanny to inhabit. However, writers should not be daunted by the uncertainty involved in the Uncanny. ‘To write about the uncanny is to lose one’s bearings’, Royle proposes, and writers should anticipate some dislocation.¹⁶³ The Uncanny is not a place in which one should expect to know one’s way around.¹⁶⁴ Let’s talk about what it might be like to create writing involving the Uncanny.

So: I will propose some ideas about the kind of writing that might suit an engagement with the Uncanny. Freud claims that, when writers create a world in which the supernatural could feasibly exist, there is no room for the Uncanny.¹⁶⁵ When the narrative loses the *heimlich*, the ordinary, the doubling and conflict inherent to the familiar-unfamiliar of the Uncanny lacks a space in which to exist. Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of the fantastic supports this idea.¹⁶⁶ Todorov defines the fantastic as that moment before the reader has established whether the story can be attributed to reality as we know it. The reader makes the decision and the story is established as belonging to one of two realms. If the story contains, for example, unexplained supernatural forces, then we are in the realm of the marvellous. If the story is grounded in contemporary reality, and yet strange happenings are involved, we are in the realm of the uncanny, Todorov writes.¹⁶⁷ This suggests that writers aiming to engage with the Uncanny should not set their writing in a world too marvellous. Fiction set in contemporary reality and creative non-fiction are ideal forms to create an environment in which the Uncanny might sprout.

¹⁶³ Nicholas Royle 2003, p8

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas Royle 2003, p8, citing Freud, p341

¹⁶⁵ Freud, p156

¹⁶⁶ Todorov, Tzvetan 1970 *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p25

¹⁶⁷ Todorov, p25

Create a Realistic Environment for the Uncanny to Live In

If a writer ‘has to all appearances taken up his stance on the ground of common reality,’¹⁶⁸ as Freud puts it, then an environment exists in which the Uncanny can be experienced in literature, as we might experience an Uncanny moment in real life. Adam Bresnick notes that Freud suggests writing set in ‘common reality’ causes us to react as we would have to real experiences.¹⁶⁹ But further, Freud writes: writers can affect responses to a text by crafting creative writing in such a way as to ‘intensify and multiply that effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience.’¹⁷⁰ Not only can we experience the Uncanny through literature, but the Uncanny is, in fact, best experienced through literature. Cixous suggests that here, Freud takes one of Jentsch’s ideas and repackages it to suit his purpose.¹⁷¹

In inviting the reader to explore the Uncanny along with him, Freud nominates a list of experiences which he suggests will fairly predictably elicit a sensation of the Uncanny. Freud’s ingredients include: twins, doubles, doppelgangers, automatons, narcissism, déjà vu, repetition, madness, repressed ideas coming to light, people we thought dead coming to life before our eyes, ghosts or haunting, a desire to return to the womb, ideas of home as unfamiliar, and the death drive.¹⁷² Presented in the form of a list of elements, a writer might conclude these could be used as subjects or motifs around which to create Uncanny writing. While this is not an entirely unreasonable line of thought, it fails to accommodate the fact that writing which involves a house as the setting for a story does not necessarily involve the Uncanny, despite the Uncanny’s close relationship with the notion of home. Royle comments that any attempt to recite a list of Freud’s ‘things which inspire a sense of the Uncanny’ is

¹⁶⁸ Freud, p156

¹⁶⁹ Bresnick, Adam 1996 ‘Prosopoetic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffman’ in *The Germanic Review* 71.2, 114-132, p116

¹⁷⁰ Freud, p157

¹⁷¹ Cixous, p534

¹⁷² Royle, p2; and Freud

always incomplete and soon becomes a comical exercise,¹⁷³ and Dolar calls Freud's list of effects that generate the Uncanny 'haphazard'.¹⁷⁴

Anthony Vidler defines the Uncanny as a mental state, and 'not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial confirmation.'¹⁷⁵ Creative writers are better served by a more intimate engagement with the Uncanny. Once a writer moves beyond the superficial potential of these ideas as sites for Gothic fiction, they can engage with the Uncanny in a more meaningful way. Royle notes that great works of literature, canonical works, have a certain strangeness, a mode of originality – a startlement rather than a fulfilment of expectations, and that this connects them to the Uncanny.¹⁷⁶ We will see, throughout the broader discussion of the thesis, how a range of different forms of writing can involve the Uncanny.

Freud proposes that we might look at the list of experiences that invoke a sense of the Uncanny, and from what these have in common we can infer the underlying nature of the Uncanny.¹⁷⁷ In the interstices among Freud's diverse ideas lie common themes, and it is at this deeper level of investigation that we can better make out the shadowy form of the elusive Uncanny.

What we find at the heart of the Uncanny are ideas about identity, and particularly the instability of identity and the relationship of the self to the world. The common thread connecting the aesthetic elements of Freud's list of Uncanny ingredients lies in the ability of the Uncanny to return us to one of our earliest thresholds in our evaluation of the sense of

¹⁷³ Royle

¹⁷⁴ Dolar, p5

¹⁷⁵ Vidler, Anthony 1999 *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p11

¹⁷⁶ Royle, p15

¹⁷⁷ Freud, p124

self, when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world, as separate from others.¹⁷⁸ As a result, the uncanny is closely tied with ideas about identity.

As Freud travels through '*Das Unheimliche*' in his exploration of the Uncanny, he leads himself and his reader into what Hélène Cixous terms 'the labyrinthian space' of the Uncanny.¹⁷⁹ Freud's argument twists and turns back on itself: the Uncanny is a slippery concept and eludes easy definition. However, some key ideas about the Uncanny emerge from Freud's exploration, which the further discussion of this thesis will use. The Uncanny causes us to question the identity of ourselves and those around us. The Uncanny has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves.¹⁸⁰ The Uncanny creates a space of open discussion, presenting more questions than it answers; it is found in spaces between, as it both creates and inhabits places of ambiguity. The Uncanny is intimately involved with literature and the writing process.

While the Uncanny might seem to relate to terror and anxiety, Nicholas Royle suggests that the Uncanny is not necessarily gruesome or terrible; it can be something strangely beautiful bordering on ecstasy ('too good to be true') or eerily reminding us of something like *déjà vu*.¹⁸¹

Martin Heidegger, in his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art', proposes that our very existence is Uncanny, that: 'at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny'.¹⁸² Heidegger suggests that anxiety is experienced in response to an indefinite threat; that because anxiety is about nothing, actually, we experience anxiety about being in the world.¹⁸³ Anxiousness is, Heidegger writes, a fundamental mode of being in the world.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ Freud, p143

¹⁷⁹ Cixous, p525

¹⁸⁰ Royle, p6

¹⁸¹ Royle, p2

¹⁸² Heidegger, Martin 1953 *Being and Time* Albany: State University of New York Press, p54. In fact, Heidegger proposes that the familiar is a mode of the uncanniness of existence, and not the other way around. That is, that the sense of being not-at-home in the world, and the anxiety which accompanies it, came before the familiar (p189).

¹⁸³ Heidegger, p181

¹⁸⁴ Heidegger, p182

Most of the time, we forget this strangeness of existence but sometimes the illusion is dispelled and we are reminded of how fragmented we are and how strange and unfamiliar we are in relation to the world. And, Heidegger writes, ‘Tranquilized, familiar being-in-the-world is a mode of the uncanniness of *Dasein*, and not the other way around. Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon’, Heidegger urges us.¹⁸⁵ An uneasiness about who we are and the relationship of our self to the world is our earliest experience, but one we come to forget, and the Uncanny returns us to that state, in a moment of shock of recognition. If we want to see the extraordinary, Heidegger suggests, we must make ourselves average; it is only when we go through a process of estrangement that we can see ordinary things as they really are.

As Royle notes, the Russian Formalists have alerted us to the powers of literature to make strange, to defamiliarise, perceptions and beliefs which may have become less challenged or invisible defaults in the way we approach the world.¹⁸⁶ ‘A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.’¹⁸⁷ As writers, we can use words and language to offer new ways of seeing. Simon Spiegel cites Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky’s ideas on the power of estrangement: ‘in daily life, we see things only superficially, we become blind ...to truly see things again we must overcome our ‘blind’ perception by making things strange again ... this is the essential task of any art’.¹⁸⁸

While Bertold Brecht does not call it the Uncanny, his idea of an ‘alienation effect’ or ‘A-effect’ describes a sensation of strangeness (as when ‘one sees one’s mother become a

¹⁸⁵ Heidegger, p183

¹⁸⁶ Royle, p5

¹⁸⁷ Brecht in Spiegel, Simon 2008 ‘Things Made Strange: On the Concept of “Estrangement” in Science Fiction Theory” in *Science Fiction Studies* 35, 369-385, p370

¹⁸⁸ Spiegel, p369

man's wife'¹⁸⁹) and transforms something familiar and ordinary into something strange and unexpected.¹⁹⁰ Brecht notes that 'the success of the alienation effect is dependent on the lightness and naturalness of the whole procedure'.¹⁹¹ There is great possibility in the ability to defamiliarise. We can create the opportunity for assumptions to be challenged, and for dominant voices to be seen as just one possibility, and for spaces to be created in which marginalised voices can be heard. This has tremendous significance for writers and readers, on both a personal and also a political level. As Nicholas Royle suggests, perhaps the Uncanny can provide ways of beginning to think in less dogmatic terms about the nature of the world, ourselves, and a politics of the future.¹⁹²

The Uncanny's destabilising ability to estrange offers a valuable tool for writers. And the unfamiliar is never fixed, as what is unfamiliar at one time may be familiar at another. So, because the Uncanny relates directly to the self and our social environment, the Uncanny always remains relevant to creative writers.

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¹⁸⁹ Spiegel, p369

¹⁹⁰ Royle, p5

¹⁹¹ Brecht, in Spiegel, p133

¹⁹² Royle, p3

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4: Home to Adelaide

The last slow curves of the freeway snake through the insides of hills made raw by rock-chewing monsters. No faery palaces within, just scraped skin and the sensation of a slow moving creature that has abruptly become something else, insides exposed after a long, long time resting underground.

Glimpses of Adelaide between the hills gradually open into a grand vista of tree-lined streets nestled into the curved arms of hills and the city stretches across broad plains all the way to an icy ocean. A slight haze of heat and smog hangs above the city. The reflective windows of office buildings wink at her from the distant city skyline.

The city opens its arms to her and whispers: home. So quiet; so calm. Nothing of the mallee wildness and the uncertain winds. Nothing of darkness and wells and emptiness. Suburban streets breathe slow and sleepy as apricots ripen and white-haired women read in tall floral fabric armchairs in the lounge rooms of cream brick houses.

She feels unsteady; she is unsettled in a place she can't quite locate in her mind. What the hell happened? Did she dream the whole last couple of days? Did she find herself adrift on the shipless oceans of the highway to Melbourne and suddenly have an anxiety attack, and just get everything mixed up? Did she hit her head and not remember anything? Is that possible? Everything seems so real but so far from the grasp of her logic and she is alarmed at the tingling, pricking sensation of the sense of her own sanity slipping away from her, of the ground tilting slowly beneath her feet.

5: Nowhere near home

‘So Trish, tell us about your new house,’ Susie, Elise’s sister, says, and she leans across the table to top up Trish’s glass of chardonnay.

Trish folds thick forearms across her lap and turns to her left and smiles indulgently at the straw-haired man beside her.

‘Oh, we love it, don’t we, Damie?’

Damien smiles through his whiskery moustache but says nothing.

The room is too bright for Elise, and she plays with her knife and fork and the herbed gnocchi on her plate.

‘It’s close to work and the kitchen is lovely,’ Trish continues. A collective happy murmur floats around the table. Trish picks up her wine glass and takes a large sip. Elise can’t place any importance on the conversation. It seems irrelevant. She fidgets with her water glass.

‘My favourite thing,’ snorts Jolie, the single friend, tossing back bouncy dark curls, ‘is that Trish and I have been friends for just ages, haven’t we darling? And so of course I should visit often, and, just through my visits to them, I’m going to hook up with that gorgeous neighbour, obviously. That’s what Trish has been trying to tell me.’

Elise’s sister takes a sip of wine and throws back her eyebrows with exaggerated laughter. The rest of the table joins in, except Elise, who pushes a pea to the side of the square black plate in front of her.

‘Oh, well, what about the neighbour on the other side? Huh, Damon?’ Trish says.

‘She wears – get this – jeggings. And it is *not* pretty. Why do people do that? Jeggings are not pants, people! Come *on*! And she, especially, should *not* be wearing them.’

‘Or maybe,’ Elise’s voice came out too loud, especially in her own ears, ‘life is too short to give a fuck about what other people think. Maybe, if it makes her happy to wear fucking jeggings, then she should just wear the hell out of them.’

The silence at the table lasts just long enough for her to stand and carry her plate to the sink, dump it in a clatter in the sink, and storm on down the hallway to the sunroom. Even as she enters her temporary bedroom, she hears them starting up again, this time about their shared annoyance at the wait time for Internet connections to be installed in new houses.

Essay 2: New York

Dorothea Tanning and Me on the Threshold of a Stranger City¹⁹³

In the summer of 2013, in the middle of a heatwave, I visit New York for the first time. The trapped heat of the big city bounces off the footpath and up into my armpits, crawls under my hair and across my scalp. My clothes hang heavy in the stillness. When she painted *Birthday*,¹⁹⁴ New York was Dorothea Tanning's home, and I walk the streets she once walked. She is a stranger to me, but the forms and words of her painting and memoir have soaked into my subconscious so thoroughly that she seems alive and familiar. I am a stranger to this place, Kristeva's foreigner; finding 'weightless freedom in the solitude of transience',¹⁹⁵ I submerge myself in a place which is not home.

Back home, when the news of the blue-eyed man's cancer fell into my life, I learned about the distance the inadequacy of words can create between friends. I learned about an enfolding silence that can suddenly descend, a reminder of the distance that always, actually, lies between each of us. With the treatment over, a moment of respite, I said I needed time to clear my head, and I left. And now here I am, halfway across the world, my head full of research: theory spilling out of my ears, my eyes, my mouth, walking the hot streets, wrapped in the solitude of the stranger I am in New York.

The painting: forty inches tall, titled *Birthday*. A self-portrait of Dorothea Tanning: bare feet, bare breasts, an elaborate costume jacket of purple silk and cream lace, a skirt crafted from bulbous green roots shaped like twisted human forms. She stands on wooden

¹⁹³ Originally published as Finlayson, Katrina 2015 (March) 'Dorothea Tanning and Me on the Threshold of a Stranger City' in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 5.1, online at <http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-8-1>, accessed 31/12/2016, and revised for this thesis

¹⁹⁴ Tanning, Dorothea 1942 *Birthday*, Oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, at <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/93232.html>, accessed 27 November 2014, 1942

¹⁹⁵ Kristeva, Julia 1991 *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans L Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, p12

floorboards, her hand on the porcelain doorknob of an open door. Beyond the doorway, another open door, and then another, an infinite recursion of doorways receding into the distance. She looks out from the painting with an unsmiling gaze. At her feet sits a black creature, a winged lemur with a forked tail. Dorothea Tanning has positioned herself, artist, and subject, on a threshold; the painting is life-like in detail and true to the artist's image, but the creature suggests she stands somewhere between the ordinary and the creative subconscious.

In her artist's statement for a 1943 exhibition, a year after she painted *Birthday*, Tanning writes, of the painting:

One way to write a secret language is to employ familiar signs, obvious and unequivocal to the human eye. For this reason I chose a brilliant fidelity to the visual object as my method in painting *Birthday*. The result is a portrait of myself, precise and unmistakable to the onlooker. But what is a portrait? Is it mystery and revelation, conscious and unconscious, poetry and madness? Is it an angel, a demon, a hero, a child-eater, a ruin, a romantic, a monster, a whore? Is it a miracle or a poison? I believe that a portrait, particularly a self-portrait, should be, somehow, all of these things and many more, recorded in a secret language clad in the honesty and innocence of paint.¹⁹⁶

These past few days, I have learned to navigate New York by subway. I travel in fragments, jumping from its greasy rabbit holes onto city streets, to explore each area with my hungry stranger's mind, before looking for the subtle signs of another subway entrance through which to submerge myself once again in the damp heat and darkness of the subterranean tunnels and train platforms and ticket gates and tiles and so many people and lives just paused in that moment of waiting for lights to appear from darkness and the sickening acrid whoosh of burnt oil as the next train arrives.

¹⁹⁶ Tanning, Dorothea 1944, artist statement in *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, p107, online at <http://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view-work/work-657/>, accessed 27 November 2014

Over forty years later, Tanning, by then in her mid-seventies, wrote a memoir, also titled *Birthday*, and in it she describes the creative process around that strange painting:

At first there was only that one picture, a self-portrait. It was a modest canvas by present-day standards. But it filled my New York studio, the apartment's back room, as if it had always been there. For one thing, it *was* the room; I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors – hall, kitchen, bathroom, studio – crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light, shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless doors.¹⁹⁷

In the New York subway, I recognise Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory: lives spreading every which way below the ground, with 'the potential for expansion and exploration in new directions',¹⁹⁸ a new creation ready to 'suddenly burst through into consciousness ... from the network of subconscious connections constantly being incubated'.¹⁹⁹ Connections click and whir in my mind, just behind my eyes, as stations flutter past, threads of creativity crossing as neurons fire. From subway entrances that blend into the city around them, bursts of people emerge with each train arrival, every one moving on their own path through New York, random meetings made or missed.

Later again, in 2002, when Tanning is asked by an interviewer for *Salon* what she intended to communicate with the painting, she says simply, 'I'd be satisfied with having suggested that there is more than meets the eye'.²⁰⁰

Riding the subway, my eyes avoid wandering into the eyes of strangers. In some of the carriages, one advertising panel high in the curve of the carriage wall has been replaced by a poem, a City of New York public art initiative. I soon learn to seek out the poems. My favourite is one titled *Grand Central*:

¹⁹⁷ Tanning, Dorothea 1986 *Birthday*, San Francisco: The Lapis Press, p14

¹⁹⁸ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari 2014 *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, p22

¹⁹⁹ McLaughlin, Nigel 2013 'Modelling Creativity: How Might It Help Us Understand What We Do?' in *AXON: Creative Explorations* 3.1, online at <http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-4/modelling-creativity>, accessed 27/11/2014

²⁰⁰ Glassie, J 2002 (February 11) 'Oldest Living Surrealist Tells All' in *Salon*, online at <http://www.salon.com/2002/02/11/tanning>, accessed 20/10/2014

The City orbits around eight million centers of the Universe.
And turns around the golden clock at the still point of this place.
Lift up your eyes from the moving hive and you will see time circling under a vault
of stars and know just when and where you are
(Billy Collins, 2013)²⁰¹

I travel to Grand Central station to see for myself, to try and decode the secret message in the poem's treasure trail of clues. I almost clap my hands with childlike glee when I see a large golden clock at the centre of the marble hall, constellations of gold painted stars on the high indigo ceiling. I stand on a stairway and look down across eddying currents of people gliding along the paths of their separate but interconnected lives and I grin as the poem unravels into the extraordinary ordinary. I do know just when and where I am, and it feels like part of the puzzle of who I am. I am self-conscious taking a photograph, until I realise I am surrounded by people also standing on the stairs, also taking photographs. In fact, there are so many people standing on these stairs that a security guard hovers near by, moving people on whenever the crowd becomes too thick for travellers to make their way through.

In her memoir, Dorothea Tanning wonders whether *Birthday* was perhaps a talisman for the events of her life at that time, 'an iteration of a quiet event, line densities wrought in a crystal paperweight of time'.²⁰²

I burrow down into the maze of subway platforms once again, finding the right colour and letter and end point and when the whoosh and the grind of brakes arrive I let myself get swept along into the carriage.

This time, I emerge into the space between tall buildings and hot pavement. The sounds of traffic bounce around me and the footpath crowds are thin, slowed to a crawl by the extreme late morning sun. People stall in patches of shade created by the overhangs of

²⁰¹ Collins, Billy 2013 'Grand Central', New York MTA Poetry in Motion program, online at <http://web.mta.info/mta/aft/poetry/poetry.html>, accessed 27/11/2014

²⁰² Tanning 1986, p14

buildings. I walk along 53rd Street, towards the Museum Of Modern Art entrance, where I hope to find another mirror for my thoughts. Near a ladder, I pause to sip some bottled water and a construction worker crawls down the ladder and he begins to talk to me about his job at the top of the ladder and how, aw gee, would ya know, it's even hotter up there. I have no words to offer, so I just nod and murmur, but he seems happy enough simply to tell me about the building project. Further down the street, I pause again, before vibrant statements screen-printed across maps of the city; an artist is selling prints of his politics from a trestle table. He is a loping man: gangly, straggly dark hair and long thin spider legs spilling out from his folding chair. He stands, in his loping way, and he asks me for a cigarette and we smoke together, silent, watching the foot traffic pass. Soon, I wave goodbye to him and follow the traffic clustering around the doors of the gallery, into a dark and cool foyer, where a group of schoolchildren waits for instructions, chattering, swinging hips weighed down by schoolbags, shuffling feet.

I take the map handed to me and I catch a quiet elevator up. I begin to breathe in art. The dim marble halls of MOMA and the cool hush are a welcome contrast to the stifling air outside. I wander and just exist and absorb, and the air conditioning licks over my body and soothes me, lulls me into a daydream.

In my ear, Dorothea whispers, her phantasm close now, 'the decibels of nature can crush an artist's brain ... so I lock the door and paint interiors'.²⁰³ But instead of interiors, all I see are thresholds, and Donald Winnicott's idea that both creativity and self-development occur in the space between inner and outer, that, 'in creating art, the artist opens up the possibility of being transformed'.²⁰⁴ I let my subconscious inhale deeply; give myself over to the experience.

²⁰³ Tanning 1986, p84

²⁰⁴ in Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson 2006 *Writing: self and reflexivity*, 3rd edn, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p7

Around midday, I find the museum's busy restaurant and I request a table for one. Soon, I am seated outside on a balcony, bordered by glass panels, overlooking a statue garden several floors below. Little square tables, set with giant wine glasses, polished cutlery and white table cloths, crowd the small balcony area. Waiters glide between the tables and in and out through a heavy glass door to the restaurant inside with its open kitchen area full of busy chefs, and every time the waiters return with cool drinks and summer foods, they bring with them great rolling waves of refrigerated air. I sit, alone, among the bubbling conversation of diners, and I study the menu. I order a salad and a glass of crisp and expensive Californian white wine. Returning with the wine bottle, the waiter seems to notice my simple black cotton dress and cheap canvas shoes, and he pours a very generous glass. At a nearby table, a middle-aged man and a neat older gentleman elegantly sip at miso soup and discuss something I can't quite hear but which, their expressions and deportment suggest, is clever and engaging. The absence of conversation at my table grows larger momentarily as a couple at the next table over slide quick, slippery glances across me and my aloneness before returning to their own lunch and light chatter about the gallery and the food.

The wine and the yawning heat of the afternoon stretch out the daydream sensation but also bring with them a sudden impatience in me, and I realise I am secretly hoping to see Dorothea Tanning's work. But some quick research on borrowed Wi-Fi informs me that Tanning is not on the walls of MOMA. The couple at the next table pick up long, thin spoons and begin to pick at their dessert. It seems the closest I can get to Tanning is the work of surrealist artist Max Ernst, Tanning's lover, chess opponent, surrealist painter husband. And even Ernst isn't anywhere in the MOMA; he's across town at the Guggenheim.

In an instant, the gallery walls are empty, meaningless. Everything is somewhere else. I fidget, try to talk myself into patience, but, very soon, I'm back outside in the sunshine, on the hot streets. But if, as Hunt and Sampson suggest, theory and experience are absorbed to

become part of ‘an unconscious “toolkit” in the background of our writing process’,²⁰⁵ my writing and my self have already been changed by everything I have encountered, on this very ordinary New York summer afternoon.

I plunge into the dark tropical heat of the subway system once more, to travel uptown, and I am born again into the sun a few blocks from the smooth white curves of the Guggenheim. I sit for a moment across the road, on a bench under one of the leafy spring green trees bordering Central Park, eyeing down the strangely shaped building, taking in the silver letters of Solomon Guggenheim’s name stretched across the façade. Behind every arrangement of letters in a name is the whole rich and complex collection of stories that makes up a person, one human life, but sometimes a name is just a word.

Simon Spiegel writes of Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), which is the breaking up of our ways of seeing, so that we once again see daily life as it really is.²⁰⁶ We must, Shklovsky urges, make things strange again: this is the essential challenge for all art.²⁰⁷ I am the stranger. I will estrange you from the ordinary.

I float with the in-breath of the building and the crowd. I line up in the cool dark foyer and I pay the entry fee at a long desk and I’m told third floor and I wander in, between the tall white walls of the mouth of a shell. The entrance opens out almost immediately into a hollow central chamber, a round space filled with deep indigo light, like a lighthouse keeper’s favourite room. Twenty or thirty people lie on their backs on the speckled Terrazzo floor, silently gazing upwards. I look up to see what they see, but there’s only the curved inside of the shell-like building, dark stripes of layered walkways punctuating indigo walls that rise to a blue disc at the top, filtered sky. It is beautiful, but after craning my neck for a moment, I leave the daydreamers on the floor and begin my ascent.

²⁰⁵ Hunt and Sampson, p7

²⁰⁶ Spiegel, Simon 2008 ‘Things Made Strange: On the Concept of “Estrangement” in Science Fiction Theory’ in *Science Fiction Studies* 35, 369-374, p369

²⁰⁷ Shklovsky, in Spiegel, p369

‘A few of us took to wearing old clothes,’ Dorothea Tanning explains, ‘but they had to be really old, from another time, way back. We’d show up in these rags as if it were perfectly natural. You had to be deadly deadpan about it’.²⁰⁸

And the bare breasts, the *Salon* interviewer asks, was that not considered risqué at the time?

I swear I can hear a woman’s laughter, carried through time, from beyond the grave, to here and now.

‘It was a kind of statement, wanting the utter truth, and bareness was necessary. My breasts didn’t amount to much. Quite unremarkable. And besides, when you are feeling very solemn and painting very intensively, you only think of what you are trying to communicate’.²⁰⁹

Arriving at the third floor gallery, I exchange identification for information: an audio tour headset and small electronic screen. My Australian driver’s licence, so familiar to me, is strange to the young hire desk staffer, who peers at it closely before tucking it into a visitors’ folder. I wander into the gallery, glancing at works on the walls as I flick through the screens on the small device, searching for Max Ernst’s name. It is glaring in its absence, and I cut short my circuit of the gallery space and return to the loan desk.

‘Excuse me, but I’m looking for a particular artist.’

He raises a quizzical eyebrow, not entirely unkindly.

I describe what I’m hoping to find, and of course I say Ernst, not Tanning and not me, but he explains that the paintings are on rotation. Max Ernst is in storage. I have arrived at the wrong time of year.

²⁰⁸ Glassie

²⁰⁹ Tanning, in Glassie

‘Come back in a few months,’ he offers, and I fight back tears.

I slowly descend the spiralling ramp, all the way down to the ground floor, where I stand once again in the curved inner space of the main entrance hall. Now the room is soft pink, the seashell’s smooth inner self revealed. I wonder at the people lying on the floor and I am exhausted by my empty search and so I find a place to lie down among the silent strangers. The floor is cool and solid beneath me, and the strangers around me lie still and dreamy as they gaze towards the round rose pink circle above. I lie there so long that I begin to wonder whether I imagined the room indigo earlier, the play of memory changing the colour in my mind. But then I realise the pink is ever so slowly changing to the golden yellow of a field full of sunshine. It changes so gradually that I begin to remember it had never been pink, begin to know my mind has created another illusion, and the golden glow fills everything. I lie still among the strangers for a long time and eventually the light changes again and a gentle violet seeps into the room. In the slowly shifting uncertainty, I cease to exist, and for a time I am only a part in the collection of shapes made from soft bodies lying on hard ground. Only once I have forgotten where I end and others begin, once my mind is only silence and colour and patience, I slowly sit up, then stand up, and then walk out, into the world.

‘I suppose I’ll die knowing I don’t belong anywhere, and that I do belong everywhere’,²¹⁰ Tanning says softly to me, and she recites two lines of a Stanley Kunitz poem into the seashell of my ear: ‘I have walked through many lives / some of them my own’.²¹¹

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6: You have to go looking

The roads spread out from a dense cluster where the heart, Adelaide, branches in golden arteries across the pale body of the land. The sage green awkward shapes of national parks poke jagged corners of preserved wilderness into the lonely, farmed emptiness surrounding them. Periwinkle blue flecks of lakes lie spattered across the white expanse, few and far between. Highway numbers pulse along the road like blips on a cardiogram, each heartbeat pushing hundreds of invisible cars and imaginary people along the diagrammed roads. Elise can almost hear the wind whipping through the mallee trees. She zooms in and out, swirls the map around in front of her, but the names are all too familiar and they sing a tired, weird old sad song of hours and plains and memories. All of the Melbourne road trips in her lifetime fold into one. Adelaide, Murray Bridge, Tailem Bend, Bordertown, Kaniva, Nhill, Dimboola, Horsham, Stawell, Ararat, Beaufort, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh, Melbourne. Adelaide, Murray Bridge, Tailem Bend, Bordertown, Kaniva, Nhill, Dimboola, Horsham, Stawell, Ararat, Beaufort, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh, Melbourne. Adelaide, Murray Bridge, Tailem Bend, Bordertown, Kaniva, Nhill, Dimboola, Horsham, Stawell, Ararat, Beaufort, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh, Melbourne. Nowhere nowhere nowhere. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to get lost. No matter how much she drags the map around, she can't make another town appear in between Tailem Bend and Coomandook. The town has vanished. The dark-haired boy is nowhere.

The confusion Elise slides into does nothing to delay time. The sun rises and sets and days seem to pass regardless. Elise tries her best to turn the spinning world around her into something close to a routine. She sets her room up in the spare room of her sister's house, but

in a disturbingly temporary way, retrieving only a few extra items of clothing from the pile of boxes stored in the large shed in the backyard. She tries to press the thought into her head that this is home now, but she just can't help feeling that the room is just a room and the things around her are just nameless things. The city begins to feel suffocating.

She puts one foot in front of the other anyway, and she convinces dear, sweet, blue-eyed Alban to let her come back to her old weekend job at the cafe for some shifts. Her sister hasn't asked for rent yet, but she needs something regular to get her thoughts off the boy.

'Sorry to muck you around, Alby,' she says, 'and, yeah, I would understand if you said no, and it's probably only for a few weeks and I don't want to...' But Alban is busy and happy and cuts her off mid-sentence, shushing her like a mother. Sits her down with a large black coffee, sits across the table from Elise, and tells her kindly that she's looking pretty damn peaky.

'I know, I know,' Elise agrees. 'Ugh, you wouldn't even believe the nightmares I've been having. Like last night: just wandering around in a giant house, looking for someone I don't even recognise. It's pretty weird.'

'Oh dear. I'll give you some of my special dream tea blend. Remind me before you go. BUT. I mean, I'm gonna have to be serious for a minute now, Elise.' Alban leans across the table to look, hard, into Elise's eyes. 'If you're going to work here, Sweetpea, you'd better get some rest. I only need strong ladies working here, not a weakling. I don't want you to drop anything on a customer. And you will need to find a smile somewhere every day.'

Alby stands. Glances towards a customer at the counter and shoots them a smile. She rests a strong, weathered hand on Elise's shoulder for a moment.

'Just put it on if you have to, love. Fake it 'til you make it, huh?'

Elise smiles wanly, thinking of her reflection in the mirror earlier that morning. The dark circles under her eyes. Pale face. Tight lips. Haunted eyes she met so briefly in the mirror with her own rattled gaze before she had to look quickly away. She stands, grabs her bag, and gets ready to leave the café. Elise waits, lurking near the end of the counter, until Alby waves the customer a cheery goodbye and then she mooches over.

‘Look, I know, Alby, you’re right. I’ll try to get some sleep. And I’ll be in for that shift on Tuesday.’

She looks at Alban’s strong, hard-working hands stacking the cups on top of the coffee machine.

‘And...’ Elise hesitates, suddenly shy. ‘Just, thanks again, Alby, you’re the best.’

Elise leaves the café and starts walking the few blocks to the train station, heading back to her sister’s house. As she walks, she thinks about how lucky it is that she can get back to her job, about how the busy café lunchtimes might help take her mind off things. Sleep still won’t be easy, though. Since the first night she arrived back in Adelaide, dreams have arrived in strange fragments, vividly real, and heavy with a sense of hidden meanings.

On the third night back, she had become suddenly aware of herself dreaming. Feet, her own feet, running down an empty street, streetlights flickering overhead, houses dark and silent on all sides. Looking down at hands, realising they were her hands, and also suddenly sensing that it was a choice to keep running or not. A sudden, terrifying, sharp awareness that she was not sure why she was running. Not quite able to control the dream completely or even end it deliberately, but a sense of acting within a dream, her own actions suddenly flooded with an earthy richness of deliberation. Her choices as controlled as reading a choose-your-own-adventure book. There was an outer world and this was a construct, and,

while she could not use this awareness to break the construct, she found the awareness itself strangely comforting.

But worse than the strange dreams is the half-sleep vision that settles on her chest every few nights, returning just when she thinks she might have outrun it. It creeps into the room with her in the half-waking, half-sleeping moments, just before she falls asleep, in the twilight time when her mind cannot distinguish between waking and dreaming, as she loses control over her mind's ability to adjust reality with logic. For a few terrifying moments, each time the vision comes, she is convinced she is an old woman, a very, very old woman. She doesn't have a reference point to tell her how old she feels at these times but she guesses it is at least eighty or ninety years old. But, rather than living to this age through a life rich with experiences, the vision comes with the realisation of a sudden jump from her late twenties self now to this much older self. Life has slipped past in a blink. And with this vision comes terror, the terror of the accompanying sensation of certainty, absolute certainty, that she is about to die and, also, that she has wasted her whole life.

Outside of Elise's terror, outside of her dreams, outside of her half-memories of the town and the boy, the apricots on the backyard trees are swelling. Pale yellow deepens and blushes. The sun warms the fruit and the deep green tear-shaped leaves and the crackly dry brown bark of the trees and the sky loses its clouds to an intense blue, broken only by a jet plane trail across long, late afternoons. Children eat fistfuls of sand on the beach and people hop from one hot foot to the other on cement driveways. Birds race sharp-eyed gardeners for the ripest fruit. The apricots are plucked and eaten. The abundance overflows onto the ground and is pulled apart by the pincers of tiny black ants and carried away to their tiny dirt store rooms deep in the ground. In quiet lairs, deep beneath rectangle metal clothes lines, beneath half-hearted sprinklers on scraggly lawn patches at sunset, beneath crowded beds of red

geraniums, the stockpile grows, day by day. Unsympathetic to her confusion and her slippage through life, the days become weeks and the weeks slide into months.

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The late afternoon crowd has thinned but the cafe is still serving a steady stream of lattes and long blacks as Elise hangs up her apron. She waves goodbye to the others and heads across the street and into the Central Markets. The piroshki from the Russian stall is served to her by the same tall Asian man as last time, and he smiles generously at her across the steam rising from the bain-marie.

Walking out past Victoria Square towards the end of King William Street, she bites into the sweet dough. Warm oil and dough and spinach and ricotta filling bloom in her mouth, filling her with the comfort of a hug from an old friend. She gobbles the whole pastry down, licking the last greasy memories from her fingertips just as she reaches the bus stop.

Elise sits heavily onto the metal bench seat; feels the relief in her feet and the ache in her legs. The sun has moved behind the buildings and the afternoon shadows make the slight breeze seem cruel. She wishes she could be already back at her sister's house, in an instant.

An old woman ambles slowly up to the bench seat. She smooths her thin floral skirt down over her lap and tugs at the lower edge of her worn blue cardigan as she sits down next to Elise. The woman looks away up the street, above the traffic and beyond, as though she has seen something far off in the distance. But then she glances back towards Elise, catches her eye, smiles. Brown eyes twinkle from deep within the lines on her face. Elise feels a strange pull from those deep brown eyes, feels she is falling into a pool of clear water and brown rocks, hidden away beneath rugged cliffs. Sinking beneath the water. And more; there is something in them she needs to know, doesn't know how to ask.

The woman reaches one thin, bony arm across the space between them and curls soft fingers around Elise's arm.

'Sometimes, lovely,' the woman's low voice jumbles breathy words into Elise's ears, 'sometimes, things won't come to you. You gotta understand the way the world works.' And she emphasises the word 'works' with an eye roll towards the sky.

'You gotta know that,' and the elderly woman holds one hand up in the space between them, one long, slim pointer finger crooked for emphasis. 'You know,' she continues, 'you gotta know that, sometimes, you just gotta go looking for things yourself. Do you know what I'm saying? Do you hear me?'

The bus rounds the corner, engine rumbling with slow acceleration and then deceleration and then a swoosh of air as the front door of the bus folds inwards. Elise mumbles a thank you and slips her hand from the woman's grasp. She stands, turning back to throw a smile and an 'um, well, seeya'. An elderly Asian man in brown slacks and a grey short sleeved shirt steps carefully down from the bus, sinewy arms lugging a wheeled shopping cart along after him, turning back to lift it down the last step. Behind him, the driver looks bored and mildly annoyed, running a hand across his bald head. Elise hovers near the door, leaving space for the departing man.

The woman calls out from the bus stop seat, one word.

Elise turns back to look at her again, calls back, 'Uh, I'm sorry, what did you say?'

'Pearl,' the woman says, 'my name. It's Pearl.'

Elise responds to the driver's waving hand telling her she is holding up the bus, and she steps up onto the bus, scans her metro card, and walks the length of the bus to find a seat near the back, slouching into the space to lean against the window pane.

It is only as the bus doors whoosh shut and the engine rumbles and the bus pulls away from the curb, only then, as she raises a hand to wave goodbye to Pearl, still looking at her intently from the bus stop bench. Only then does Elise recognise the old woman from her dreams.

~

She lies awake in the early morning light, under the green cotton cover of the feather quilt, a dead body lying peacefully under the grass of an overgrown grave. Birds outside the window chatter and call to one another. She listens to the suburbs waking up around her, humming gently with the start of the weekend. She remembers back to the doctor's surgery. Tries, hard, to remember watching him write on the clip-boarded form, but trying hard to focus only seems to make her thoughts all the more confused. Rising slowly from the bed, Elise stretches her arms above her head, bends to each side. She throws a deep blue cotton shirt and grey track pants on, over her underwear and tank top. Pads her way along the hall to the kitchen. She lets her mind drift and blinks sleep from her eyes as she fills the electric kettle and takes a mug from a cupboard. As she stirs sugar into hot tea, a name floats into the edges of her sight. Brad. No. Brendon. No. Brodie.

Maybe?

She remembers she had stared at it for a while, feeling she had eavesdropped but at the same time warmed by the satisfaction of a burning curiosity satiated. But she can't remember seeing him write his last name, and it was further away on the clip-boarded form from where she had sat, looking at the figure in the window of the white wooden house. And his address? That was more clear. Number 23. She had seen him write the start of it. She sits

on a seat at the end of the kitchen table and curls her legs up in front of her, holding in the last warm crumbs of sleep. The street name is not so clear in her mind, but she knows it is something to do with the sea. Ocean Street? Sand? No... the image she has is of something gleaming from deep waters. The bus stop woman's face swims to the surface of her consciousness. Rock pools and cliffs. Pirate treasure. Sunken mysteries wrapped in a cocoon of waves and sea bed. And then it comes to her in a flash: he'd written Pearl Street. The strangeness of the coincidence with the random bus stop encounter shifts uneasily in her stomach.

She remembers more. He said he was planning to return to San Francisco in late July. A month away. She feels, acutely, nerves tingling with fire, the warm curve of the red ceramic tea cup lip beneath her clasped fingers. Lifts it to her lips and sips sweet and milky. Mid-morning chatter on the street outside only just makes it as far as the kitchen table. Finally, thin slivers of memory which seem to make sense. Finally, a clue.

~

She has kept the new knowledge close to her heart for a week now. Sure, she looked it up on the computer, looked at a satellite view of the city, the street, and the house, blurry through her tired 2a.m. eyes and bright against the darkness of the room in the quiet house. But it didn't tell her much. A weatherboard building, with what might be a shop in the lower floor, and the darkened windows of a house above. She had tried to imagine it wasn't an old picture from whenever the map was compiled, but instead that the picture was taken today, that she was standing outside the house. She had moved the camera to look up and down the street, shifted it to the houses on either side, wondered if he was there right there, right then. She had half expected to feel some kind of emotional pull to the house, some kind of intuitive

sense to let her know whether he was there, whether she should try to follow, but it just looks like a pretty weatherboard house on a strange street.

The front bar is busy, the sunny Sunday afternoon weather breaking up the grey that has been creeping into the days as the season grows colder. Elise squeezes her elbows in between two other people as soon as a space becomes available, and idly watches the bartenders lope about the small space, pouring beers and serving people with a gangly, affected nonchalance. Mia and the others are out in the back room, watching Luke's band. It's been great to catch up with them today, but difficult to make conversation. They're caught up in ongoing Adelaide stories and Elise feels a long way away and outside of it all. Waiting to be served, her eyes are drawn to the collection of kitsch Americana curios in and around the fridges. Between a statuette of a hula girl and a bottle opener shaped like a cactus, there is a snow dome picturing the Golden Gate Bridge. Across the tiny sunset skyline of the arced backdrop golden words sprawl: *Sunny San Francisco*. She leans against the heavy wood of the bar and sucks air in past her teeth. Right now, this little snow dome diorama seems more real than the bar around her, more real than her shifts at the café, where she has lately been distracted enough to mix up orders and forget things. Alban's glances from behind the coffee machine, shaded with more concern with each mistake Elise makes. The underwater white speckled world and the tiny bridge seem more real than the procession of nights broken into uneasy dream sequences.

When the band finishes and they've all told Luke how much they liked it, Mia's keen to meet a particular somebody at another pub and she leads the charge out of the front door of the Grace, jumping around and telling everyone loudly that they're headed to another pub a few blocks away, on Hindley Street. Elise makes excuses about a headache and some empty promises to catch up soon, and rides Susie's bike back through the late afternoon streets to Bowden.

Susie and Rish are home when she gets there. She walks into a house filled with specks of dust floating in sunlight, the sounds of Portishead drifting towards her down the hallway. As she walks past, she waves a hello to Rish through the lounge room doorway. He's sitting on the couch, leaning forward towards a sketch book; a bottle of red and a half empty glass on the coffee table beside his elbow, swaying his head slowly to the music from a music player in the corner as he contemplates his drawings. She finds Susie in the kitchen, arms in suds and dishes. The little grey cat, Mixer, sits near Susie's feet. Mixer is a contortionist, balancing on curled back muscles, one leg towards the ceiling, washing her tail. Elise pours herself a glass of water from a bottle in the fridge and flops down at the kitchen table, dangling one arm down to idly pat grey fur and a small, furry nose with licking tongue.

'I'm going away for a while. Travelling', she says. Just like that. No big deal.

Her sister Susie pauses, rubs her nose on the patch of forearm between the end of yellow rubber gloves and the beginning of sun browned elbow. Susie's eyes dim with distance as she looks out across the back lawn, the neat green rectangle bordered by a faded grey corrugated iron fence.

One rectangle, Susie and Rish's rectangle, in between others the same on each side, and one more the same behind. The grid pattern stretching wide spread arms along the street in either direction. Filling up the suburb and building the city, a patchwork growing erratic in lighter greens and brown as dry desert creeps in amongst ragged edges. Somewhere beyond is the heavy wing of an aeroplane, carving an arc through quicksilver sky against the pale blue curve of the earth. Racing away from the familiar comfort of Susie's kitchen. There are people leaving home every minute, in search of something strange they need to know. It's not such a weird thing to do.

‘It’s a good idea, Suze. Trust me on this. I’m just going to go crazy if I stay here. I don’t even know what else I can do.’

Susie sweeps circles of water with a dishcloth across a blue patterned dinner plate.

‘Okay,’ Susie agrees, after the silence has filled up all of the space between them. ‘Okay. I know you, and you’re right. Don’t look so shocked to hear me agree! This isn’t actually a surprise to me, you know. You’ve been moping around lost ever since you came back from that road trip.’

Susie pauses, dish cloth in hand, half turning to Elise. Her face softens.

‘And you know what? Basically, I know for sure that your curiosity will be the killer of you, my little kitty cat, if you stay here running yourself in circles. Even when we were kids, you’d get really upset and chuck a hissy fit if somebody tried to keep something a secret for you. Remember that surprise party we ended up having to tell you about before it even happened? Hah!

Leesy, *honey*, I’m actually surprised it took you so long to work out that you need to go looking. But you have to do this properly. And, oh my god, don’t even think about coming back here with that same expression on your face! Elise, it’s me, and you *know* I love you, but I am *so* sick of that face.

So here’s what you do. You go, and you take care of yourself, and you don’t get too crazy. But you do *not* come back here until you have some answers.’

Susie places the cup she is holding in the dish rack with a flourish, as though that settles everything.

Elise feels a rush of heat flush her face and she laughs at the sudden awkward feeling of her sister knowing her too well. She had expected it to be a bigger deal, maybe with her sister trying to talk her out of what still feels like a bit of a rash decision. She lets out an exaggerated sigh.

‘Ugh. Okay, Susie. It’s a deal. I’ll get to the heart of the itch and then, only then, I’ll come back to your loving arms.’ She spreads her arms wide in an exaggerated flourish.

‘If you end up happily married in San Francisco, just send me a postcard now and then. Or – ooh – we can Skype! Just... take care, okay Leesy?’ Susie shakes water off her gloves into the sink and turns and darts a few steps across the space between them, to give Elise a quick hug. Suds from the bright yellow gloves form three tiny dark spots on the deep blue cotton resting across Elise’s right collarbone.

‘I love you, you bloody idiot.’

‘Yeah, I guess you’re alright, sometimes, too, Sooz.’

Throwing ourselves down wells: locating the Uncanny in contemporary creative writing²¹²

Earlier in this discussion, we established that an experience of the Uncanny is essentially an experience of a sense of feeling not-at-home when at home, a sense of anxiety that something once familiar has become unfamiliar.²¹³ Beyond that basic definition, the uncanny is a contested and slippery concept, particularly around what causes us to experience this sensation. Susan Bernstein suggests that Freud's failure to provide a neat definition of the Uncanny says something about the nature of the Uncanny. She asserts that it is impossible to look at the Uncanny head on, and that this 'foregrounds the textuality of the Uncanny',²¹⁴ and 'points to the ways in which the Uncanny functions as a critique of identity'.²¹⁵ Bernstein advises that the Uncanny is best approached not through definition but through a reading of texts where the Uncanny can be experienced.²¹⁶ Freud himself looks to literature to define the Uncanny, exploring his ideas through a reading of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story, 'The Sandman'.²¹⁷ As Freud continues his exploration of the Uncanny, he leads himself and his

²¹² Finlayson, Katrina 2010 'Throwing ourselves down wells: embracing the theory of the Uncanny in contemporary creative writing' in *The Strange Bedfellows Or Perfect Partners Papers: The Refereed Proceedings Of The 15th Conference Of The Australasian Association Of Writing Programs, 2010*, online at <http://www.aawp.org.au/publications/the-strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers/>, accessed 31/12/2016. This essay was originally presented at a conference and subsequently published as a refereed critical paper in the proceedings. The essay has been revised to become a part of the discussion in this thesis section.

²¹³ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Books, p152

²¹⁴ Bernstein, Susan 2003 'It Walks: The Ambulatory Uncanny' in *MLN* 118:5, 1111-1139, p1111

²¹⁵ Bernstein, p1112

²¹⁶ Bernstein, p1112

²¹⁷ Hoffmann, E. T. A. 1992 (1816a) 'The Sandman' in *The Golden Pot and Other Stories*, trans. R. Robertson, New York: Oxford University Press, 85-118

reader into what Hélène Cixous terms ‘the labyrinthian space’ of the Uncanny,²¹⁸ and his argument twists and turns back on itself: the Uncanny is a slippery concept and eludes easy definition.

To experience the Uncanny is to experience a shift in certainty of perception and identity, and this causes anxiety. Freud suggests that the Uncanny relates back to phases in each child’s early evaluation of the sense of self; the moment of the Uncanny embodies a regression to times when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others.²¹⁹ As a result, the Uncanny is closely linked with identity, particularly with the instability of identity. Julia Kristeva explains that both poetic writing and madness signify a return to the repressed maternal, to the semiotic stages that exist pre-language or at its limits. In the semiotic stages, our identity is not stable.²²⁰ Where we encounter the Uncanny, we once again experience this forgotten pre-language stage, and this can disrupt our sense of self.²²¹ According to Jacques Derrida, our identity exists as an uncanny visitor in the realm of language.²²² As a result, writers can create Uncanny narratives that disrupt the reader’s sense of self.

Even a brief exploration of literature which involves the Uncanny illustrates ways in which writers can create such uncanny spaces. This discussion will briefly digress in order to seek out some examples of the Uncanny in contemporary literature. First, the Uncanny is located in the work of three women writers from my home town of Adelaide, Barbara Hanrahan, Patricia Hackett and Stephanie Luke, to look at how ideas of home can destabilise identity and bring the Uncanny into writing. Then, a close reading of three texts, by Elizabeth

²¹⁸ Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, Hélène Cixous, and Robert Denno 1976 ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (The “Uncanny”)’ *New Literary History* 7.3, p525

²¹⁹ Freud 1919, p143

²²⁰ As noted by Laura Deane in her essay ‘Psychotic Fictions and Terrible Truths’ (2005: 78), referring to Kristeva’s ‘A Question of Subjectivity: an interview’ (1989: 129 and 131). This realm is inhabited most frequently, Kristeva says, by the artist, the saint and the mad person (in McCredden, 2010: 25). It is only after the stage of development defined by Jacques Lacan as the mirror stage that childish narcissism is repressed, in an act of forgetting.

²²¹ Kristeva, in Deane 2005

²²² in Royle 2003, p129

Jolley, Margaret Atwood and Mitch Cullen, shows how the motif of a well or submerging can function as an Uncanny site within a narrative.

In her 'Weird Adelaide' essay, published in the *Adelaide Review* in 1988, local author Barbara Hanrahan comments on two dominant and contrasting impressions of Adelaide. 'It's either,' Hanrahan writes, 'Garden City of the South... or that ideal setting for a horror movie of Salman Rushdie's infamous *Tatler* piece'.²²³ Hanrahan describes 1930s Adelaide as a city where: 'You marry in moderation, have children in moderation, die in moderation'.²²⁴ 'Moderation' suggests limits imposed on desires and a life lived to rigorous standards of ordinariness, and whether moderation is a pleasure or horror experience depends on one's point of view and is sometimes both. Each of the Adelaide writers presents this duality in their work. 'Steady and sober and utterly extraordinary,' Hanrahan writes.²²⁵ 'How is it that such ordinariness took a leap in the dark to *terra incognita*?' It is within this context that ideas about the Uncanny can provide value to explore the three chosen texts, and to show how these texts represent Adelaide as an uncanny city. Patricia Hackett's poetry anthology *These Little Things*, published in 1938; Barbara Hanrahan's 1978 novel *Where the Queens All Strayed*; and Stephanie Luke's *Harm: A memoir of dark, glorious days*, published in 2000.²²⁶

The poetry of Patricia Hackett's *These Little Things* hosts the Uncanny's sense of feeling not-at-home while at home. Even the structure suggests this. *These Little Things* is divided into two sections. The book contains no contents page but launches straight from a basic title page into thirty poems written in Adelaide. Three quarters of the way through the publication, a page announces 'Songs of the Solomons' and a final ten poems follow. This

²²³ Hanrahan, Barbara 1988 'Weird Adelaide', *The Adelaide Review* 48, p6

²²⁴ Hanrahan 1988, p6

²²⁵ Hanrahan 1988, p6

²²⁶ Hackett, Patricia 1938 *These Little Things*, Adelaide: Hunkin, Ellis and King; Hanrahan, Barbara 1978 *Where the Queens All Strayed*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press; Luke, Stephanie 2000 *Harm: A memoir of dark, glorious days*, Kent Town: Wakefield Press

structure, but also the content of the poems, serves to present the Solomons poems in contrast to the Adelaide poems.

Hackett's Adelaide poems offer only hints of description of Adelaide, in a brief mention of hills, sea, a river, and churches. Conversely, her Solomons poems, written on the island of M'bangai, her second home, contain more vivid, colourful descriptions of the surrounding physical environment, and express a more positive tone. The Adelaide of Hackett's poetry is a society with a stiff veneer, which Hackett repeatedly punctures with jabs of anger at its hypocrisy, mockery, societal constraint, and oppression of women. As her distant relative, Earle Hackett, writes of *These Little Things*, and this applies more to the Adelaide poems: 'The poems are generally lightweight as her title indicates, but the recurrent themes and images are dark'.²²⁷ Themes of escape from home, a desire for death, the illumination and critique of false perception, and spiritual conflict generate a strong sense of alienation of the poet self from society. The poems' central images form a checklist of uncanny subjects, including: madness, narcissism, solitude, and darkness, expressing the unease of the uncanny. Adelaide is Hackett's home, but it seems the poet, or at least the central figure of the poetry anthology, does not feel at home.

For example, take the poem 'Nepenthe',²²⁸ which shares its name with a drink of ancient Greek mythology said to assist with forgetting. Nepenthe is also the name of the Adelaide Hills house Hackett lived in with her partner, anaesthetist Dr Mildred Mocatta.²²⁹ The poem's title immediately alerts us to the presence of the Uncanny, in the return of a self which has been repressed in a form of forgetting, and the idea of home. Under an embroidered canopy of poppies, the narrative 'I' of the poem floats in an opiate trance. She experiences a vision; a beautiful landscape of warm seas, coral islands, and 'bright painted

²²⁷ Hackett, Earle 1965 'The Poetry of Patricia Hackett', *Westerly* 1, p45

²²⁸ Hackett, Patricia 1938

²²⁹ Peoples, Jo unpublished 'Miss Patricia Hackett': a dissertation written in 2001 as part of a fellowship diploma. Extracts obtained during an interview with Jo Peoples conducted by Katrina Finlayson in 2003.

birds' that lift her up into the sky. Catching sight of their own reflection in the sea, the birds drop her and she sinks down:

To the sea-kings' mighty green-walled cave
Whose dim light shows the awful depth
Of great unmastered seas...

She submerges, travelling from the surface world through the unconscious world. In the next stanza, the central figure finds herself in a frozen land of death, and begs to be saved. She falls 'through oblivion'²³⁰ until she eventually returns to her bed with its poppy-embroidered canopy. While the poem was written by Hackett in Adelaide, the poem's subject escapes from pain to a tropical island. The final lines of the poem suggest that the central figure, quite likely Hackett as poet narrator, feels more at home when not at home:

Tired poppies
You have stolen all my strength,
Yet glad am I.
My strength, my body and my mind
My living self my dying soul I'd give
For one strange dream.

Despite her anxiety about death while in the dream, the speaker expresses less anxiety about home when drifting through the less familiar realms of the unconscious, the home of the Uncanny.

Barbara Hanrahan's *Where the Queens All Strayed* (1978) also expresses the Uncanny, through the novel's exploration of the relationship of home to identity, and in its central theme of the surfacing of repressed ideas coming into conflict with a stifling social veneer. Barbara Hanrahan paints a 1920s Adelaide as a city with an English facade, evidenced in the cultivated physical environment and mirrored in Mother's feelings of being 'permanently homesick'.²³¹ The novel begins with a change in family home, from the familiar inner-city suburb of Prospect to the unfamiliar Adelaide Hills community of Fern

²³⁰ Hackett, Patricia 1938

²³¹ Hanrahan 1978, p3

Gully. This signals an opportunity for the disruption of identity, and potential for the Uncanny to emerge.

The novel is set in Fern Gully, which is positioned as a liminal space, at Adelaide's urban-bush boundary, where fairytales exist in parallel with reason; Hanrahan describes a place of witches and magical thinking. As mentioned in an earlier section, Freud relates this kind of thinking to an old animalistic view of the universe; he suggests it stems from an infantile narcissism of belief in the power of one's own thought.²³² This boundary land between the semiotic pre-language stage and the symbolic world of rules, noted by Lyn McCredden as a recurrent concern in Hanrahan's work,²³³ is the territory of the Uncanny.

Elisenda Masgrau-Peya, writing about the way Barbara Hanrahan's work deals with the idea of home, suggests that:

Home is essentially a spatial concept; whether a site in the diasporic imagination or a reality of the here and now, home is rooted in a place... Inscribed within the idea of home are the notions of border, roots and community... Home is also related to a point of origin from which we draw a fixed and secure identity.²³⁴

The familiar coexists with the unfamiliar: home is 'associated with safety, security and protection on the one hand, and with confinement, exclusion and domestication on the other'.²³⁵ This dichotomous tension, a consistent undercurrent in Hanrahan's *Where the Queens All Strayed*, expresses the anxiety of the Uncanny. The following examples demonstrate how this is expressed throughout Hanrahan's novel.

On a community field trip to the beachside suburb of Glenelg, away from home, the social facade of the Fern Gully community temporarily breaks down, and the uncanny is once

²³² Freud 1919, p147

²³³ McCredden, Lyn 2010 "'A painted queen jumped free": body and spirit in the fiction of Barbara Hanrahan', *Southerly* 70:2, p25

²³⁴ Masgrau-Peya, Elisenda 2004 'Towards a Poetics of the "Unhomed": The House in Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude" and Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus*', *Antipodes*, p62

²³⁵ Masgrau-Peya, p62

again exhumed. At first, ‘people remembered who they were meant to be and kept playing out their everyday roles’,²³⁶ but then:

...gradually, people were affected by the queerness of it all, the great expanse of sky and sea, so unfamiliarly open after the Hills, where you were hemmed in by trees and small-town eyes; the beach with its passing parade of strangers. Sand sifted into their clothes and the sun got at their skin. People began to change: shed identity, turn anonymous.²³⁷

The uncanny brings with it a fragmentation of identity; in the liminal space of the uncanny, identity becomes unstable. In the beach scene, Hanrahan contrasts the uncertainty, yet freedom, of the uncanny with the safety of home:

Home was cosy and safe; in it you knew who you were. Here, at the beach, day-time gone and night not yet come to blot everything out, you existed only as an afterthought.²³⁸

Because the narrative is revealed to us through our child-narrator, Thea, we become accomplices to Thea’s perception of the world, limited by her vision and also her naïveté. As Diana Brydon suggests, the reader must ‘employ her own perceptions to form a comprehensive vision from the fragmentary perceptions recorded in the text.’²³⁹ The problematic nature of perception, fundamental to notions of self, also lies close to the heart of the uncanny.

As the novel progresses, Thea grows gradually aware that there exists ‘another layer’ beneath the apparent ordinariness of the daytime minutiae.²⁴⁰ Thea is frightened by the silence, solitude, and darkness she senses just beneath the surface, and as she matures she realises that the infantile terror of the unfamiliar is not assuaged by magical thinking. Hanrahan represents this contrast vividly and repeatedly throughout the book, in passages such as the following:

²³⁶ Hanrahan 1978, p35

²³⁷ p35

²³⁸ p38

²³⁹ Brydon, Diana 1982 ‘Barbara Hanrahan’s Fantastic Fiction’, *Westerly* 3, p42

²⁴⁰ Hanrahan 1978, p128

The apricot leaves were heart-shaped, and between them were beginnings of fruit. But at night I stared into the darkness. It didn't matter if you had a hero uncle. Or got the wish-bone when it was chicken for tea. Or never walked on a crack. The black trap could still fall; the coldness creep upon you.²⁴¹

The contrasting intensity and ordinariness of Thea's world is presented by Hanrahan in a claustrophobic excess of detail. Clothing, household items, food, garden plants and other symbols of domestic life crowd Thea's everyday world and form the constraints of the society around her. The experience of abortion and betrayal by Teddy also opens older sister Meg's eyes to the world beneath the surface of polite society. Once she breaks the boundaries, Meg cannot return to childhood innocence, because she cannot un-see.²⁴² In the end, Thea turns away from the strange and unsettling; she sees no real alternative to sacrificing her identity to society's mores. Meg, conversely, finds herself unable to escape, except through death. The uncanny offers another perspective onto a darker underside society, but in its arrival it is an unsettling presence, offering little comfort.

Stephanie Luke's *Harm: a memoir of dark, glorious days*²⁴³ also confirms the interconnectedness of home with identity. *Harm* tells a story of the destabilisation of identity which can occur in the face of the Uncanny's return of the repressed. As with *Where the Queens All Strayed*, *Harm* also begins with a move, a disruption of home. Anna's lesbian relationship threatens her mother's heteronormative ideas of the family home. Anna's mother tells Anna, 'I know you. You are not a lesbian!'.²⁴⁴ By refusing to acknowledge Anna's relationship with her girlfriend Sarah, Anna's family denies Anna part of her identity, and in doing so, denies her a sense of home and stable identity. The ties with the maternal home are strong, and Sarah comments that 'there was so much invisible string between her and that den

²⁴¹ p128

²⁴² p151

²⁴³ Luke, 2000

²⁴⁴ p1

of repression she liked to call home',²⁴⁵ but Anna breaks the invisible string, separating her identity from her mother, and moves with her girlfriend to Adelaide. They drive, as Sarah says, 'away from the fetid claustrophobia of Sydney';²⁴⁶ the unfamiliar, new home city of Adelaide, contrasted with Sydney, offers both physical space and freedom from identity repression. Anna and Sarah move into an old, run-down house, plant vegetable seeds and bring a collection of found objects from the outside world into their private space, fashioning a new home, a new identity. But Anna's repressed self begins to surface, in an uncanny destabilisation of her identity, as much as she tries to, as Anna says: 'bully and punish the answer[s] into a back corner to give an appearance of bland passivity that threatens no one'.²⁴⁷ For Anna, who describes Henley Beach as 'flat infinity on the doorstep of suburbia',²⁴⁸ Adelaide offers the choice of the chaos of nature or the constraints of society, and, in response, some part of Anna chooses chaos and a pre-language state:

I took to hiding down at the beach, swinging off jetties and screaming into the squalls, letting my head hang back and allowing the darkness of this strange town to invade me.²⁴⁹

Sarah's infidelity disrupts the boundaries of the new home and family identity they have established, the spectre of Lisa's death haunts the house and Anna's psyche, and Anna's descent into madness accelerates. She experiences an uncanny estrangement of self.

As part of her short story, 'Cinema, a Story for Jacob', Anna writes 'Don't show so much! Only bad can come of it!'²⁵⁰ She tries desperately to keep the repressed hidden, but the maggot man sits beside her in the cinema: the Uncanny comes to visit in a vision of the undead. Anna's sense of feeling not-at-home in her identity is expressed as abjection of her own body.

²⁴⁵ p1
²⁴⁶ p2
²⁴⁷ p7
²⁴⁸ p5
²⁴⁹ p3
²⁵⁰ p15

The final structures of a defined self break down when Anna eats dope cookies and hears voices on the radio. Caught in a vision, she descends into the realm of the Uncanny; she encounters the pre-language unfamiliar and finds home in its silence. Anna describes her journey:

My soul, dislocated and travelling in strange lands, stumbles – a soldier, war-torn, bloodied, exhausted and screaming – into a great underwater cavern of silence. The walls glisten with knowledge and when the screaming stops the stillness throbs and I have come home.²⁵¹

Anna describes her own voice as ‘captured by a world that exists below the surface of language’; in Anna’s return to the semiotic stage, we witness the Uncanny.

As Nicholas Royle writes, Freud repeatedly ‘evokes the uncanniness of moving about in the dark’.²⁵² In *Harm*, Anna describes her illness as blackness,²⁵³ and it is in the darkness of unfamiliar, night-time Adelaide streets that Anna conducts her solo excursions. She drives through the suburbs amongst arsonists and skinheads, identifying with them as an outcast of society.²⁵⁴ Anna’s night travels through an internally constructed world, where madness causes language to lose its meaning, illustrates an uncanny Adelaide, where a darker side exists outside of the ordinary.

These three texts, written by South Australian women writers, each creating a representation of Adelaide, speak to the Uncanny’s home-and-yet-not-home sensation, and the relationship of home to identity, in particular, to our sense of self. The fundamental cause of the Uncanny effect relates to the return of the repressed, to the surfacing, or coming to light, of that which was supposed to be hidden, and the anxiety this creates. The poetry of Patricia Hackett’s *These Little Things* hosts the Uncanny’s sense of feeling not-at-home while at home. Barbara Hanrahan’s *Where the Queens All Strayed* expresses the Uncanny in its

²⁵¹ p40

²⁵² Royle, p108

²⁵³ Luke, p137

²⁵⁴ Luke, p68

exploration of the relationship of home to identity, and in the surfacing of repressed ideas and a return to the semiotic stage, in conflict with a stifling and complex system of social rules. Stephanie Luke's *Harm: a memoir of dark and glorious days* confirms the interconnectedness of home with identity, and tells a story of the identity destabilisation that can occur when confronted by the return of the repressed uncertainty of identity, when we experience the uncanny.

If, as Royle proposes, the Uncanny exists 'in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness',²⁵⁵ then down a well seems an ideal place to look for the Uncanny. A well runs between the surface and the underground, it enfolds in arms of earth and rock a between-places space where the Uncanny might be encountered.²⁵⁶ To experience the effects of the Uncanny, this section of the thesis discussion presents a reading of three texts which use the motif of a well, or submerging, to involve the Uncanny. While all three texts effectively conjure the uncanny into being through a similar motif, the Uncanny visits each of the three texts in a different way. Three novels from authors in three different countries, Elizabeth Jolley from Australia, Mitch Cullin from America, and Margaret Atwood from Canada, demonstrate a similar method of using the idea of a well or submerging and the effect this has of invoking the Uncanny. All three writers use a well or submerging as a catalyst for change in their stories and all three create room for the Uncanny.

In Elizabeth Jolley's novel, *The Well* (1987), an abandoned well in the country functions as a site of the Uncanny,²⁵⁷ and it is in this space that building tensions in the narrative rise to the surface. The Uncanny causes the protagonist, Hester, to question both her own identity and that of her younger dependent companion, Katherine. Further, the Uncanny explodes the narrative frame to even question the identity of author and reader.

²⁵⁵ Royle, p2

²⁵⁶ Royle, p2

²⁵⁷ Jolley, Elizabeth 1987 *The Well* Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd

One dark night, on the road home to their cottage in the wheat fields on the outskirts of a remote Australian town, rich, elderly spinster Hester and her young ward Katherine hit a man with the roo bar of their ute. To protect Katherine and keep her close, Hester decides to hide the evidence and they tip the body down an old well outside their cottage. A few days later, when Hester returns home from a day trip to the local town, Katherine tells Hester that the man down the well is alive, and the two women crouch by the well to listen for signs of life:

The familiar sound, a small rushing of air caught in the cylindrical shaft, came to them. They thought that faintly there was a drip dripping of a thin trickle of water somewhere far down. But, as before, this could have been imagination, for it was, after all, a well.²⁵⁸

Hester and Katherine search for the unfamiliar in the familiar soundscape. The two women have discussed the well sounds in the past without resolving whether they are real or imaginary; they have concluded only that the expectations of the mind might suggest sounds to the ear which do not exist. Uncertainty is introduced into the text, directly linked with the well. Either the man in the well is a persistent ghost or he has been buried alive, and either result is an indicator that the Uncanny may be present. Whether the man in the well is alive or dead is never confirmed, despite the fact that Hester attempts to rationalise the voices, for herself and the reader, as a state of hysterical madness in Katherine.

The Uncanny exists in the uncertainty of spaces between life and death, and where the Uncanny exists, so, too, emerges the freedom to question a status quo.²⁵⁹ In its ambiguity, the well creates a narrative space within which the relationship between the two women changes significantly; a repressed power struggle surfaces. The disruption that the well events cause to the routine of Hester and Katherine also disturbs Hester's ability to repress her love (or obsession) for Katherine. As long as the man in the well does not surface, uncertainty and the

²⁵⁸ Jolley, p114

²⁵⁹ Royle, p2

Uncanny persist and the repressed comes to light. When heavy rains come, the well floods and Hester thinks perhaps she sees the man. Hester expresses some terror at the danger of his return, symbolic of anxiety about the Uncanny's return of the repressed, but for the most part Hester hides in avoidance and uncertainty.

Gerry Turcotte suggests that the uncertainty around the well causes us to eventually doubt most of the story; we are uncertain as to whether there is even a body in the well.²⁶⁰ Hester, through whose eyes readers see, and who, before this point, has demonstrated a stuffy and sensible logic in contrast to Katherine's youthful whimsy, seems to see a body down there herself, but the uncertainty remains. And, Turcotte points out, 'at the heart of this juggling is an insistence on showing the variability of meaning'.²⁶¹ Jolley uses the well to play with boundaries and representations of life and death, sexuality, reality, motherhood, love, desire, and obsession. Turcotte describes the well as 'the site of polyglossia, of multiple discourses; it is both a "masculine" and a "feminine" focus promising and denying freedom'.²⁶² The Uncanny of *The Well* denies resolution and so enables a space for multiple voices, for questions and for open discussion.

Faced with the Uncanny and its accompanying uncertainty and disruption, Hester tries to regain control and impose simplicity and logic onto the events. But we know Hester is not maintaining control. The sense of displacement and discomfort experienced in the presence of the Uncanny is internalised and expressed through Hester's body; manifesting physically in migraines and a croaky voice.²⁶³ Hester is alarmed by the sound of her own voice: the Uncanny causes us to question who we are; even our selves become unfamiliar.²⁶⁴ This disruption of identity causes Hester to become helpless in the face of the Uncanny. Her

²⁶⁰ Turcotte, Gerry 1995 'Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel's "Bear" And Elizabeth Jolley's "The Well"' in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26. 2, 65-91, p81

²⁶¹ Turcotte, p81

²⁶² Turcotte, p83

²⁶³ Jolley, p118, 124

²⁶⁴ Royle, p24

physiological reaction prevents her from maintaining control over the situation. Hester is confronted with a different truth than the narrative she has created.

The Uncanny causes us to question ourselves, and also those around us. Hester has been grooming in Katherine almost a second self. With the dispute over the well, this doubling is separated. Katherine's American accent, amusing and charming to this point, now suggests a well-acted role, and Hester has to face the fact that she has only been looking at her double in Katherine, and perhaps does not really know the girl at all.²⁶⁵

Once the Uncanny has been unleashed, it creates a space where we question the identities of writer and reader, opening up both the process and product of writing. Through a break in the narrative perspective, effected by the circular storytelling structure of the book and the author character who Hester meets in the local town store, the creative process is made conspicuous; what is more often hidden is brought to light. Sue Gillett explains that:

the structure of *The Well* enacts this experience of longing for clarity, for certainty, for the physicalizing and apprehending of the interior world and the frustration of encountering barriers which block access to the hidden meaning.²⁶⁶

This structural contradiction raises extra-textual identity questions: at what point does literature end and life begin?

Eventually, Hester deals with the situation by boarding-up the well, regaining control through force and an insistence on repression, denying her emotions and sealing in the mystery. The reader is denied an explanation and the narrative remains riven and dual in nature. The well, historically a source of life and plenitude for Hester's family, on the land that once made the family wealthy, also symbolises emptiness, death, destruction and avoidance. The uncertainties in the text are never resolved; the Uncanny persists.

²⁶⁵ Jolley, p124

²⁶⁶ Gillett, Sue 1992 'The Well: Beyond Representation, the Active Space of Desire and Creativity.' *Westerly* 1, 33-40, p33

In Mitch Cullin's verse novel, *Branches* (2000),²⁶⁷ masculine identity and sexuality are explored with the help of a well motif, and, as in Jolley's *The Well*, a space for the Uncanny emerges. But rather than acting as a crisis point catalyst, the well in *Branches* is significant for the form of the novel, as a framing device.

Branches opens with Sherriff Branches having thrown his stepson Danny down a well somewhere in 'the asshole of West Texas'.²⁶⁸ The well serves as a pivotal focal point for the text, and Sherriff Branches spends most of the novel sitting next to the well, between the well mouth and the harsh emptiness of the surrounding desert and road. From this space, he contemplates wider issues and then his thoughts return to the well once again; the well and the physical space around it are mirrored by his thoughts. Branches seems to directly acknowledge the internal space of the well, the Uncanny, and his own thoughts, in his own blunt way, saying 'it seems that the weirdness / and surprise / of life / are pound into my brain here'.²⁶⁹ With Danny in the well, broken but not dead, Branches reflects on a range of morally difficult issues, about life in a small, isolated town, and about Branches' idea of 'Justice'.

By trapping Danny, the well opens a narrative space in the structure of the story. Branches sits by the well for several hours and the effect this has is to pause the story in one present moment. Within this space, the thoughts of Branches rise to the surface, are masticated by the dry old sheriff, and then discarded. This process seems to help Branches come to terms with events, and it also provides a way for the writer, Cullin, to slowly reveal the events to the reader.

As Branches exposes the significance of the well, he describes a moment which is essentially an encounter with the Uncanny:

²⁶⁷ Cullin, Mitch 2000 *Branches* Sag Harbor: The Permanent Press

²⁶⁸ Cullin, p25

²⁶⁹ Cullin, p25

Stepdad taking the slow walk
with Stepson
from the patrol car
to the well.

Look in there, Danny.

What do you see?

How far is it?

*Get yourself over the top some
and stare*

at what's down there.

A black hole
in the middle
of West Texas,
twisting, burbling, invisible.

What goes in
don't ever come out.

As a child,
during my midnight ambles,
I spied starlight flickering
at the bottom,
caught in the still water.

Reach for the stars
in the well,
but it's too deep
for boys and men.

And stars ain't meant
to be touched anyway, Danny.²⁷⁰

For Sherriff Branches, the well opens a way to explore difficult issues of masculinity ('it's too deep for boys and men'), and to come to terms with killing his stepson in the name of

²⁷⁰ Cullin, p183-184

‘Justice’. The motif of the well provides a way to look beneath the surface at deeper issues, within a space that holds death and darkness and the light of stars, all within one Uncanny, liminal space.

The well sets boundaries around the problem of Danny, postponing resolution in the narrative of the verse novel. In the void of the Uncanny, with Danny down the well, Branches has all the time in the world to slowly reveal to the reader a series of brutal events which provide context by way of telling the story leading up to the current narrative moment. At the start of the novel, it seems Branches is the monster for throwing his stepson down a well, but the opening pages of the verse novel create a sense of uncertainty, which soon turns to discomfort. The moral compass of the reader is lead this way and that by the narrator, and the reader soon works out that the only comfortable position from which to engage with the text is to not judge at all, but simply to listen. By the end of the verse novel, it has been proposed to us, as readers, that perhaps morals are more complex than first impressions might suggest, and that ultimately real life often denies any satisfying resolution to a narrative of terrible events. In *Branches*, it turns out that Danny has been acting on racist, neo-Nazi impulses, poisoning the town dogs and blaming the Mexican townsfolk. Sherriff Branches stops Danny’s cruel acts in an equally brutal manner, by pushing Danny into an isolated well. But the story is more than that; it is a tale of identity.

As the narrative closes, Branches walks away from the well. Beyond the well, his musings on his past are silenced. But, in the final stanza of the verse novel, Branches acknowledges the open-ended nature of conversation of the Uncanny, where the dead might not be dead, ghosts might not be silent. Regardless, he has concluded his conversation and will walk away:

This is how I walk away –

yank the brim of my hat
over my brow,
shake the rain
from my shoulders.
Forward
and don't turn around
in case something
might be crawling
past the rim of the well.
Something might be moving
beneath the scraps
of the old place.²⁷¹

Branches brusquely faces forward, towards the future, refusing to look, seeking safety in repression, much like Hester in *The Well*. The ambiguity of the perhaps living and perhaps dead 'something' crawling below the surface illustrates the space of the Uncanny within the verse novel narrative.

Where *The Well* and *Branches* both involve someone being thrown down a well, in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972),²⁷² as well as the obvious difference of submerging in a lake rather than a well, the protagonist opts to submerge herself. But similarly, this, too, invokes the Uncanny; through this act, again we experience a space of uncertainty and identity exploration, created within and by the text.

The unnamed protagonist travels to her past, to a family home in the Canadian wilderness, in search of her missing father. She discovers a trail of clues leading her to a point in the lake (and in the narrative) where she must dive, in order to see rock paintings of ancient beings. She submerges herself in order to face a deeper, more ancient reality. She

²⁷¹ Cullin, p196

²⁷² Atwood, Margaret 1972 *Surfacing* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited

describes her underwater experience with the Uncanny as beautiful and terrifying, the in-between space of life and death, strange yet familiar forms:

Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened... It was wonderful that I was down so far, I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my arms and legs were weightless, free-floating; I almost forgot to look for the cliff and the shape.

It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, it was a dead thing, it was dead.²⁷³

The protagonist has learned to repress her emotions, to avoid talking about certain things with her parents, with her older lover, and with her friends. Even the friends she travels with seem disconnected from their past.²⁷⁴ By returning to the wilderness, to her past family home, by submerging herself, and so by diving down to a deeper level of consciousness, she un-learns repression. In the cool, underwater space she finds the Uncanny, and with it comes the freedom to bring to light a new personal narrative. Through the conscious act of submerging, the protagonist's memories surface.

She is at first unwilling to let go of the defences she has created around her perception before this point:

It was all real enough, it was enough reality forever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now.²⁷⁵

It is easier to hold on to even false constructions of a unified identity than it is to let go, to submerge, to become restless and questioning and universal. But the Uncanny denies

²⁷³ Atwood, p136

²⁷⁴ Christ, Carol P. 1976 'Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision' in *Signs* 2.2, 316-330, p319

²⁷⁵ Atwood, p138

oversimplification, and it is an important and old influence on our existence, despite its initial strangeness.

The protagonist must let go of the restrictive anchors to her identity in order to release herself from her own perception, and this is a painful process. Her identity is signified by her name, and she releases this hold by stating she has no name; words lose their meaning: 'it's too late, I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending'.²⁷⁶ Ironically, the protagonist already had no name, at least to the reader, and what the protagonist refers to as 'civilised' is her previous existence, a complex and traumatic pretence, a false memory constructed around an abortion in order to protect her married art teacher.

These revelations drive her over the edge and into a profound exploration of her body, her identity, her sanity. From this point in the story, her previous reality unwinds and with it her identity unravels, in an experience similar to a schizophrenic's psychotic break. She remains self-aware enough to know that she is letting go of rational thought, as she tells us 'from any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view'.²⁷⁷ Admittedly, as readers we take the journey into the 'beyond rational' realm with only the questionable reliability of the protagonist as guide, but, nonetheless, the message of the text is that our own often ill-constructed logic, the 'reality' we build around us, sometimes benefits from a fresh point of view.

Atwood does not provide a resolution that results in the protagonist forming a new identity, but, in a fundamental shift in perspective, the protagonist realises that by doing nothing she can still cause harm.²⁷⁸ Whatever the result, however we might judge her relative sanity and might predict an uneasy future, she begins to really live. Submerging, and

²⁷⁶ Atwood, p162

²⁷⁷ Atwood, p163

²⁷⁸ Christ, p320-321

encountering the Uncanny, has acted as a catalyst for her to find the ability to face her past and discover a different truth.

Each of the three novels discussed here plays with ideas of submerging and surfacing and conjures a space for the Uncanny. From within this space, issues of life, death, memory, trauma, sexuality, and power are explored. But, most significantly, in each text the notion of identity is questioned, without resolution. In both *The Well* and *Branches*, the central themes are the questioning and deconstruction of identity which occurs where the Uncanny is present. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist comes to the text with a limited and repressed identity, and the Uncanny helps her to assertively dissolve her self-constructed facade in favour of (at least the possibility of) a more rich and complex identity. In all three texts, the Uncanny performs a transformative role but does not close identity discussions; the Uncanny does not answer the questions its destabilising presence raises.

Lyn McCredden suggests our current approaches to both critical and creative work involve ‘an additional seeking out of new ways of speaking and representing identity which go beyond the current stases of guilt, on the one hand, or reactionary closure on the other’.²⁷⁹ The Uncanny delays closure and promotes a discussion of identity which involves multiple voices and a necessary complexity. The Uncanny is, therefore, relevant to an ongoing discussion of identity and writing, and especially to contemporary writing in Australia. Nicholas Royle suggests that, when we look at literature as a means of looking at ourselves and the future, the Uncanny is a useful space within which to base our thinking, because ‘the Uncanny can perhaps provide ways of beginning to think in less dogmatic terms about the nature of the world, ourselves, and a politics of the future’.²⁸⁰ To create literary spaces where we might look frankly at our past, including deeper into the darker corners, and to better

²⁷⁹ McCredden, p23

²⁸⁰ Royle, p3

identify where we are now, we need to be comfortable delaying resolution to questions of identity. If we are to explore new ways of constructing identity moving forward, in order that we might represent a rivenness and haunting in our identity, we need to find practical and immediate ways to open spaces of alterity in our writing. To achieve this in creative writing, we might turn to methods of invoking the Uncanny. And as a starting point, as a basic exercise in writing, we might destroy our character's homes, look for ways to destabilise our characters' identities, and create some wells and throw our characters, our narratives, and ourselves down them.

The Uncanny does not offer an easy ride. But diving beneath the surface to confront difficult questions and perhaps then to receive challenging answers can be a good thing or not, depending on one's preconceptions. Julia Kristeva writes that we choose how we respond to the strange, based on where we are and where we have come from: 'to worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts'.²⁸¹ If we are not familiar with our ghosts, and unable to converse with them, perhaps we need to take time, in our writing, to find ways of expressing these anxieties.

²⁸¹ in Gelder, Ken, and Jane M. Jacobs 1995 'Uncanny Australia' in *The UTS Review* 1.2, 50-68, p30

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7: San Francisco

Arriving at SFO after a long flight, she buys a heartbroken airport coffee with the strange new money. That leaves her with enough quarters to happily negotiate the BART ticket machine. She follows the signs and a thin stream of passengers wheeling cases, wheeling her own black case behind her, to an elevator. She travels with the other arrivals to another level of the airport station, emerging onto an open train platform.

Soon, she is seated in a train carriage with her suitcase resting against her shins. The train winds out of the airport station and through a patchwork pattern of houses in suburbs and snaking freeways and the ocean glitters off in the distance on the right. Nothing is strange enough to remind her that she's half way around the world, in a city she's never before visited. As the gently rocking train carriages hit the outskirts of San Francisco, the track dips into the darkness of tunnels and then the shadow of underpasses riddled with graffiti tags. She is calm and curious, floating in a pleasantly expectant haze of the unknown.

The train emerges into suburbs, houses dotted across sloped streets, and the rails curve in a graceful arc, forming a backbone between gently rising hills on the left and the distant coastline on the right. Caught off guard by a sudden rush of a mixture of strangeness and familiarity wrapped around the train tracks and rising up to fill the carriage space and somehow suck out all of the air, Elise finds herself suddenly on the verge of tears. Her heart swells and the feeling overflows into her eyes. She dabs her eyes with a corner of her jumper sleeve. Elise tells herself it's just the similarities between this landscape and that of her home city, but she can't help feeling it's more. She feels somehow she is returning home, to this

city she has never visited, this place she has never even seen before outside of a television screen. Flickering memories of long ago dreams of this city rise to the forefront of her mind. She doesn't know how or why.

She rides the tracks past stations with meaningless names, where other passengers alight, and more board, swapping strangers at each pause of the rolling journey, all the way down towards the ferry stations at the pier. She senses the ocean draw nearer, glimpses a deep blue strip widening around each bend in the track: beneath the curving arc of a footbridge, between thin wooden houses, through a forest of tall office buildings and shiny department stores. One stop before the end of the line, she steps off the train, struggling with her oversized suitcase, jumping it up slightly with her knee to avoid the dangerous dark gap between the train carriage and the platform.

The city buzzes around her. There's a spring in steps and a steady murmur of activity all around her. People stride past with purpose, intent on daily routines and wrapped in familiarity. Or maybe they just seem over-active compared with her travel-weary slow movements, the hesitation of arriving in a strange place. The ocean is so close now that she can smell the sea air, and, every now and then, a fat grey and white seabird wheels in overhead, gliding between tall office buildings.

She wonders about every American movie she has seen where people fight for taxi cabs, as she hails one almost immediately. Her smartphone is out even before she slides into the back seat, directing the driver towards North Beach, only a few blocks away, to the Hotel Boheme, where she has made reservations just because their website advertises shawled bedspreads and the fact that Lawrence Ferlinghetti or one of the other Beats once stayed there.

The hotel entrance is simply a canopied doorway off the busy street, tucked in between a salt water taffy candy store and the cursive lettering front of an Italian restaurant whose tables, on this early afternoon, are already smattered with small groups of early diners, or perhaps late lunchers.

She buzzes the button beside the hotel door, feeling conspicuous standing on the doorstep. The door clicks open and she wrestles herself and her suitcase inside before the door's own weight swings it closed again. In the dim glow of a ceiling light whose lampshade seems to be made out of a collage of old newspaper clippings, all she can see is an apparently endless flight of narrow stairs covered in somewhat worn mint green carpet, rising before her.

Struggling with a suitcase up two narrow flights of stairs, with only a small and twisted landing in between for a brief, panting respite, is not the most elegant way to arrive, and Elise feels flustered and shabby in contrast to the elegant foyer area on the landing at the top of the stairs. In front of her is a reception area: a window space surrounded by an ornate dark wooden border, beyond it a heavy dark wooden desk pushed up to the window space, a set of pigeon holes, a bookcase and a filing cabinet. Elise hovers at the edge of the alcove, holding on firmly to the feel of worn varnish beneath her fingertips, until an aging chanteuse appears at the window, black hair framing a pale, sensual face. With her thick dark eyeliner and crimson lips, she would have been a killer queen in the sixties, Elise thinks, and she maintains a sense of seductive mystery about her now.

Elise explains her emailed reservation and the woman flicks through a small pile of papers behind the counter before she hands over a large cream plastic oval with a key attached. She gestures up the next flight of stairs and smiles with a mixture of wisdom and kindness. Elise instantly feels nurtured by that one glance, and replenished, less weary.

The woman hands her a one-page room service menu as a parting gesture, large typewriter text on a strip of fake parchment. The menu offers coca cola, mineral water, and champagne by the half or full bottle.

Elise tucks the menu under one arm and lugs her case one more floor upstairs to find her room. At first the key won't open the door and she mentally walks herself through the process of having to go downstairs, entice the sultry woman out of the book-hole or backroom in which she spends her time between guests arriving and departing, and explaining that she is child-like and incapable. And then she feels the inner workings of the lock give way beneath her jiggles and the door handle turns and she pours herself and her suitcase, with great relief, into the haven of her room.

She remembers seeing a rock star interviewed on a late night talk show, and he said the first thing he always does when he arrives at a hotel after a long journey is to strip off all of his clothes and lie naked on the bed. She considers this. She keeps her clothes on for the moment but she does lie back on the sagging double bed like a wilted starfish, dangling her legs over the side and down towards the floor and stretching her arms above her head, resting on the soft cotton cover. She stares at a wooden ceiling fan and faint cracks in the plaster, not really seeing them. She lies there until time slows a little and she begins to feel the journey catching up with her, as though the world is slowly turning from the past towards the point in the present where the edges of her body begin.

When the new-city jitters get the best of her, she rises cautiously from the bed. Leaning into the window, she struggles with the heavy old window sash and eventually manages to raise it so the window is open and the street outside streams in through the dusty fly screen. She sits in a chair by the open window, mostly concealed by a lace curtain, and

peers out onto the street, happy for the moment to observe from her private spot rather than participating.

Across the road, at the Italian café, a couple sits at one of several cast iron pavement tables. They are both eating pasta. The dark-haired woman frowns at something the man is saying. A bored waiter lounges in the doorway, glancing up and down the street and then down towards his shiny black shoes.

She hears mumbled singing and turns her gaze further along the street, towards a nearby intersection. Wandering along towards the lights is a scraggly man in a dirty brown business suit, his hair matted into dreadlocks, his beard dusty and ragged. He is carrying a huge bunch of brightly coloured flowers and singing to himself, the words unintelligible and the melody chopped into fragments by the breeze.

Elise looks out across the rooftops and notices the way the undulations of the hilly streets of San Francisco create a pattern across the city like a giant piece of corrugated iron. Small hills covered in dark foliage break the grey and brown mosaic of buildings and a blanket of fog forms a pocket around the nearest hill. As she sits by the window, the breeze picks up and the sunlight dulls from yellow to grey. On first impression, the city is smaller than she expected, although she doesn't know why she expected anything about its size, and it still seems full of secrets and she wonders for the hundredth time whether she might actually be a bit mad for even trying to find the boy.

Madness. She has often wondered exactly where the edge is between sanity and madness. Is it a line drawn on the ground in chalk, easy to miss and therefore easy to step over? She pictures it as a door frame. Or perhaps a mirror, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* style. Has she walked over the edge into madness? *Stick to the plan, Elise*, she tells herself. She'll spend one day in this hotel, delaying the search, and that way she can calm her anxious

mind by telling herself that this whole trip is just a holiday she wanted to take anyway, following the vague logic of a long-standing love of books and adventure all the way to late summer in San Francisco.

And tomorrow, once she has found her feet, she will go and find the boy. What a surprise! She'll say she was visiting an old friend; won't tell him he is the old friend. He'll be pleased to see her. He'll be impressed by her spontaneity in coming to see him. They'll go out drinking and laugh about the strange time they had back in Australia. He'll show her off to his American friends. Look at my novelty friend from the other side of the world. And then?

And then she will have answers for her head and for her heart and she can stay a while exploring the city and then go home and work out what the hell to do next with her empty life. Maybe even find herself a new home.

She'll smooth everything over straight away by joking that she is a stalker. They will laugh about it. But it's not such a strange idea to look up someone you've only briefly met before. These days it's pretty easy to find anyone, isn't it? Old school friends, ex-lovers, neighbours from your first share house; the Internet spills names and cliques and favourite movies without actually revealing anything.

8: Poetry and music

Elise peels off her green jumper and long black dress and travel grime, and runs her fingers through her hair. She sweeps her fingertips lightly across the dark crescents beneath her eyes. She changes into a short grey skirt and black stockings, a t-shirt with a large black bird on a brown background. She laces her canvas boots up again and grabs her thick black duffle coat in one hand.

She swings the coat around her shoulders and snakes her arms through the armholes as she steps out of the hotel's front door at the bottom of the steps, onto the street. She pulls the coat closer around her as the biting chill of the wind tries to creep in between her ribs and her arms.

Elise walks down the grey concrete street, towards some traffic lights. Despite the bitter undertone to the weather, there are people dotted up and down the street, wandering in and out of old glass-window shopfronts, strolling deep in conversation down the steep footpaths. She turns left, past a church and up a hill, and left again at the next corner. Without thinking much about where she's going, Elise finds herself browsing hand knitted woollen scarves in a dim shop where a red-haired woman stands behind the counter engrossed in a magazine. The shop is overcrowded with scarves and jackets and jumpers, all knitted in a chunky colourful style. The jumpers crawl up the walls to the ceiling and more hang suspended from high rails. It must be cosy to work here, in this little rabbit burrow of coloured wool. Like those days where you don't want to face the world and instead stay curled up in an armchair, wrapped in a blanket and a book. Every day could be one of those.

The woman walks over to Elise and smiles.

‘These are beautiful scarves,’ Elise offers.

She picks a scarf from the rack before her and rolls the silky dark green fabric across her arm, swirls it up to wrap around her neck and across her shoulders. She turns to one side and another and watches the soft material turn with her, delayed by its own weight, catching up with her and falling in on itself to bunch up in a hurried twist. The woman smiles at Elise from behind the counter.

And soon the woman is directing her to a cafe down the road, Café Trieste.

‘Local artists hang out there. It’s a bit dingy, but... if you don’t mind that kinda thing.’

‘Not at all. That sounds great.’

She replaces the green scarf on the white wire rack, thanks the woman, and walks a few doors down to a cafe on the corner, cold wind tugging at her hair. The pavement outside the cafe has small square aluminium tables but there are also vinyl padded cafe chairs dragged out to the edge of the footpath to accommodate the straggly overflow. Several street poet types relax on the pavement seats, greying hair and slacks and sandals, and one of them a sprightly toothless man with a greying wiry beard, in a red sleeveless puffer vest and dirty cap. She guesses these are the artist regulars the woman was talking about.

Elise pushes open the swing flyscreen door and walks into the cafe.

The glass of cheap red wine arrives at the counter quickly, and she cradles it as she walks back outside to find a table. She sits on a lone chair between two tables. To her right is an old flowerchild woman with a triangular bob of dark wavy hair and to her left is an empty

chair, and a dark-haired girl with tan skin sits on the far side of the table; Elise guesses she'd be maybe late twenties. She is smoking a joint. Elise leans back in the aluminium chair to light a cigarette.

'Oh, excuse me?' the girl says to Elise, out of the blue. 'Please don't smoke here.'

Um. Elise moves her chair to the edge of the footpath.

When Elise has almost finished her cigarette, the girl takes a tissue from her purse and butts the joint out into it. She carefully folds the tissue back over the joint.

Elise stammers awkwardly, thinking the girl wants her to butt out her cigarette into the tissue; she gestures to do so but the girl shakes her head. The dark-haired girl suddenly leans towards Elise and she says: 'No, you smoke this. You look like you could do with it.'

Elise takes the folded up tissue and unrolls it to find the joint. She glances around, wanting to impress the girl with her nonchalance but wary just the same. But a steady buzz of lazy conversation around her rolls and bounces off the pavement and down the steep footpath and she is wrapped in the anonymity of other's people's egos. She lights the joint and leans back against the tiled wall behind her, inhaling the pungent smoke deep into her lungs.

But it is only a moment until one of the waiters comes walking out and walks over to me. She remembers she is in a strange country and her head starts to spin and she wonders how interesting life is about to get. The waiter stops before her and gestures back towards the cafe entrance. 'The smoke is blowing back into the cafe and I need you to move a little further down the street.'

She freezes with embarrassment, but the waiter shakes his head, the corner of a smile creeping onto his face.

‘It’s fine. Just move a tiny bit along that way,’ he says, with another graceful gesture.

So she moves her chair again. The joint has gone out, so she rummages in her bag for a lighter while the girl casually watches. Finding a lighter, she cups her hands against the frisky breeze. She inhales deeply.

The joint only has a few drags left in it, but it’s strong and the effect is instant. Elise transforms, from a being made from a different texture to everything around her, into a body existing in two dimensions. She is oil paint on a canvas. She fits. She leans back into her chair and raises a finger of thanks towards the girl, but she’s already gone back to writing, fast, in a notebook. Elise sips her glass of wine and exhales, perhaps for the first time all day. She bathes in the babbling conversations flowing around her and feels overjoyed to just exist here, happy to be part of the sidewalk crowd without participating. She lights another cigarette. The wavy-haired woman is telling a wiry, grey-haired man about someone else’s art exhibition opening. He asks if she went to Jo’s poetry reading last night. She did, the woman replies laconically, leaning back in her chair, and there were quite a few people there, she says, and yeah, she liked the poetry. A young hipster, standing, has just made friends with a white-haired man in a black faux-leather jacket, sitting. The young guy gets excited and hops from one foot to the other and he gestures down the street. A tall man in fluoro patterned happy pants, with a Chihuahua in a canvas satchel slung over his shoulder, strides across the street towards the café. He pauses at the street corner to hang the satchel from a metal lip on the street name sign, and then he walks to the café door, swinging it open with one long arm. Elise looks back to the satchel and the tiny dog, poking its nose from inside the bag and hanging its paws over the canvas lip.

The conversation momentarily turns to a group assessment as to whether the dog is alright, its big-eyed head and fine paws poking out over the lip of the satchel giving little

indication as to its happiness or distress at the situation, but after some discussion, general agreement is that it's happy enough, and everyone returns to other musings. Elise tilts her head back towards the sky. Clouds race behind the steeple of the church at the bottom of the hilly street. The clouds are long and thin, like running greyhounds, white with sharp grey edges against the pale summer sky. The sun comes out from behind them and warms the street.

~

The man smiles at her from his footpath seat as she holds the swinging door open with one foot and steadies the glass of wine with her left hand. She smiles a half smile back at him; judging from his relaxed slouch in the metal frame chair, he is a local, and she is the new girl. He could be anybody and so could she. He nods his head slowly at her and returns to his conversation. In a glance, she takes in grey hair, beige duster jacket, faded jeans, and white sneakers.

Just as Elise surreptitiously stubs out a Parliament in a crack between two of the grey slabs beneath her feet, he ambles over to her table.

'Hi there,' and he holds a paw out towards her. She takes the offer and shakes his soft and plump hand. 'Mind if I join you?' And he gestures at the seat. The girl at the next table had packed away her notebook and departed from the next table with a slight smile and a wave about fifteen minutes earlier, so Elise accepts the invitation for some company.

He takes his time settling his large frame into the chair. Leans back, rests his hands palms down on his knees.

'I'm Rodney,' he says, once settled, and pauses for her reply.

'Elise.'

‘Elise. You’re just visiting San Francisco, Elise? Ah, that’s great. Just great.’ He smiles and shakes his head, eager and friendly.

‘Yes, I’m visiting friends. I’m with my boyfriend, but he’s back at the hotel just now,’ she finds herself saying.

‘Oh, is that right?’ Rodney says, raising his eyebrows and nodding back and forth slightly. ‘Great, that’s great. Which hotel are you staying at?’

‘Uh, it’s just around the corner, I forget the name,’ she says, feeling an uncomfortable web of her own lies beginning to close in around her. *I forget the name. Really? Who forgets the name of the place they’re staying?*

But just as she starts to flush with the deception, he graciously continues on, still smiling happily at her.

‘Maybe the Hotel Boheme? That’s a great place. I live just around the corner that way’, and he gestures back behind them, to a corner she hasn’t been around yet. ‘I ah, you could say I manage an old hotel there. It’s not as nice as the Boheme,’ and his laugh is dry.

She sips her wine and gestures at her cigarettes. ‘You mind if I smoke?’

He gestures magnanimously: she is welcome to smoke in this space, his home.

‘I gave it up a while ago,’ he says. ‘So do you like art? Are you an artist?’

‘Well, I guess it depends on whether the art is any good,’ she muses, and he laughs along with her shallow laugh, encouraging. ‘And no, I’m not really an artist or whatever. Well, I mean, I sometimes write some really bad poetry, but that’s about it. I wish.’

‘Oh, that’s great,’ says Rodney, ‘there are a lot of artists in this neighbourhood. In fact, a famous writer sits in this cafe right here a lot to write. He sits up the back at the same

table all the time, and people come up to him and sit with him for a little while, but mostly he just sits there on his own and he writes in a notebook. I forget his name. Maybe you'd know him if you saw his face. Did you see him in there just now?'

Elise shrugs, 'I don't think so, sorry.'

'Actually, you know, we all just went last night to a friend's poetry reading, in a cafe just near here. Oh, it was really great. She is a very talented woman.'

A sharp nosed man dressed all in burnt orange strides up the street towards them. As he nears them, Rodney lifts one hand and gestures a greeting with two limp fingers. The man stops beside him and glances, without much interest, at Elise. He looks around the same age as Rodney; mid-fifties, perhaps.

'Good day to you, Rodney,' he says, his greeting on the icy side of lukewarm.

'Well hello, Stephen. This is Elise and she is here to visit friends.'

'Hi Elise,' Stephen says, softening a little and holding out a hand, but he glances away towards the others seated further up the street, looks through the cafe windows at people seated at tables inside. 'So I'll see you later,' he adds, and strides away towards the cafe door.

Elise isn't sure what the expression on her face says, but Rodney seems a little apologetic.

'He lives in my hotel,' he explains, 'a few rooms down the hall from me. We don't get along very well anymore.' His shoulders slump but he doesn't look overly upset.

'Oh,' Elise offers politely, not sure what else to say.

'Yes, he called me a rock spider. It's not true, of course, but he got it into his head and then when some things got confused about money and the hotel, he yelled at me. Actually,

quite a lot. And I told him he had to clean up his room. And he wanted to call the police and they came and there was a mix up. And now... well, let's just say we don't really get along so well.'

'Uh, I'm sorry to hear that,' Elise says, and she sips the red wine, not sure she has completely followed the story. Not sure what to think about the stranger before her. Rodney seems resigned about it all and she is anxious about appearing too obviously to size him up.

'So tonight I am heading to a poetry reading just near here. You could come along; it's free. There is a guest poet from Texas who writes by the name Cherry Bill and it will be really great. Maybe your boyfriend will want to come too.'

Caught back in the lie again, Elise tries not to visibly squirm. And she doesn't know how to read this floppy man. But it might be nice to sit among a room of people, instead of in the Rapunzel tower of her hotel room. Her only other plan would be to order a bottle of champagne from the room service menu and wonder about which Beat it was that once stayed there.

'Well,' she says, her gaze flicking back to Rodney, remaining noncommittal, 'I'm not really sure what we're doing just yet, but it sounds like it might be fun. Where is it, and what time?'

He describes the way to a community library not too far from where they sit, explains with his forefinger on the table top the curve of a road past a park.

She finishes her wine and rises to leave.

'Well, I hope I see you there, Elise,' he says, holding out a paw again, 'and if I don't, I really do hope you have a great time with your friends in San Francisco.'

She smiles and shakes his hand before walking with as much purpose as she can muster down the street in the vague direction of her hotel. She can't wait to sink into the saggy bed, and sleep for a thousand years or more.

~

Thirteen hours after she has arrived. Elise feels time ticking anxiously in the back of her brain; she can delay the search no longer. She lies back on the sagging old bed. She stares at a crack on the ceiling for a long time. Nothing changes. She is unsure why she has come here but she can't just go home now that she is here. Home: where is home now, anyway?

The cab arrives at the hotel door and the driver jumps out and lifts her suitcase into the boot. On the drive uptown, the driver makes idle conversation with her as they pass through patches of fog and climb steep streets. They pass tall, colourful weatherboard houses and streets crowded with clusters of shops and a group of cyclists waiting to cross at a set of lights. When they reach the Lower Haight, she asks the cab to drop her off near a bar called Zeitgeist.

The boy likes hanging out at Zeitgeist, sometimes, he'd told her, a few beers down at the Hawley pub. He had said there's quite a gathering there on Sunday afternoons, all kinds of people sitting at large bench tables in the beer garden, and sunshine and chatter, and he likes to blend into a crowd. But she doesn't stop there; she's headed to where he lives, just a few streets away, and Zeitgeist is only a landmark on a corner nearby.

She finds herself on almost-empty backstreets, walking alongside a fence that bounds a train line. Conscious of her solo travel, a woman in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, she paces her stride to keep other pedestrians within shouting distance at all times. They are strangers but she instinctively trusts they will help if she runs into trouble. She follows the narrow path

as it leads away from the train tracks and opens out to run around the curved edge of a much busier road. She passes bus stops but isn't sure of the route and the fare and decides it's safer to keep walking, following the map she memorised back at the hotel.

At one intersection, as she is standing on one corner waiting for the lights to change so she can cross, a man rides past on a bike, grinning from ear to ear and ringing the bike bell repeatedly. Rainbow streamers fly out behind the seat of the bike. He sees her looking and waves at her, yelling 'yeah, baby!' She gives him a shy thumb up as he nears her and returns his grin. He sees her gesture and waves again, and whoops in reply, but keeps on pedalling, away into the sunshine.

~

The house is even prettier in real life. Elise notices details in the ornate wooden latticework that bounds the verandah. There seems to be a shop on the ground level, but she can see no signage, only assorted old items some with price tags in a dim interior, beyond small, square windows, and a small wooden door beside them for street access. To the right of the shop, a small flight of stairs leads up to a blue door. She ascends the stairs and pauses before knocking on the door. Something doesn't feel right but she tries to shrug away the doubt. It's perfectly fine to knock, to ask about the boy. She mentally rehearses the story about just happening to be passing through. No big deal.

The door opens almost as soon as she knocks, and she is greeted by a scruffy looking guy in t-shirt and jeans. She explains herself as best she can, briefly. Looking. Boy. Australia. She tries to describe the dark-haired boy but even hearing herself, she realises he just sounds like any one of a million people.

‘Hey, I’m sorry but I don’t think I know him,’ he says. She is defeated. Her face scrunches up and tears run down her cheeks and she just wants to fold herself up into a ball. A howling ball. Right there on the doorstep. He might have paused, might have taken a moment to size her up, but, without another a heartbeat’s hesitation, he opens the door wider to let her pass.

‘Look, why don’t you just come on inside for a bit, yeah? I’m Simon,’ he says, and he leads her a short way down a dim hallway and into a room taken up mostly by a large overstuffed old couch and a large lamp on a small wooden table at one end of it. He seats her on the couch and ducks off into the next room for a moment, returning with a large glass of red wine, which he places on the battered floorboards beside her feet. Elise snuffles back her tears and wipes her eyes on her sleeve and tries not to be the strange woman crying on his doorstep, but, instead, a traveller just sparking with interesting conversation.

Turns out he is a huge Jeff Buckley fan, and she’s not, but it is kind of nice to sit on the old couch in the lounge room and have him play record after record for her. The spinning black vinyl and the soft lamplight streaking out from beneath the vintage shade make her feel she has reached a good place and it’s not long before she feels much calmer once again. Never mind the empty space now in her heart, in the place where she has cradled the memory of the dark-haired boy for some time now.

Simon has short cropped red-blond hair and a blue diamond-shaped labret. He tells her he has discovered a great recipe with avocado and pine nuts and soy milk and Elise joins him in the small kitchen while he cooks, leaning against a counter top. He chops onions and adds them to a pan with a slug of oil, and puts a pot of water on another hotplate, for the pasta. He tells her he is a barman at an underground dive bar down the road, called The Attic. But his favourite place to go around here, he says, is the pub a couple of blocks away, where

they have some Jeff Buckley songs on the jukebox. She remembers from the walk along the street that he lives two doors down from a butcher, and she wonders whether that bothers him, but doesn't ask. He plucks several wiry dark green strands from a potted plant on the windowsill and delicately tweaks fresh thyme leaves from their stems.

She asks about share house feel to the house: 'Does anyone else live here?'

'Yeah, my ex-girlfriend.'

She suddenly realises this could look odd, pictures the ex walking in the door after a hard day of work, seeing this. She shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, the glass of wine cradled more gingerly in her hands.

'But she's away, in Portland, for this thing with her band,' he adds, and Elise relaxes.

He adds pine nuts to the frying pan, and a short while later, avocado and soy milk. Steam rises from the fettuccine boiling away in the other pot.

'Nice ink,' he says.

She looks down at her forearm, at the owl spreading its wings along the soft white skin, pinion feathers brushing the inside of her elbow and the curve just before her underarm.

'Oh, thanks,' she says.

He hands her the bowl of pasta and a fork and they walk to the lounge room. They sit on the saggy couch, Jeff warbling in the background, and she tells him more about why she's here.

'Oh hey', he says, 'so I think I do remember that guy.' Elise fumbles with her wine glass, almost dropping it, but tries to act unflustered.

‘He lived here a few years ago, back when it was a bit of a Home for Lost Boys, y’know: two or three, or even more, guys to a room. Heh. That was a pretty rad time, actually. Those nights we mostly got really wasted. We would have wheelbarrow races up and down the stairs. Some pretty bad stacks, as you can imagine. And another time we got all of the mattresses and lined the living room here,’ he gestures, ‘and we just kinda launched ourselves off the back of the couch onto the mattresses, crazed superhero style, over and over again until we were just laughing too hard to do it anymore. And the neighbours next door banged on the walls to make us stop yelling so much. So then we got all the sheets and blankets in the place and we made giant fort and we just sat under it for hours, being really, really quiet. Just kinda talking in whispers and giggling like little kids. The best time.’

She tries to listen politely to his story, to act casual about it all, but she is jumping to listen for hints about the most lost boy. She leans over and tops up Simon’s glass with more wine. He steadies the glass with soft, plump hands. She notices that his fingernails are bitten right down to stubby edges of flesh.

‘And, so, do you know what happened to him after that?’

‘Uh, let me think,’ he frowns, and her heart sinks, because it’s obviously a distant memory. The trail is cold.

‘Maybe he moved out with Taylor? Uh... no... that was Benji. Um...’ Simon takes a sip of wine, looks hard at the floor with a quizzical eyebrow raised.

She realises she is holding her breath.

‘Sorry,’ he shrugs; it seems to be of little importance to him. ‘Maybe it will come to me.’

He finds more wine and they open that, and then he finds a packet of cigarettes and opens the window. They crawl out of the window and sit on the fire escape. She pulls her knees up to her chin and leans towards him so he can light her cigarette. The wine has added soft edges to the glow around the streetlights.

He is near enough for her to imagine she can feel the warmth from his skin. He is gangly with youth and he sits floppy and relaxed, cross-legged, beside her. Every so often, as he speaks, he flicks his head as though he is shaking off some hidden responsibility. She wonders if he will try to have sex with her. She wonders if she will go along with it. He seems like a nice enough guy, but beyond that, the idea doesn't really appeal.

She tells him how the thyme in the pasta reminds her of when she was a little girl, reminds her of her grandmother.

'I remember sitting at her kitchen table,' she says. 'I would have been about six or seven, my sister Sal maybe eleven. My grandmother was a frightening, bird-like woman. We always had to sit up straight and be very careful not to spill anything. Of course, what I might say now about her was that she was big on women's rights and other environmental stuff and she loved to travel. The day I've just remembered, she had just come back from Turkey, and she had brought with her some Turkish honey in a small tin.' The memory is bright and sharp: the small dark green tin with looping curves of mysterious gold writing, the tang of metal in her mouth, as she remembers a teaspoon prising the lid from the tin. And then the overwhelming rich sunlight scent of deep golden crystallized honey inside.

'She spread the honey onto slices of wholemeal toast for our breakfast,' Elise continues, 'and as she did, she told us how it came from thyme fields. Hundreds of bees spending life times gathering nectar from purple flowers on tiny dark green plants covering the rocky red dirt of the Turkish hills. Just, in a carpet. To make honey, gathered up and sold

in a noisy marketplace and flown all the way across the world. For me, and my breakfast. And as I ate my breakfast, sucking escaped drops of sunlight from my fingers, it almost felt as though the purple flowers and the hills and the bees were there with me. So now I just love love *love* eating thyme, y’know?’ She laughs along with him as she looks out across the dark street at the rooftops and sky and streetlights. The light in the window of a house across and a few doors down is turned off; the warm yellow rectangle turning dark and silent. Her loneliness is sudden and sharp.

They talk for a while longer, but Elise feels the pull of jetlag, dragging her down.

Simon leans towards her, putting an arm around her shoulders. He looks deep into her eyes, eyes she can barely keep open.

‘Look, I think you’re really pretty, and honestly, I was going to see if you maybe wanted to hook up, two strangers in a big city and all, but girl, you are falling asleep! I mean, you are just *wasted*.’

Elise starts awake: ‘I... uh... I mean... I have to get back to my hotel.’ Salt water runs unexpected and hot down her cheeks.

Simon draws back, to hold her by the shoulders, at arm’s length.

‘O-kay. I think you had better just stay on the couch here tonight. I mean, it’s no fancy hotel but I think you don’t even wanna go back across town tonight.’

Elise nods. ‘Thanks, Simon. You seriously have no idea how grateful I am right now,’ she manages to murmur, her tongue thick in her mouth, her lips finding it hard to form words.

‘Hey, no problem. Come back inside and I’ll get you a blanket.’

Elise swims through the jetlag. Tries to say it's too much trouble, tries to muster up some sense of stranger danger but she just can't seem to care enough. It really does seem like the easiest option. She nods.

And soon she is lying on the couch, beneath a musty blanket, listening to the faint sounds of a lighter clicking, the sounds of what her sleepy brain realises must be Simon sparking up a bong behind the closed bedroom door. The gurgling sounds of water bubbling, the sweet grassy scent of weed drifting out from the crack beneath the panelled wooden door, her eyes trying to make sense of the shape of a water stain on the ceiling that she can just barely make out in the dim light of the room from the streetlights outside. She feels herself sinking into the couch, hopes he's not a creep, as she gives herself over to sleep and drifts into the shadows of the room.

When she wakes, the sun is streaming in hot through the window and it feels like afternoon. She sits up with a start, her heart suddenly racing, feeling foolish for falling asleep so easily in a strange place, but her clothes are all on, creased and crunched up and sweaty beneath the blanket, but seemingly untouched. She checks her bag but her phone and purse and other belongings are all there. Her phone tells her it is 2pm. She sits up, rubbing sleep from heavy eyes, feeling remarkably rested but a little fuzzy from the wine. Beside her is note.

Had to go to work but you looked so peaceful. Don't be a jerk and steal anything but help yourself to coffee. Lock the door on your way out. Hope you find what you are looking for. - Simon

Her eyes well up with tears at the kindness of this stranger. Or, she supposes, she could perhaps think of Simon as a new friend. She pads down the short hallway to the

bathroom. Standing over the grimy white porcelain sink, Elise splashes water on her face, looking deep into her own eyes in the mirror. A girl with a haunted gaze looks back at her. The sadness in the girl's eyes reflects back at her the heaviness of her heart. She has come all this way, only to find no answers. The dark-haired boy might as well have never existed.

~

She wanders down Haight Street, past tall whiteboard houses, iron railing fences topped with gargoyles, a tiny basement record store, an empty art gallery. The buzz of the afternoon has a lazy flow to it and she swims through the dreamlike sunshine in a daze. There is nowhere she is going. The dark-haired boy had mentioned another bar around his home, one with the best beers in San Francisco, he'd said, and she can't remember the name other than that it started with a T. Whether she imagined the boy or not, it can't hurt to look for that bar, now that she's all the way across the other side of the world from home.

Toronados has a stable-style door, blocking the street off at waist height only from the dim bar inside. This bar is busy, for the late afternoon of Summer San Francisco. She stops in for some courage, something cool to settle the prickling fuzz behind her eyes. They have pomegranate cider on tap, and she orders a large one, mumbling about pints and that she's not sure what they're called here. The bartender laughs along kindly with her and brings her a tall glass of deep pink liquid that catches the light and casts a long crimson shadow dappled with gold across the black bar mat beside it.

The bearded barman serves her a second pint and she returns to her perch on a barstool at a high table near the street. A woman with dark eyeliner and deep pink frizzy hair sits at the bar, a medium sized black and white patchy dog on the bar stool beside her.

~

The two bearded friends are working their way through a list of Toronados' most sour beers, they tell her. She figures that means they'll be there long into the afternoon and evening, and it's strangely comforting to know she could probably come back and pick up the conversation where she left it if she feels overwhelmed by her loneliness. She is grateful for the friendly ease with which they chat to her about politics, asking about the upcoming race for Australian prime minister, eager for news of Australia outside of what they have been delivered by mainstream media.

'What do the people on the ground really think about this?' they asked eagerly, and she is been pleased that even her limited knowledge of Australian politics is a valuable source of streetwise information. But once she finishes the cider, she says her farewells to Dan and Andy, and then to their new friend Rick with the guitar on the footpath just outside the bar, and she starts the walk further down along Haight Street towards the Mission, back towards North Beach and her hotel.

The sun is shining and Elise mingles in with other people walking on the street, just as though she is any other person. As though she lives in San Francisco, as though she belongs. Cloaked in silence, she is certain nobody knows she is a stranger. Nobody knows her heart is full of fear and puzzles and unanswered questions about who she is and what she is doing here, anyway.

9: The letter M

Arriving home, back at the hotel, Elise plans to slink past the reception area and into her room, but the lady at the counter looks up as Elise reaches the top of the steep carpeted stairwell and gestures her over with one generous bejewelled hand.

‘A young man dropped a package off to you about an hour ago,’ the woman drawls. ‘He said it was very important.’

The woman holds out a small newspaper bundle tied with brown string.

Elise takes the bundle, tests its weight in her hand. It is light, and gives slightly under the pressure of her grasp.

‘Uh, do you know who... what did he look like?’ she asks, although she assumes it must be Simon.

‘Eh, he was young. Good looking, but *sweetie*, I think all of the young men are,’ she purrs, feigning the need to fan herself, deep red lips pursing, lifting papery skin upwards into a smile. ‘Oh, yeah, and he had kinda blonde hair, I suppose. And did I mention - *very* handsome eyes?’

Simon fits that description, Elise supposes, and anyway, she doesn’t really know anyone else here. She thanks the woman and walks down the short narrow hallway to her room, fumbling with the key in her urgency to maintain a calm appearance while also getting inside the room as quickly as possible so she can open the package.

Inside the room, she carefully closes the door behind her. She sits on the sagging edge of the bed. She rips into the newspaper, tearing at one loose corner and then tearing off shreds

and then wrestling with it until it bursts open like a split piñata, spilling a pile of envelopes onto the patchwork bedspread.

She uses two hands to scoop the envelopes into a loose pile and then carefully lays them out on the bedspread, in a grid of four across and three down, the earliest postmark at the top and the most recent near her crossed legs. The first five envelopes are made from thick textured cream paper, woven through with crimson petals and small brown grass seeds. The sixth envelope is more coarse, a natural brown paper. The final envelope is a smooth deep red paper. All seven envelopes have been opened already, resealed only by the tip of the triangle flap tucked back into the envelope body. All seven envelopes are patterned with stamps listing postage prices in pounds and pence, each stamp featuring a cameo of the Queen of England. All seven envelopes are addressed in black pen, in the same neat handwriting, no name, only the letter E at 23 Pearl Street. All seven have been printed with neat handwriting on the back, also with no sender's name but all with the same return address in London.

Her heart skips around in her chest and she has to force herself to think about breathing. These must be letters to the boy. Simon must have remembered an old collection and brought them here for her. A clue to the stranger's whereabouts. She suddenly feels as though she is exactly where she is supposed to be in the world.

But.

But it feels wrong to open his letters.

But she was given them, so that's almost like getting permission to look.

But it's still snooping.

It only takes her three anxious minutes of staring at the grid of envelopes before she convinces herself it's fine to look inside. Partly because nobody will ever know whether or not she looked.

She opens the first envelope and inside is not paper but card: a postcard. A bear and a rabbit picnic in the woods, drinking wine together. She flips the card to read the message, but, to her disappointment, on the back is written only a single neatly criss-crossed kiss and the letter M.

She opens the next envelope. This postcard leaps out fierce with waves deep blue and creamy white foam on steep crests. On the back, the words: 'My heart.' And a kiss and an M.

All of the envelopes contain postcards. A kiss, X. A single letter, M.

She shivers with a rush of overwhelming excitement and disappointment. Her mind races through the possibilities, the many meanings these postcards could hold but she can't settle on any of them. She simply doesn't know any more than she did five minutes ago. Except.

Except now she has a new address.

And so she gets on her phone and she changes her ticket and pays a bit extra and confirms and then she packs her things and checks out of the hotel and catches the BART train to the airport and then she just travels to London, just as simple as that, really only stopping long enough to think about her decision when she is on the plane and the engines roar and the plane begins to taxi along the runway and she feels her eyes prickle with heat as they fill with tears. She stares, hard, out of the plane window, until the ground falls away and the metal cocoon carries her out over the sea in a sweeping silver arc.

Essay 3: Paris: Women in Trousers

I plan everything in advance, so I won't have to worry about my unsettled grasp of the language until I have reached my temporary home base. I make notes in paper form and on my phone. And so when I arrive, I read signs and symbols without much trouble and I find my way through Charles De Gaulle airport, even stopping to buy bottled water from a small shop at one edge of the marble floor, stumbling over strange words and coins. As I glide along the corridors, guided by the train symbols on overhead signs, I wonder whether I look foreign, and I try to keep the expression on my face relaxed, to act as though I belong here. The horror of being discovered to be a tourist – not merely a visitor, but a *tourist* – ugh. At best, I have a mumbled take on some simple phrases of the language. I am sure to be discovered, words and tone pointing to my hiding place, crouched down here in the silence and darkness of my otherness.

On June 24, 2010 Julia Gillard became Australia's first woman prime minister, elected unopposed as leader of the Labor party, to replace the current Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.²⁸² She went on to win a federal election weeks later by a narrow margin, forming a minority government with Greens and Independents members and retaining her seat at the head of the table. Kevin Rudd expressed a painful disappointment at what he saw as Gillard's betrayal of his trust.

I find my way to a ticket machine in a large, open hall, and I wait behind a small, dark haired, olive-skinned man, who is lined up behind a large American couple. The Americans talk their way through the ticket buying process slowly and loudly, and I silently confirm what I will need to do just by eavesdropping on their clumsy negotiation of the machine. Once they have left, the man in front of me steps up to the touch screen but he has trouble

²⁸² Rodgers, Emma 2010 (June 24) 'Gillard ousts Rudd in bloodless coup' in *ABC News*, online at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-06-24/gillard-ousts-rudd-in-bloodless-coup/879136>, accessed 20/12/2016

using the machine. I don't know whether it's his credit card or his understanding of the words before him, but he tries several times with no success, frowning. I am happy to wait; comfortably anonymous in the lines of people at the many ticket machines around me. The pale light filtering in through a large skylight in the roof two levels above is not so unfamiliar as to unnerve me. After some time trying, the small man cedes the ticket machine to me, apologising through a curt smile for taking so long, and he stands to one side and watches what I do as I buy a *carnet*. I change the language back to English from whatever setting he was using; it looks like some form of Arabic. Thankfully, my credit card works and the instructions seem straight forward and soon a wad of ten tickets spits out into a tray at the base of the machine. I gather them up like slot machine winnings.

In the Paris of the late 1800s, women were expressly forbidden, with a decree passed in 1800 to this effect, to wear men's clothing, with the exception of Carnival time.

The reason for this decree, van Slyke suggests, is most likely that feminists had started organising in groups; in addition, the medical profession had picked up and run with the idea of lesbianism and cross-dressing as a perversion. However, van Slyke also notes that the decree made no mention of men wearing skirts, and also notes the suspicion that many of the revolutionaries who marched on Versailles in the French Revolution of 1789 were actually politically active women.

Additionally, women who could not wear trousers could not perform certain jobs, so the decree served to protect the interests of many working men and social mores, in perpetuating the notion that women are frail and in need of male labour efforts to survive, and in keeping women out of certain aspects of public and political life.²⁸³ The decree relates directly, van Slyke explains, to the view at the time, of women as the morally and mentally inferior Other of men.²⁸⁴

I find my way down a ramp and onto a platform and then a B line train and I arrange my luggage at my feet and settle back against a hard plastic seat. The train has only a smattering of passengers. An American family hurtles onto the train, late and jittery, and

²⁸³ BBC, 04 Feb 2013; and Van Slyke, Gretchen 1998 'The Sexual and Textual Politics of Dress: Rosa Bonheur and Her Cross-Dressing Permits' in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 26.3/4 (Spring-Summer), 321-325, p324

²⁸⁴ Van Slyke p324

flops into seats near me. The daughter sits next to her mother and the son a seat behind them, on his own, and the father another seat back from that. They converse across the space between their separate rows of seats, raised voices and twanging accents filling the entire carriage. When two rustic men in embroidered vests jump on the train at the next station and one starts playing accordion, I look away, gaze out of the window, but the mother says to her family, ‘Oh see, now we’re in Paris! This is what Paris is like, kids!’

The kids nod compliantly, but, to me, this seems surreal. Is this really what Paris is like? Or is this a Paris of an earlier era? Or is this a shiny tourist-focused façade? I wonder whether the mother has been to Paris before. People make assumptions about places, carrying their hopes wrapped smugly about them even as they travel to somewhere they’ve never been before.

Even though I am a first-time visitor and the dark-haired woman may well know better than me, the music puts me on edge. I try not to fidget visibly. But the American woman’s foot taps and her head nods at her children, in time to the old French tune, and she seems lulled into her version of Paris, with its tree-lined avenues opening up before her eyes as waiters cycle past in bowties and berets with wine glasses balanced on silver trays in one hand, baguettes tucked under the other arm, waving at slender beauties promenading with their high fashion frocks and their stripe-shirted beaus. Until we reach the next station and one of the men targets her for money as the notes they are playing fade into the summer sky. And then she fumbles around for strange coins in her purse, while I continue to avoid eye contact, and the men leave the train with sour smiles.

I recall the Paris streets of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Capricorn*,²⁸⁵ streets filled with words and sentences, filled with vomit and filth, the sewers opening up like mouths into the

²⁸⁵ Miller, Henry 1938 *Tropic of Capricorn* Paris: Obelisk Press

river in weak dawn light. I wonder whether Paris might be somewhere in between Miller's image and the mother's, or perhaps for me it will be nothing much like either at all. After the men depart the train, the carriage is silent again, but just a little while, as the Americans soon begin talking about their hotel. We slide through areas of run-down apartment buildings and empty warehouse yards and graffiti-splashed fences. Grey and brown and grimy beneath a slick grey sky. Train tracks and electric cables hash the ground and the sky like scratches in the surface of an old writing desk.

Around October 2011, the Speaker of the Parliament of Australia, Peter Slipper, allegedly sent a series of sexually suggestive text messages to one of his assistants, James Ashby. In the messages, it is claimed, Slipper made multiple sexist remarks and more than once used the word 'cunts', musing on how funny it is that men like cunts but still use the word as an insult. Slipper comments that unshelled mussels look a lot like vaginas: 'salty cunts in brine'. A few months later, Ashby quit, and, rumour has it, the former assistant then became the ally of Mal Brough, the opposing candidate for Slipper's electoral seat of Fisher, in Queensland. News of the texts was leaked, in a scandal that exploded across the Australian media.²⁸⁶

The leader of the coalition opposition party, Tony Abbott, called on Gillard to sack Peter Slipper over the texts. But, by then, the Prime Minister had endured a string of incidents showing a strong sentiment of misogyny and a lack of respect for her office. Pornographic cartoons in newspapers, comments on the size of her bottom, slurs calling her a witch, snipes at her unmarried status and lack of children, criticism of her male partner's profession as a hairdresser, comments on abortion rights and women's lesser capabilities and suitability only for domestic roles in society: these had all reached her attention. And Gillard had, up to this point, remained tight lipped, in public maintaining focus on issues other than gender.

Any woman caught wearing trousers more than twice in a year risked being fined and jailed.²⁸⁷ The decree also contained instructions as to how a woman might obtain a three or six month cross-dressing permit, albeit still with certain restrictions about where trousers could and could not be worn, to enable this ruling to be circumvented based on medical reasons. The decree was amended in 1892 and 1909, to stipulate that no fine would be issued to a woman riding a bicycle or a horse.²⁸⁸

When the train reaches its terminus, I step out into the maze of levels and lines that is Gare Du Nord train station. Away from the airport, I become more aware of my strangeness.

²⁸⁶ Smith, Michael 2012 (October 9) 'The Slipper Texts', online at <http://www.michaelsmithnews.com/2012/10/the-slipper-texts.html>, accessed 22/12/2016

²⁸⁷ Van Slyke, p321

²⁸⁸ Lauter, Deborah 2013 (February 3) 'Women in Paris finally allowed to wear trousers' in *The Telegraph* online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/9845545/Women-in-Paris-finally-allowed-to-wear-trousers.htm>, accessed 29/08/2016

The signs are confusing and I have to check and re-check my notes several times before I commit to descending a flight of stairs to a platform deep in the dirty labyrinth. Even then, I watch one train leave the station without me on it, a young man with tanned skin and razor-cut dark hair grinning out through a window at my uncertainty, hesitating, catching the second train only once I am pretty sure it's headed where I want. I recall a guide book warning of snatched purses and of women being groped and pressed up against a strange man's body in the confined space and crush of the crowd where a hand or a penis could be anyone's. But I am not a loud tourist and I keep my purse tucked under one elbow and I set my face hard against the eyes of strangers all around me, my slippery gaze avoiding eye contact.

I heard a story, maybe true and maybe just an urban myth, of a man who travelled on the Metro, and his is a tale of what happens when the train is too full. As the doors of the train were about to close on a carriage crammed full of commuters, the traveller saw a young man sprint down the platform, leap forcibly onto the carriage, and turn his shoulder to the crowd at the last second. Using the momentum of his jump to drive into the crush, he created a space for himself where there was none. The story flickers in my mind as the carriage doors open and I step onto the train. But it's late on a mid-week morning and the train carriage I step into is only lightly filled. I find a corner in which to stand my large suitcase, one leg against it to hold it back from the lure of the train's sway.

Rosa Bonheur, an artist in Paris at the time, and a woman, was a notorious wearer of trousers. Her work, then and now, is known for its incredibly life-like depiction of animals, such as the horses in *The Horse Fair* of 1852-55.²⁸⁹ As part of her creative research, she would spend time at horse fairs and abattoirs, studying the formations of muscle and bone in the bodies of dead horses.²⁹⁰ Trousers were, obviously, a much more practical option than the full length

²⁸⁹ Bonheur, Rosa 1852-55 *The Horse Fair* (oil painting) online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435702>, accessed 29/08/2016

²⁹⁰ Van Slyke, p328

skirts of the time, and Rosa Bonheur obtained a cross-dressing permit and spent her working time in ‘full trousers and delicately embroidered painter’s smocks’.²⁹¹

Words whose meanings unfold into the route to my destination become a lyrical verse in my head, cycling around and around. The half-conscious act of everyday memory becomes an active effort as I repeat the names silently, the rhythm of the repetition like a magic spell. I silently chant in time to the sounds of the train rolling on the tracks. *Jaurés, Pyrenees, Avenue St Simon*. My mind adds its interpretation of a French accent, preparing me for the possibility of a conversation in which I have to ask a stranger for directions. *Joray, Pirenee, Avenoo Sanseemon, Joray, Pirenee, Avenoo Sanseemon, Jo-ray, Pi-re-nee, Av-e-noo San-see-mon*. The words gradually lose their meaning as they move from a mantra at the front of my mind to merge with other background noises. These words are part of my surroundings, tied to now and the near future and made heavy with significance only because I am going to a particular place they describe. Left to their own devices, these words are not names but jumbles of letters that float into the clouds and become part of the grey streets rushing past the train window.

But now, Gillard was about ready for a reply. On October 9, 2012, Gillard responded to Abbott in what would become an internationally recognised parliamentary speech, and one which has even been memorised for recital by young students of politics.²⁹² Incidentally, she was wearing navy blue trousers.²⁹³

Jaures is a small station and I easily find my way across the station to stand waiting on what I think is the platform for the Line 2 train, in the direction I want to go. I am the only woman and the only white person among the collective of travellers on the platform. I feel different but not uncomfortable or unsafe. We are all on our way somewhere and I belong, even

²⁹¹ Van Slyke, p327

²⁹² Lee, Alex 2015 (July 30) ‘Teens are Memorising Julia Gillard’s Misogyny Speech and Shouting it In the Streets’ in *Buzzfeed News* online at https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexlee/pretty-much-me-in-highschool-tbh?utm_term=.ndG6wrRWv#.bwbpVXq2, accessed 06/09/2016

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fleetingly, to this group. The train arrives and we all gather near the closest door and we all step onto the train and everyone finds a seat.

Thank you very much Deputy Speaker and I rise to oppose the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. And in so doing I say to the Leader of the Opposition I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. I will not. And the Government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. Not now, not ever.²⁹⁴

The accent of the announcement for stations is thick and distorted but I manage to find my way off the train at Belleville, just a couple of stops along the line, and I drag my cases across the gap, from the carriage onto the platform. I pop the handles on the cases up and wheel them along in tandem, my arms outstretched like a skydiver behind me. In this small station, there are no escalators, only stairs. I stop at the base of the stairs to hide away the suitcase handles and to get a better grasp on the cases. The crowd flows around and past me and away up the stairs. A dark-skinned man in a white Islamic robe and cap, small in stature and old but wiry-looking with life in his eyes, offers to carry my cases, with hand gestures and a smile and a stuttered string of French. I am larger than him, and younger, and fine to carry them myself, so I decline with a shake of my head and a quick *non, merci*. But he is insistent. He reaches again towards the larger of the two cases. I decline his offer again, *non, non merci*, and make a show of flexing my biceps, but my soft white arms fail to convince him. *Forte*, I offer, grinning and pointing at myself and trying not to waver in my confidence too much, hoping I have used the right word. He grins, throws his hands up and rattles off a string of French at me. I nod my head and smile back, but his expression tells me instantly I have got something in the meaning wrong, and he looks at me warily and shrugs before heading away up the stairs, with his twinkling brown eyes and sprightly step.

²⁹⁴ Transcript, *SMH*

Wearing trousers was not Rosa Bonheur's only divergence from the milieu's idea of the perfectly contained woman; she also defined herself as a professional artist, smoked cigarettes in private, and refused to marry.²⁹⁵ She often packed a pistol, and at one time she kept a tiger called Nero as a pet.²⁹⁶

I take a deep breath and lug the cases, with some difficulty, up two flights of concrete stairs to street level. I'm relieved that the hard part of finding my way to my rental apartment is behind me. I have successfully navigated the Metro and now all I have to do is call my host and he will come and meet me and show me to the apartment. Easy. Soon, my shoes will be off. But my phone won't make the call. The new mobile phone SIM card I have purchased, to give me data access anywhere in Europe, reports no service. Dead end. No map and no means of communication. I am lost. Suddenly, the street seems more dirty and grey and my surroundings take on a whole new level of unfamiliarity.

The Leader of the Opposition says that people who hold sexist views and who are misogynists are not appropriate for high office. Well I hope the Leader of the Opposition has got a piece of paper and he is writing out his resignation. Because if he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he doesn't need a motion in the House of Representatives, he needs a mirror. That's what he needs.

Let's go through the Opposition Leader's repulsive double standards, repulsive double standards when it comes to misogyny and sexism. We are now supposed to take seriously that the Leader of the Opposition is offended by Mr Slipper's text messages, when this is the Leader of the Opposition who has said, and this was when he was a minister under the last government – not when he was a student, not when he was in high school – when he was a minister under the last government.²⁹⁷

I scan the street for a pale-faced, dark-haired man who looks like the website photograph of my host. I can see nobody who matches the description even slightly. I see people walking into what looks like a restaurant, across the road, on a nearby street corner. I

²⁹⁵ Van Slyke, p324

²⁹⁶ Goderich, Evan 1873 (June) 'Rosa Bonheur and her Tiger' in *The Aldine* 6.6, p118

²⁹⁷ Transcript, *SMH*

decide to order a coffee so I can sit and more calmly work out what to do. If I can't get in touch with my host, I may have to find a hotel for the night. I know nobody in Paris and my French is appalling at best, possibly even offensively so.

I take a seat at the back of the restaurant, mildly annoying the waitress because I don't want any food, just coffee, and for that I should have sat in the front section, near the street. But the waitress is elaborately pleasant to me and I nurse my *café au lait*. I change my SIM card back to one from back home, one that charges excessive rates for data, and I manage to get onto the apartment website and there's a message from the host, wondering whether I need help.

He has said, and I quote, in a discussion about women being under-represented in institutions of power in Australia, the interviewer was a man called Stavros. The Leader of the Opposition says "If it's true, Stavros, that men have more power generally speaking than women, is that a bad thing?"

And then a discussion ensues, and another person says "I want my daughter to have as much opportunity as my son." To which the Leader of the Opposition says "Yeah, I completely agree, but what if men are by physiology or temperament, more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command?"²⁹⁸

I drink only half the coffee and I pay the smiling man behind the counter and I trail along the curve of the street with my luggage clickety-clacking behind me on the pavestone footpath. The street winds downhill between tall old apartment blocks, some with shops at the base. As I near the address, my host is waiting for me out the front of the building, tousled dark hair and a slouched stance, and he kisses me on both cheeks in greeting. I try not to cry on this stranger, the warm gesture such a welcome relief. I've made it home. He helps me through a thick metal door, into the hallway, and then into the iron cage of the old elevator. He slides the grill across in front of us and presses a button and the elevator begins to rise up

²⁹⁸ Transcript, SMH

through the centre of the building. I can see the landing of each floor as we pass: faceless doors in dim hallways, counting up to six.

He lets me into the apartment and offers me coffee. The space is small but tastefully decorated in a bohemian style, with a record player and a collection of vinyl, ferns, a tall lamp and some fairy lights. A small kitchenette opens onto a small space with an old futon couch in one corner and a wooden table and chairs near the window. I can see the edge of a bed through a doorway, in the next room, and the whiter light and tiles of a bathroom beyond that. Home, for the next few days.

My host puts a small pot of coffee on the stove and fishes out a tin of grounds from a small cupboard. He asks me for a cigarette, and he takes an ashtray from the sink and smokes out of the kitchen window, leaning out over the sill and towards the empty eyes of the other apartments in the building's triangular inner courtyard. We chat over coffee and then he leaves me with the keys and tells me he'll be back in a few days. He waves a cheery farewell and I hear the clunk and whir of the elevator as it begins to rise to collect him.

Rosa Bonheur was named the most popular artist of her time, man or woman.²⁹⁹ She was decorated with the Legion of Honour rosette by the Empress Eugenie, and she was once praised highly by art critic Theophile Thore at the Salon of 1847, who wrote that she painted like a man.³⁰⁰ At a time when women artists were encouraged to view and paint human and animal forms differently from men, Rosa Bonheur painted her bulls and stallions complete with sexual organs.

I mooch around the apartment for a bit, poking things, and there's Wi-Fi, so I get my phone data access sorted out, but pretty soon I'm out on the street again, to explore the area before it gets too dark. I want to make the strange streets familiar. The map on my phone tells

²⁹⁹ Van Slyke, p328

³⁰⁰ Van Slyke, p328

me to cross the tree-lined street and then to continue straight ahead, down a steep flight of many stairs to a thin cobbled street below. As I begin my descent, a dark haired woman is climbing up the stairs, just a few from the top. She is young, perhaps in her thirties, wearing a scarf around her head and a long dress. She is lugging a pram up the steep stone stairs, with a baby sitting forward and hanging onto the pram rail. A small boy trails behind her on the steps, carefully climbing each grey stone step with exaggerated leg movements, arms wide to balance. Dark eyes in his round face check how fast he needs to move to keep pace with the woman, weigh the risk of falling too far behind against the risk of losing his balance.

From the street below comes a loud bang, sudden, and the first thing I think of is a gun or a bomb. The woman looks back down the street and frees one arm to gesture back towards the boy, to try and take his hand, and he scrambles in a crawl up the stairs to her. I start down the stairs towards her, to help her, but by the time I am a few steps down, she is already almost at the top with the pram, and she reaches back down a step to grab the boy's hand, drawing him close. She darts a quick smile at me with her eyes and then they are gone, pushing the pram up the sloped street. I decide not to continue down the stairs. Instead, I follow the footpath downhill towards the next street corner, to circle around whatever just happened down there in a street I will never see.

Then ensues another discussion about women's role in modern society, and the other person participating in the discussion says "I think it's very hard to deny that there is an underrepresentation of women," to which the Leader of the Opposition says, "But now, there's an assumption that this is a bad thing."³⁰¹

My heart has almost stopped racing by the time I turn at the next street corner. This street also heads downhill, perpendicular to the one I was on, but on a steeper slope. It is a

³⁰¹ Transcript, *SMH*

street with small footpaths and few people, or at least, nobody on the street. I pass the facades of tall courtyard houses and the openings of alleyways that run between the tall houses, turning my head to look along the empty alley of each one I pass. Halfway down, I pass one alley where two boys are standing facing each other, twenty feet apart. One is pointing a gun. He pulls the trigger and my heart pauses but they are only playing; a cap echoes as it bursts, the sound bounding off the buildings and up into the sky. I quicken my step but my eyes follow the boys as I walk past. They barely give me a glance.

This is the man from whom we're supposed to take lectures about sexism. And then of course it goes on. I was very offended personally when the Leader of the Opposition, as Minister of Health, said, and I quote, "Abortion is the easy way out." I was very personally offended by those comments. You said that in March 2004, I suggest you check the records.³⁰²

The street winds down between low apartment buildings; the activity on the streets disconnected from whatever is behind the dark rectangles of doorways and windows. The slope gradually levels out as the narrow street opens onto a busy, wider road, lined by shops advertising brightly in Korean and Chinese. There seem to be many tiny shops all selling mobile phone accessories. I turn left onto the road and wander towards the noise buzz, further along the street. Women in short skirts and high heels lounge in doorways, their attention flickering briefly across me, past me, and then back to the street.

At social events and in public, Rosa Bonheur still wore a dress, even being accosted by a policeman once, who became suspicious of her short hair and thought he had nabbed a female impersonator.³⁰³ And the same artist success which allowed Rosa Bonheur autonomy in a society that would have women painters remain in the private world, subservient to men, also

³⁰² Transcript, *SMH*

³⁰³ Van Slyke, p327

required Bonheur to make at least some show towards conforming.³⁰⁴ Many days, Bonheur would spend the morning privately sketching while wearing trousers, and the afternoon at social events, wearing a dress.

I was also very offended on behalf of the women of Australia when in the course of this carbon pricing campaign, the Leader of the Opposition said “What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...” Thank you for that painting of women's roles in modern Australia.³⁰⁵

I am hungry but unsure how to navigate the crowded bars and cafes crouched on the corner of the next main intersection. Instead, I turn left again, and the street begins to slope upwards. I wander past a Chinese restaurant, brightly coloured pictures of giant yum cha crowding its windows. A few doors down, a line of people stretches from a shop door and out onto the street in a lazy arc. A sign above the door says simply *Boulangier*. I don't know if that's a brand or a type of food but I join the line and crane my neck to see inside the shop.

In the tiny *Boulangier* interior, an L-shaped glass counter runs from the window to the back of the room and beneath it rows of pastries rest on shelves behind glass. Large racks behind the two women serving hold baskets full of baguettes and bread loaves. As the line moves slowly forward, drifting me along with it, I listen to the words and accents as each person dances through the courtesy of exchanging greetings with the woman behind the counter, and then orders, pays, thanks and farewells. I listen carefully to the subtleties of the words exchanged, the inflections and nuances of accent, and the shortened versions of formal phrases. Soon it is my turn.

The woman behind the counter looks about my age. She has cropped dark hair, an earthy presence, and a broad warm smile. ‘Bonjour!’ she greets me cheerfully, followed by a quick string of words I neither catch fully nor comprehend. We negotiate anyway: me,

³⁰⁴ Van Slyke, p330

³⁰⁵ Transcript, *SMH*

awkward and with poor French, and her, smiling and so lithely crossing the communication barrier to meet me. I fumble my way through ordering a wedge of vegetable tart and she serves me a large piece, wrapped in printed paper and tucked inside another paper bag. I point and mumble about a *pain au chocolat* and soon that is tucked neatly into another paper bag. I am sincere in my gratitude as I take my change, thank her in the best French I can muster, and excuse my way past the line and out of the shop with a short series of gestures and murmurs.

I begin the walk up hill and back to the apartment, feeling pretty good about myself for buying some food. I stop in at a tiny wine shop near the apartment building, for a bottle of Bordeaux, and then I find a grocer across the road and buy assorted French field mushrooms and tarragon.

And then I am back at the apartment, arriving triumphant with my dinner. Old locks on old solid doors and large keys in clunking keyholes form thresholds along the path from street to private space. And, once inside, the elevator changes the dimension of space in another way altogether, sliding up past the landings and doors which are layers of people's lives. On the sixth floor, I bolt the heavy apartment door behind me and leave the street outside for now.

The evening brings with it dusky night and I open the windows onto the courtyard and play some of the host's jazz records, the sounds slipping out from under the needle to dance around the apartment, mingling with the splutter of the deep bath running, before escaping out of the window, into the night sky above the old, clustered and tall buildings. I sit on the futon couch and read Nicholas Royle's theories on how language has a way of veering:

There is a responsibility (which can include a certain irresponsibility) to make language veer, show it veering and be faithful to its veering, to attend to spectral strangeness, the divisibility

of words, the foreignness with a language, the limits of a language and what is beyond.³⁰⁶

And then of course, I was offended too by the sexism, by the misogyny of the Leader of the Opposition catcalling across this table at me as I sit here as Prime Minister, “If the Prime Minister wants to, politically speaking, make an honest woman of herself...”, something that would never have been said to any man sitting in this chair. I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition went outside in the front of Parliament and stood next to a sign that said “Ditch the witch.”³⁰⁷

The morning brings with it coffee and the chocolate pastry, warmed in the oven, and in the bathroom mirror, I catch a glimpse of myself slowly relaxing into this new place. As the summer day wakes up, I tie my shoes and set out to explore Paris. I head downhill along the leafy street that rolls away from the front of the apartment building, but this time I don’t take any of the side streets. In the dappled sunlight that skips between the trees and apartment buildings, I walk slowly, daydreaming. I cross at traffic lights on an intersection busy with cafes, restaurants, a variety of little stores. I keep walking.

I turn a cobbled corner and the narrow street reaches the bottom of the hill and opens out onto the banks of a canal. People stroll along each side of the water, or sit on its raised concrete banks to eat home-packed lunches. Steep-stepped concrete arch bridges span the river every so often, making both sides easily accessible. Today, there are markets in the middle of the tree-lined canal, where one section of the water gives way to a concrete island. The stalls are selling all kinds of fruit and vegetables, meats, breads and cheeses. I buy a small round of soft rind goat cheese, and a punnet of strawberries. I stop for lunch in one of the small cafes and I’m waited on by a warmly smiling woman with frizzy brown hair. Later, I head back to the streets near the apartment. A steady stream of people into a small corner shop alerts me to the presence of fresh baguettes, the workers grabbing one on their route

³⁰⁶ Royle, Nicholas 2009 ‘On creative and critical writing, environments and dreaming: veering’ in *Textual Practice*, 23.6, p919

³⁰⁷ Transcript, *SMH*

home. Some will take their baguettes directly home. But some, like me, will take them to Butes-Chaumont Park, to sit high on a grassy slope, shaded by an oak tree if preferred, to nibble on baguettes and cheeses and strawberries.

I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition stood next to a sign that described me as a man's bitch. I was offended by those things. Misogyny, sexism, every day from this Leader of the Opposition. Every day in every way, across the time the Leader of the Opposition has sat in that chair and I've sat in this chair, that is all we have heard from him.³⁰⁸

In her memoir, published in 2014, Gillard notes that, as she entered the room, she was already mentally yelling and swearing: 'For f***'s sake, after all the s*** I have put up with, now I have to listen to Abbott lecturing me on sexism. For f***'s sake!'³⁰⁹ She admits the speech came out at cracking point, and that the preceding displays of misogyny had sparked in her a feeling of 'murderous rage', but she also acknowledges that the issue is bigger than her.³¹⁰

'Yes it's about me,' Gillard comments, in an interview with author Anne Summers, 'but it's about all of us and about the kind of society we want to be for all of us. We can drop the murderous but we should feel a sense of rage about it because it's only something that really spurs you on to action that is going to change.'³¹¹

On my last morning in the apartment, after a couple of lazy days exploring Paris, Australia's first female prime minister is deposed in a leadership spill. Social media instantly brings the news and the shocked reactions of friends and family back home into my consciousness, even so far away. I walk into the city centre and stand on a bridge across the Seine to take a photograph with the Eiffel Tower in the background, just because I think I should. Nobody around me acts any differently.

On June 26, 2013, Julia Gillard was herself ousted by Kevin Rudd, in a 57 to 45 party leadership ballot. Those supporting Rudd no doubt believed this would give Labor a better

³⁰⁸ Transcript, *SMH*

³⁰⁹ in Marks, Cathy 2014 (October 16) 'Julia Gillard: Australia's first female Prime Minister reveals the 'sexism and misogyny' she faced on her rise to the top' in *Independent*, online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/julia-gillard-australias-first-female-prime-minister-reveals-the-sexism-and-misogyny-she-faced-on-9796953.html>, accessed 06/09/2016

³¹⁰ Chan, Gabrielle 2013 (September 30) 'Julia Gillard explains "misogyny speech"' in *The Guardian*, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/30/julia-gillard-explains-misogyny-speech>, accessed 06/09/2016

³¹¹ Chan

chance of winning the upcoming election, but a few months later Rudd lost the election to the Liberal Party, led by Tony Abbott.³¹²

In an essay she wrote for *The Guardian*, Gillard describes the experience of losing power:

I sat alone on election night as the results came in, Gillard writes. I wanted it that way. I wanted to just let myself be swept up in it.³¹³

I arrange to meet my apartment host that evening for a drink somewhere nearby. A quick web search finds me a little *guinguette* called Rosa Bonheur, at the top end of Butes-Chaumont Park. The web page says it is a restaurant and bar preferred by a lesbian crowd, and I feel confident that will ensure my host receives no mixed messages from me, and besides, the pictures of the place are pretty. We make a plan to meet there.

I wonder about the name and I do some quick research as I head there on the train. It seems Rosa Bonheur was a painter who lived in Paris in the late 1800s. She would paint oil paintings of horses; sleek, glossy horses, their sinewy muscles visible through tight skin. To imbue her art with anatomical accuracy, Rosa would visit a nearby slaughter yard, to look at horse muscles and sinew and bone. She wore trousers rather than a skirt, and was criticised for this, and she also smoked cigarettes: most unladylike.

Losing power is felt physically, emotionally, in waves of sensation, in moments of acute distress.

I know now that there are the odd moments of relief as the stress ekes away and the hard weight that felt like it was sitting uncomfortably between your shoulder blades slips off. It actually takes you some time to work out what your neck and shoulders are supposed to feel like.³¹⁴

³¹² Rourke, Allison 2013 (June 26) 'Julia Gillard ousted as Australia prime minister' in *The Guardian* online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/26/julia-gillard-australia-prime-minister-kevin-rudd>, accessed 06/09/2016

³¹³ Gillard, Julia 2013 (September 14) 'Julia Gillard writes on power, purpose and Labor's future' in *The Guardian* online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/13/julia-gillard-labor-purpose-future>, accessed 06/09/2016

³¹⁴ Gillard

I climb a flight of steps from a train station near the very top of the park and I head to meet my host. I walk through large iron gates at the entrance to the park and follow a path down until I reach the Rosa Bonheur. The Rosa Bonheur nestles among tall leafy trees, bounded by neat lawns and bitumen paths. It has the feel of an old summer house, all white painted window frames and large windows. I guess that the Rosa Bonheur has been here for a long time; perhaps it is part of the original park. The park enfolds a high, small hill, which opens into a strange artificial crater forming a kind of grotto in the middle. The Rosa Bonheur looks down from its high perch, across the crater, and out across the tiled rooftops of the busy Paris skyline. There are coloured lights strung on the outside the building, tables and chairs arranged across the front and around the sides, many of the seats taken up by people lounging in the warm afternoon with cool drinks and cigarettes.

In her will, Rosa Bonheur established an annual art prize to be awarded to the best painting at the Paris Salon, regardless of the artist's gender or nationality.³¹⁵ She advocated for education for women, and promoted the idea that women's status in a society determines the development or decline of that society.³¹⁶

I know too that you can feel you are fine but then suddenly someone's words of comfort, or finding a memento at the back of the cupboard as you pack up, or even cracking jokes about old times, can bring forth a pain that hits you like a fist, pain so strong you feel it in your guts, your nerve endings.³¹⁷

Inside, the space is dim but very open, with a long bar and a wooden floor for dancing, and people are drinking champagne and laughing. I am early to meet my companion, so I cautiously order a gin and tonic from a chic bartender, trying not to mutter

³¹⁵ Van Slyke, p332

³¹⁶ Van Slyke, p332

³¹⁷ Gillard

my words, and I take my drink to sit at a bench table outdoors, to the side of the building, with the summertime park and its smiling people all around me.

My host arrives soon after, bouncing in with a broad grin and tousled brown curls, and he also orders a gin and tonic. The waiters sashay between tables like elegant deer, and the chatter and laughter and smiles of people enjoying the day surround us. A group of women at the next table order a bottle of something that arrives in an ice bucket. One of the women in a group of young people at the next table borrows my lighter. We stretch out the afternoon and we take it in turns to buy *gin-tonics* from a cute young man in a pink beret who springs uncalled to our table whenever we are close to finishing our drinks. I wear pants and smoke cigarettes, and I share my cigarettes with my host.

My new friend is a teacher, of histories and languages and he is full of tales of travel and interested in the world. I try to explain what has happened in Australia today but excessive and localised political zeal seems too heavy in the summery afternoon air and before long I give up. We talk of other things, besides, about travelling and language and philosophy, and of the strangeness of the world.

I know that late at night or at quiet moments in the day feelings of regret, memories that make you shine with pride, a sense of being unfulfilled can overwhelm you. Hours slip by.³¹⁸

The no-women-in-trousers decree was no longer enforced from around the time of World War I, when suddenly, women were needed to replace absent men in shops and factories. However, the decree remained buried in the foundations of French legislature, and was formally repealed only recently, on January 31, 2013.³¹⁹

As the sun begins to sneak away from the afternoon, the place lights up. More people arrive, and the music changes up tempo, and suddenly the place is alive and busy. I feel drunk on the gin but even more so on this place and the colours and lights in the warm air around

³¹⁸ Gillard

³¹⁹ Lauter

me. I feel I am in a safe place, with these bright, bubbling people, and I whisper promises to myself to return. I drink more gin and tonics and chatter happily.

In her concession speech, Gillard commented: 'The reaction to being the first female PM does not explain everything about my prime ministership, nor does it explain nothing about my prime ministership'.³²⁰

Around dusk, we leave the Rosa Bonheur and wander up to the gate of the park and then down to another nearby bar for some food and a last night cap. Outside a busy bar across the road from the now-closed *Boulangerie*, we embrace as old friends, before he jumps on his bike to ride home, and I turn to wander the short distance along a lamp-lit street back to the apartment. I wander past wine bars overflowing with people deep in conversation in seats on the footpath, and restaurants where people are only just sitting down for an evening meal, as late as it is.

As I reach the apartment, I feel sleepy, and a little sad that my time here is over, and something else... the pull of strings that is homesickness, all the way across the oceans and into my night time in Paris. In the morning, I will say goodbye to this place.

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³²⁰ Rourke

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10: Share house

Elise steps cautiously across the gap between the train and the platform at Dalston junction. She climbs the stairs to the street. The turnstile clicks in response to her Oyster card swipe. She lifts her small suitcase over the shiny silver bar, and she pushes past the border of turnstiles and out, onto the footpath of a busy road. She is surrounded by discount stores. A teenage girl runs laughing across an intersection, to join a small group of guys on the far side. Two older men, dark brown jackets with collars pulled right up to their brown-skinned chins, stroll past. One darts a glance in her direction but remains somewhere else, in the conversation with his friend, graceful hand gestures explaining his thoughts. She walks past them and along the busy street towards Hackney. She passes a discount store and a small grocery store and a restaurant. She passes the entrance to an area of dusty unpaved ground, signs advertising the space as open air markets. Today, late in the afternoon, it's just closed stalls. Squat rectangular frames hunker beneath striped canvas. She turns a corner and the footpath narrows and now she walks between two-story buildings. She passes the entrance to another train station, the silent squat of the turnstiles interrupted by a man in an Adidas jacket, blue jeans and sneakers rushing through, and then a hurried-looking woman in a headscarf and long skirt, with a nervous-looking child in tow. Elise passes a small white painted building on the corner of a narrow alleyway. She can see through a large shopfront window into a white room with a long table in the centre. The walls are hidden by shelves of lettuces growing in complex hydroponic watering tubs, suspended above tanks of large grey fish. She can almost see her reflection in the window. Across the road is some kind of church or community centre, closed but signposted with a quotation about belonging, painted in neat

handwriting above the double doors, blue on the white wooden frame. ALL WELCOME beneath it, in small and shaky letters. She reaches an intersection and waits for the signal before wheeling her suitcase across the road.

As she approaches the house, she pulls a scrap of paper from her pocket. Elise looks at the address again. She consults the tiny rectangle of map she transcribed from the maps on her phone when she stopped to use the wi-fi in a cafe at Heathrow airport. Yes, this is the place. A large brick house, two storeys, two windows left and two right of the door, a cracked concrete pathway leading from the footpath up to the door between low dark green hedges. She takes a deep breath and raps on the frosted glass insets of the blue wooden front door.

Sound spills out onto the street as the front door opens to her knock. A mop of ginger hair and beneath it somewhere a freckled pale face. A t-shirt of a band she hasn't heard of, full of holes, and thin legs in black jeans.

'Uh, hi,' he says.

'Uh hi,' Elise says back, like an echo. She is suddenly and completely certain that this whole thing is a very, very bad mistake. That it has all been a mistake from the beginning, and definitely, absolutely, that there is nothing she can say to provide a reasonable explanation of what she's doing right here, right now. *I mean, come on, Lise, what kind of creep travels across the world to find somebody they only, maybe, met once? A stalker, that's who. Oh man. You have really fucked up this time. Weirdo alert.* Images flash across the back of her eyes, memories of turning up to an ex's house late at night, crying, and very drunk. Her ex, questioning Elise's sanity so loudly and spitefully, slicing papercuts in the fleshy softness of her nineteen-year-old self-confidence. Questioning her ability to reason, ever after. But she is right here, right now. So she might as well at least try to explain. She takes a deep breath, and she scrunches and unscrunches her toes inside her shoes.

‘Look,’ she manages to get out, ‘I know this might sound a bit strange, but I’ve come here looking for someone I met, someone who might live here. Some strange things happened while we were uh... hanging out... and I really feel like I need to find him. I have these letters from him, with your address on them and I was hoping you could help me work out where he might be now and I really get that I might sound a bit nuts right now but I just didn’t know what else to do and I just really would like to know, y’know?’ Tumbling, falling, rushing words. She gasps for air, her breath catching in her throat.

The young guy takes a look at the address on the paper Elise has thrust towards him. He shrugs noncommittally and his face shows that he is clearly not interested in the anxiety she seems to have suddenly worked herself up into. He holds the heavy wooden door open and steps back against the wall to allow her room to enter the long, thin hallway behind him.

‘Come on in,’ he says, ‘I have no idea, but maybe somebody else can help. I’d say probably ask Juanita. She seems to know everyone.’

She turns sideways to squeeze past the boy, dragging her case awkwardly in behind her. She shuffles her way past two bikes that are stacked against the grubby hallway walls, crowding the small space at the foot of the stairs. She looks back towards the front door as he pushes it shut and turns towards her, a slight tip back of the head to usher her further down the hall. She passes several closed doors but one is ajar off to the left near the end and she pushes gently against it. Ragged couches and a marked coffee table, a battered guitar leaning up against the low table. A chipped mug and an empty chip packet on the low table. But there’s nobody in the room.

‘Keep going, she’s out the back’ he calls out to her. He opens one of the hallway doors and disappears through it.

Elise leaves her suitcase next to the coffee table and heads towards an open doorway at the back of the lounge room, through which she can see a kitchen, dishes overflowing in the sink, a fridge covered with stickers about environmental causes, something about riding bikes and another something against coal. She crosses the room towards a sturdy wooden back door, ajar.

She timidly pushes open the door and steps into the back yard. Shut in by tall wooden fences, the same cracked concrete as the front yard covers all except for a tiny square of hard ground. In one corner, large red and yellow painted plywood shapes lean against the fence. A young woman in loose geometric patterned pants and a grey singlet kneels before the patch of dirt, winding pea tendrils up and around a bamboo stick. A grey beanie slouches on her head. She has her back to Elise.

‘Um, hello, are you Juanita?’ she asks shyly, and the beanie head turns and hazel eyes study her before a smile creeps across the woman’s broad face.

‘Yes, love, although you, my dear, you can just call me Yannie,’ she says. She notices Elise looking at the colourful shapes and holds an arm out towards them. ‘I’m a set designer for a little theatre company,’ Yannie explains. She stands from her crouch and fishes around in the depths of a pocket of the large pants, her hand soon resurfacing with a tobacco pouch. She offers it up towards Elise with the same relaxed gesture as the red-haired housemate’s shrug. ‘You smoke? Want one of these?’

Elise wants the welcome more than she wants the rollie but she thanks Yannie and takes the plastic pouch, extracts enough tobacco and a paper and looks down at her own two trembling hands as she rolls a thin cigarette. Yannie gestures towards some beaten up plastic chairs and they sit, silent among the bricks and grey sky of Hackney. Yannie lights both of

the cigarettes. Elise is overwhelmed by the simple gesture of hospitality and has to swallow back tears prickling at the back of her nostrils.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ Yannie asks as she rises slowly, stretching her legs out stiffly. ‘Ooh, that sounds very British of me, doesn’t it? A cup of tea! Lah di dah! But it really is what we drink a lot of in this house, yeah? And you guys drink tea in Australia, and all, yeah?’ She disappears through the door into the kitchen.

Elise leans back into the chair and stares up at the grey sky and takes another drag on her cigarette. She feels upside down but also that her feet are firmly on the ground. The grey sky seems to fit the strange and confusing sensation.

When she comes back out with two mugs of white, sweet tea, Yannie asks about the suitcase in the lounge room, asks whether Elise has a place to stay sorted. Elise murmurs politely about finding a bed in a youth hostel but Yannie insists she stays on the couch for a night or two, until she gets things sorted. It works out to be that simple and Elise feels suddenly a lot more okay about things. She lifts one heavy, tired arm to brush the sleeve of her jacket against her damp eyes.

When they go inside, there’s a small-framed girl with a high ponytail of long blonde hair, sitting on one of the couches. Her sparky eyes widen as Elise enters.

‘Hiya, I’m Minnie. I’m just one of the many people that live here, obvs. What’s your name?’

‘Elise,’ Elise says.

But her heart jumps. Minnie. M. The initial on all of the envelopes was M, sent from this address.

‘Oh, right’, says Minnie. ‘Well, you know, I had a friend Elise, once. Oh, no, silly me, it was Elisa, that’s right. We worked together, in this tiny café in South Kensington. You know, organic lattes and pastries and that. I think she moved to... Belgium? Or no – maybe Berlin. Somewhere that starts with a B. I mean, I only knew her for a few months when we worked there. Anyway, she was great, and we’d head out for a drink after work at the end of most days, and sometimes that would turn into a few drinks and then, oh, you know, we’d end up out for a dance together before we knew it. But we’d get a cheap bottle of wine from this wine cellar place around the corner from work and sit in the park and drink that somewhere along the way, to save money, you know?’

Elise is hypnotised by the steady rhythm of words that spills from Minnie’s mouth in a seemingly endless river but it also gives her a chance to look at Minnie. She admires her immediately. High blonde ponytail and black and white striped jumper. Tiny yellow lightning bolt stud earrings. She wonders whether those hands with their bright pink nails wrote the kisses on the backs of the envelopes.

So Elise takes a seat on the couch across from Minnie and tries to slip questions into the stream of Minnie’s ongoing chatter. She asks about past housemates, and Minnie tells her tales of eccentricities and trysts of housemates past and present. How the house belongs to the guy who answered the front door, and how they all pay him rent, but he doesn’t like people to know that. How they did have another housemate but he got drunk and fought with Juanita last week and broke a window and they had to kick him out. But finally, Elise’s shyness about seeming like a stalker gives way to her burning need for answers and she bursts out impatiently in an awkward explanation of her story, cutting Minnie off part-way through an explanation of which housemate most likely has the most sex. When Elise gets to the part about the envelope, she looks, hard, at Minnie’s face for a reaction of recognition, but Elise sees nothing more than Minnie’s eyes widening slightly at the juicy details of a new story to

remember, to tell and retell. Minnie's expression seems to be purely and simply pleasant listening.

‘And... I mean...’ Elise stops short, clutches one nervous hand in the other, sucks in her breath, and then continues. ‘Are you the girl who wrote those postcards?’

The question hangs between them in the air for a moment before Minnie bursts out laughing. ‘Oh, lover, I thought you were going to tell me the ending to this amazing story, for a minute! For real, like! But no, it's not me!’

Minnie's eyes widen further beneath long, darkened lashes and she places a reassuring hand on Elise's arm.

‘Oh! Oh my god, you know, I think... I mean, I *think* I know who it is!’ And Minnie squeals after saying this, a kind of high ‘eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee’.

‘Yes! I just figured it out!’

Elise is frozen in the space between heartbeats as she waits for Minnie to continue.

‘Emma! Her name was Emma! She used to sign all of her, like, her notes about keys and grocery money and stuff with an M! It must be her, right?’

Minnie tells Elise about a girl with dark hair, a girl who once lived in the share house. Quiet, and the thick woollen jumper type, Minnie says. Some kind of artist? Minnie remembers something about paintbrushes, and maybe an exhibition, although that could have been the exhibition of another girl, Shelley, Minnie says, apologising for the mix-up. Minnie regains her confidence in her story and tells Elise that, dead set for real and all, the girl she is looking for happens to be playing a show that night just a short distance away. Minnie has to work, unfortunately, she says, but she exchanges phone numbers with Elise and gives her directions to the address of the bar, down a side street in Soho. Minnie says she might meet

her there later. She needs to know everything, like, absolutely everything, Minnie says. Elise feels sick with the thought of finding out the answers she has been seeking. But maybe also excited.

Juanita calls Elise into the tiny kitchen and Elise jumps up with a start and walks to lean on the door frame between the two rooms. Yannie hands her a chopping board, a knife, and some red capsicums.

‘Sit in the lounge and chop these, yeah? You can stay here but maybe you can also earn your keep with chopping duties, yeah?’ And Yannie laughs and it is a full, round laugh and Elise happily takes the things to the lounge and settles down to chop.

Minnie springs from the couch soon after, but not before saying again that she’ll head to find Elise once she finishes work. Minnie yells a cheery goodbye to Yannie and dashes out the door.

So Elise helps cook a tofu and red capsicum curry and they sit in the small backyard on the plastic chairs and they talk about London and Adelaide as they eat, comparing notes, laughing at similarities. And Elise helps with the dishes, and then she showers and dresses and puts on some eyeliner and mascara, all the while trying to keep her mind away from the anxiety bubbling up in her stomach at the thought of meeting the girl who sent envelopes with kisses to the dark-haired boy.

And then it’s finally late enough, and Elise takes the spare key from Yannie and walks out into a chilly late summer evening. She catches a brightly-lit tube and when she alights she walks as patiently as she can up a steep flight of stairs to the dark street, and then she walks a short distance to the entrance of the bar, putting one foot in front of the other as casually as she can manage. Trying not to think too hard.

11: Band night

Through a ruby red wooden door and down two flights of a concrete stairwell, the brick walls of a dark cavern bar arch up to meet the low ceiling above her. Elise takes her door charge change from a girl with a vacant stare and friendly smile and she winds her way into darkness and the smell of stale beer and the thick murmur of background music and English accents. She weaves through the dimly lit room, between clusters of people who hold large plastic cups of beer and yell conversations at each other. She presses herself into a space behind a throng of people waiting at a long stone bar. When it is eventually her turn, she points to one of the bar taps, and gives a pretty blonde bartender a thumbs up as he takes her strange Pound money in exchange for a froth-topped cup. She holds the cup in front of her like a membership card as she turns back into the crowd. Most of the boys have long fringes hanging down to one side and pencil leg jeans and the girls are wearing dark cotton dresses and patterned stockings and thick dark eyeliner. The mooching crowd is starting to condense near a small stage set up down the far end of the long room, and so she finds a place to lean against a wall in the shadowy corners to the left of the stage.

The lights go down, the lights come up, and sound explodes into the room. Guitars and drums and a fierce girl voice singing. The crowd stands mostly silent but whoops and clapping erupt from a small group of people right down the front. The song quickly swings into punchy, rolling rock and roll and the drummer's hair flies out around her as she nods her head to her own beat. The lead guitarist leans back on her heels and rocks from side to side; her pelvis tilted towards the front of the stage to support a glossy red guitar. The singer cradles hands around the microphone and thrusts her voice out across the now bobbing heads of the crowd, all the way to the door. But it's the bass player who has Elise's attention straight away. She recognises her immediately from Minnie's description. Emma. She rolls

the name around in her head and fits it to the girl standing before her. Emma is small but not overly thin, cradling the guitar against one thigh, her eyes downcast towards the neck of the guitar. Her dark hair is cropped blunt, close to her face. The fingers of her left hand glide like a spider, back and forth in a hypnotising pattern across the four strings, as her other hand plucks out the deep notes of a beating heart. The girl's eyebrows are drawn into a frown of concentration but her lips curl subtly up at the corners into the slightest smile. Her left leg is tilted forward slightly, her thigh gently resting some of the weight of the guitar as she rocks slowly from side to side, in time with her own playing. Black jeans define strong legs in the red glow of the stage lights. Her pale tee shirt hangs loose around her neck, soft material of a thick black leather guitar strap across her breasts in a sharp diagonal.

The band slides into the chorus of the song and the energy in the room rises. Two girls, both with short spiky cropped hair, start to dance at the front of the crowd, jumping around on the balls of their feet in stepped patterns, their arms bent at their sides, rolling their heads from side to side. Someone cat-calls happily from the back of the room. A tall, lanky guy in a red tee shirt near Elise yells out 'Yeah!' He claps loudly above his head, long arms swinging through the air to meet at the hands.

The band doesn't bother with an introduction between songs; the singer squats down to take a quick swig of water from a bottle near her feet as the girl on bass starts the next song. It is a dark, sliding melody and Elise almost involuntarily sways on her heels. From where she is standing, she feels the whole room focus on the sphere of sound that begins from the stage and spreads out to encircle the room. The crowd becomes a communal experience. Elise sips her beer and watches the girl's hands caress the bass guitar and she is washed away by the music. It surges in a wave into her ears, through and over and around her, enveloping her in sound. She feels herself grow taller, heightened by the rolling rhythms and melodies. Between the lights and the crowd and the beer warming her stomach, she forgets she is a

stranger in an unfamiliar place. Elise lets her body sink and rise with the rhythm of the bass notes, bending each knee in turn and in time, taking delight from her own weight shifting down through the rubber soles of her shoes and into the cement floor. She watches the light move across the smooth skin of the girl's arms. Sinews slide beneath skin and muscles change the light into shadows as the girl hypnotises her with the bass guitar's deep song. She sets down her empty beer cup on a tall table at the edge of the room and she claps with the crowd at the end of each song, trying hard to look away from the bassist, at the other members of the band. She revels in her hiding place against the wall, among the sea of dappled bodies in the dancing crowd. She lets the grin that is swelling her heart spread across her face, happy to be carried away by the moment and join in this shared ceremonial rite, worshipping these goddesses of rock and roll in a crowded London dive bar on a Friday night.

By the time the final guitar notes of the last song have whined into the rising voice of the small crowd, Elise is flushed with the hot seeds of a heavy crush on the bass guitarist. She tries to keep in mind that her whole purpose for coming here tonight was to meet this girl, in order to collect the next clue in her search for the dark-haired boy, but she feels the shy awkwardness of a fan girl tingling through her legs. The crowd disperses, back to small huddles of conversation and a new round of drinks and a line for the women's toilets. Some people head towards the street entrance for a cigarette or other bars or home. The show is over. Elise makes her way to the bar as the band begins to creep around the stage, unplugging and coiling leads, and a few long-standing fans cluster near the stage to offer praise. Another beer in hand, Elise leans against the bar and watches the girl snapping the latches on a guitar case. The girl straightens her legs to stand, turns towards the edge of the stage and stretches, her arms out to each side, tilting her head towards each shoulder. She brushes a strand of hair away from her eyes and tucks it behind one ear as she looks over at Elise. Elise holds the

girl's glance for the slightest moment and then looks awkwardly down at her beer as the girl walks across the short distance between them to stand at the bar beside her. Elise waits, heart pounding, as the girl orders a drink and thanks the eyelid-batting bar girl for her gushing compliments about the band. And then Elise turns as casually as she can to the girl, to start a conversation, fumbling and stumbling into a sentence but regaining her balance just in time and opening the door with the magic word: Minnie.

The dark-haired girl turns to Elise and the expression that flickers across the girl's face is frightening. But it is such a brief moment and then the girl smiles, warily, and Elise isn't sure whether she imagined it.

'Aye, Minnie,' Emma replies. 'What a lovely lass.' Her tone is friendly and light but seems noncommittal. Her Scottish accent cuts through the general chatter around them and Elise leans in to concentrate, to catch the girl's words. 'Well then, go on, spill it all,' Emma continues, 'exactly how did you meet her? And what do you want from me? And,' Emma laughs, a hollow laugh, 'how d'ye get a word in anyway? That one can talk!'

Elise laughs and awkward laugh and she tries to explain this strange thing that has brought her across the world and into this moment, right now, but it's difficult to make sense of in a way that it can be told to this pint-sized rock goddess without making Elise seem completely flaky. She tries to piece it together, anyway, while the girl's cool gaze breaks with Elise's eyes, now and then, for a sip of beer. Elise tangles time, intending to start at the beginning and go on until the end and then stop, but something flickering brightly in those eyes, so firmly intent on hers, have her tripping over herself again and she starts again at an earlier beginning and then tries to jump ahead, more slowly this time. As the story becomes intimate, or perhaps just because she grows tired of standing, the girl gestures with a slight tilt of her head towards an empty table away near the back of the room. Elise pauses while they

walk across the room, and then picks up the story thread again when they are seated across from one another, the wooden circle of the table top forming an arc from Elise's elbow to Emma's. Emma interrupts every so often to clarify, and tangents take those opportunities to jump in between the sentences, and the digressions lead sometimes to other digressions and sometimes back to the story. Conversation hums around them and music starts up and a tall man in dark clothing stops by the table to say a brief hello and Elise is introduced but the man soon moves on to sit at a table where a curvy woman in a striped tee sparks a sudden laugh and happy blush in a thin and whiskery red-haired man. The room around Elise swirls with other stories and Elise senses invisible bridges building between people, steel girder by steel girder, and she feels she is all too suddenly falling into familiarity with the stranger across the table. The sensation that she's known this dark-haired girl for a very, very long time almost makes her run away.

But finally, her mouth and her mind wind the story around to the present and end up creeping up on the moment when Elise met Minnie.

'And she said you knew this mysterious boy,' she adds. 'Minnie said you were, maybe, more than friends, and that you wrote to each other for a while afterwards.'

A shadow, a hint of an old and bitter darkness, falls across the pale face across from her as the girl's expression fades from warmth to cold stone.

'I'm sorry, I really can't talk to you anymore,' Emma says. She rises from the table, picking up the pint glass. She looks across Elise's head, towards the bar and then the stage.

'Wait, what do you mean, you can't talk to me? Are you kidding me?' Elise feels a flush of embarrassment creeping up her neck; it's obvious that she has said something wrong.

‘I... I just...’ Emma says. ‘Make up whatever answer you like, but just... let’s leave it at that, hey? I don’t even know you. I don’t owe you anything.’ And she stands and pushes in her chair. The girl looks up at Elise, eyes like stones, mouth grim. ‘I’m sorry,’ she adds firmly. And then she turns again and darts across the room, picks up her guitar case, and leaves, the fire exit door next to stage swinging suddenly and heavily shut behind her.

It all happens so suddenly that Elise is stunned, frozen to the spot with indecision, but she has come too far not to react quickly. She stands and then grabs her coat from the back of the wooden chair, almost tipping the chair in her haste. She races to the exit door and pushes down against the metal bar in its centre, leaning against the door to swing it open.

The alley is narrow and dark and the cold air confronts her like a slap. She shuffles one arm and then the other into her jacket sleeves as she dodges around the corner of a dumpster and walks towards the street. She doesn’t need to go far; the girl is crouched in a doorway, crying into her arms, the guitar case abandoned beside her on the ground. But Elise feels, even more now they are completely alone, the horror of having said something wrong, conversation bricks crashing through the bubble of intimacy that had seemed warm around them only moments earlier.

‘Are you alright?’ she asks shakily, instantly mentally kicking herself for saying the most stupid thing ever. The girl is quite obviously not alright, and apparently something she said is what caused her to change in an instant from brassy and self-assured to this crumpled stranger in an alleyway. ‘Was it your relationship with the guy? Did something bad happen? I’m sorry. I didn’t know I would upset you like this.’

The girl sniffs, wiping tears and mascara onto the bottom of her t-shirt. She shakes her head slowly. ‘Nothing that daft,’ she mumbles, so soft that it takes Elise a moment to process the meaning of the words. Elise steps over the discarded guitar case to sit beside Emma on

the step, the night sounds of the bar and the nearby Soho streets clattering and clanging around them. The smell of stale urine from the rear of the dark door recess around them roars at the back of her nostrils and she involuntarily wrinkles her nose. Elise sits beside the girl. She waits.

Emma looks up towards the sky, using a forefinger to slide away the last tears from beneath her eyes. She turns to look at Elise, her eyes large and bright in the dim orange glow from the streets that filters down between the tall buildings forming the walls of the alleyway.

‘It... it wasn’t me,’ the girl says, but the words have no meaning for Elise and so she waits some more.

‘The girl, it wasn’t me. The girl your mystery guy knew.’

‘But Minnie described you so exactly!’ Elise says, confused. ‘I knew it was you the very first instant I saw you! What do you mean, it’s not you? I didn’t mean to upset you, I just... I’m looking for...’ Elise’s words trail away into the night air.

The girl grabs her by the wrist and turns it towards the street lights.

‘My name is Audrey’, the girl says, the words hitting like a slow motion punch to Elise’s stomach. ‘I have... I had... a twin sister.’ Audrey pauses. ‘I can’t. I’m sorry, I just can’t.’ She sighs heavily and then stands, picking up the guitar. ‘I don’t care about your answers. When we met just now, I felt this strange thing, like, I had met you before. But you’re not my sister and now I don’t know what’s happening and all this you’ve been talking about doesn’t matter. I just... I can’t... I miss my sister.’

She turns to leave and this time Elise doesn’t follow, doesn’t say anything. She is frozen in the moment of Audrey leaving her life just as suddenly as she has entered it.

But Audrey turns, after only a few steps. She doesn't soften much at all, but she says to Elise, 'Look, there's a picnic on tomorrow, in Hyde Park, okay? Minnie will know about it. I mean, I guess you should come to that, while you're here in London anyway.' She turns on a heel and walks away, in shadow and in light, slouched with the weight of her guitar, vanishing at the end of the alley.

Braided Essays

In 1977, Norman Maclean, whose manuscript was once rejected by a New York publisher with the phrase 'this story has trees in it', was not awarded a Pulitzer Prize, because, although nominated by the fiction jury, the board felt it was "too close to his life-story to be called fiction." And thus was born a need for the term creative nonfiction.³²¹

For the collection of travel essays in this thesis, and for the structure of the thesis as a whole, the choice of form has been given special consideration. At both the individual nonfiction essay and the whole thesis levels of detail, devices to disrupt and fragment the text have been employed, as a way of engaging with the Uncanny's destabilising, fragmenting nature. A common theme across the travel essays is the rewriting of history, and a questioning of who has the authority to remember and tell a story. A form which embodies this disruption and challenges the idea of one unified dominant narrative is a suitable form to use in an immersion in the Uncanny. The braided essay, a form of Lyric essay, offers this structure to writers.³²²

In Turcotte, Helen Tiffin notes that writers in colonised places such as Australia have 'explored the importance of imperial cultural impositions in the shaping of their societies' and that 'it has frequently proved more difficult for them to alter their forms than their attitudes. Finding a "language" and a form to express a postcolonial point of view has thus

³²¹ Kitchen, Judith 2011 'Grounding the Lyric Essay' in *Fourth Genre* 13.2, p115

³²² Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola, eds. 2012 *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* New York: McGraw Hill, p148

been a primary concern of novelists from these areas.’³²³ The Gothic, Turcotte asserts, ‘has been central to this recuperative initiative both for postcolonial writers generally, and for women writers in postcolonial cultures specifically’.³²⁴ Writing back is an intent shared by postcolonial writers, feminist writers, queer writers, and writers from other historically marginalised perspectives, and the inherent characteristics of the Uncanny offer some useful ideas about form. Turcotte suggests that postcolonial and feminist writers both seek ‘a fractured, problematic structure, with an emphasis on disunity’, in order to address the disconnect between their environment and their perspectives.³²⁵ As Turcotte explains:

The primary task of feminist “resistant fictions” in challenging empowered discursive hegemony centres entirely on language – specifically, on discovering a suitably non-masculine form to express content [...] The Gothic operates within comparable constraints.³²⁶

Turcotte advocates for structures in Gothic writing which guarantee ambiguity and the impossibility of closure, forms of writing which ‘enable a type of fragmentation that enriches rather than weakens’.³²⁷ This thesis presents both critical and creative nonfiction writing framed by such fragmented forms, in order to engage the potential of the Uncanny to disrupt. This chapter discusses the choice of form for these works, a type of Lyric essay: the braided essay. The discussion focuses on the creative nonfiction essays but applies similarly to the overall thesis structure.

While writers of prose or poetry might be familiar with choosing a form for their work, as one of many decisions in the creative process, creative nonfiction writers tend to favour a traditional linear narrative form by default.³²⁸ But, just as with other creative choices writers must make, such as point of view, character, or plot devices, Jennifer Sinor notes that

³²³ Turcotte, Gerry 2009 *Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Canadian and Australian Fiction* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, p218

³²⁴ Turcotte, p218

³²⁵ Turcotte, p219, 226

³²⁶ p219

³²⁷ p230

³²⁸ Sinor, Jennifer 2014 ‘Deserting the Narrative Line: Teaching the Braided Form’ in *teaching English in the Two Year College* 42.2, 188-196, p188

‘form is a choice, one that literary nonfiction writers must consciously make.’³²⁹ There is no one form better or worse suited across all nonfiction, but it is important to acknowledge that there is a range of options. However, Sinor suggests that writers should approach the decision of form as a matter of recognition rather than personal choice. Sinor assures us that the best choice of form will become obvious, once we stop to think about form and recognise the need to make a conscious decision.³³⁰ Once the writer has settled on the right form:

it should appear to the reader that no other form was possible, that this essay, this set of ideas, this experience had to be rendered this way and no other. Only then are form and structure truly working at their highest level.³³¹

As with any creative skill, over time, as writers become more experienced in their field and more familiar with the variety of forms a creative nonfiction work might use, a writer’s ability to recognise and employ the most suitable form will improve.³³² This skill can be actively improved on through practice.

Linear Narrative and Chronological Sequencing Might Not be the Best Choice

Once we look at form as an important creative choice, writers soon realise that simple chronological sequencing might not be the best way to articulate spaces and experiences that span time and place. Our lives involve chronological sequencing every day, as we orientate ourselves within the world based on clocks, days of the week, months, and years, and so a linear narrative structure seems natural.³³³ But while we might find comfort in the idea that our lives follow a predictable linear narrative line as we go about our daily routine, the way we experience the world more commonly involves bursts of meaning, and cross-connections and jumps from one subject to another. Even as I stand in the present moment, and think

³²⁹ Sinor, p188

³³⁰ I looked for a narrative form that best fit the travel essay writing I was doing, which I was calling a ‘mash-up hybrid essay’ up until I found the braided essay form, through my research. It fit my work well.

³³¹ Sinor, p191

³³² Sinor, p188

³³³ Sinor, p189 and Hopkins, Heather 1986 ‘Temporality and Reflexivity’ in *Human Relations* 39.7, 635-645, p635

about myself and my travels, I form connections with other ideas, from the position of the present moment and space, and inspired by the historical and global context within which I exist. So, given that our consciousness follows non-linear paths, a linear narrative structure might not be the best choice for creative nonfiction.³³⁴

While linear narratives, which use time as a foundation, create sequential relationships, structures which instead base connections on meaning present a modular narrative.³³⁵ The Lyric essay is a form that offers a modular narrative structure.³³⁶ Because of this inherent ability to fragment narrative and inspire new connections of ideas, the Lyric essay form can be used to create writing of the kind Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola describe as ‘a work that is interactive, alive, and full of new meaning.’³³⁷

Lyric essays commonly emphasise the rhythm of words and utilise word-play. They are frequently image-heavy. Lyric essays often involve a creative use of white space or experimentation with paragraphing.³³⁸ Playing with expectations of the traditional essay form is a common characteristic of Lyric essays.³³⁹ Miller and Paola define the Lyric essay as a hybrid form, and suggest that ‘the lyric essay encompasses both attention to poetic language, imagery, sound, rhythm not highlighted in conventional critical essay forms, while simultaneously also attending to the story, the argument of the essay’.³⁴⁰ The essay’s ideas are often presented in smaller bursts, rather than one steady, long stream of unbroken narrative.

However, while this describes some common approaches to the Lyric essay, the form is largely open to interpretation, and Miller and Paola advise that ‘nothing is fixed or

³³⁴ Sinor, p188

³³⁵ Madison Smart Bell, in Sinor, p189

³³⁶ Miller and Paola articulate a rich history of the lyric essay, citing lyric writing back to writers such as Seneca, Bacon, Montaigne, and Emerson.

³³⁷ Miller and Paola, p147

³³⁸ Miller and Paola, p146

³³⁹ Miller and Paola, p149

³⁴⁰ Miller and Paola, p145

predetermined'.³⁴¹ There is no subject matter unsuitable. There is no way a writer can use the form in the wrong way. The main idea is that the structure can ground the essay, guide the reader along, and, importantly, 'work in tandem with the content for a certain effect'.

Reader Engagement in the Construction of Meaning

The form of the Lyric essay favours fragmentation. The Lyric essay is described as a montage, a collage, a mosaic; the form is 'disjunctive, sectioned, and segmented'.³⁴² And just like a mosaic, the Lyric essay's whole form can best be seen from a distance. The form creates gaps through white space and paragraph structure and juxtaposition and these structural elements bring the fragmentation inherent in such a modular narrative.³⁴³ This fragmentation creates spaces in the text. The text jumps around on the page, 'leaping from one image-laden paragraph to the next, asking readers to do the work of navigating white space'.³⁴⁴ These spaces invite the reader into the creative process of constructing the text. It is in these gaps that meaning resides, and the reader is encouraged to fall into these spaces.³⁴⁵ As Rebecca Faery describes the resulting reader experience, 'the rests... are spaces inviting me in, inviting response'.³⁴⁶ The fragmented form invites engagement on the part of the reader, to participate in the construction of the essay, contributing their own experience to the overall meaning of the piece.³⁴⁷

The Lyric essay structure, Miller and Paola explain, 'emphasises what is *unknown* rather than the already articulated known'.³⁴⁸ The reader is an accomplice in the creation of new meaning, becoming the writer's Uncanny double. This kind of text 'generates its

³⁴¹ Miller and Paola, p149

³⁴² Miller and Paola, p147

³⁴³ Miller and Paola, p146-147

³⁴⁴ Sinor, p190

³⁴⁵ Sinor, p190

³⁴⁶ in Miller and Paola, p147

³⁴⁷ Tall, Deborah and John D'Agata 'The Lyric Essay' in *The Seneca Review*, online at <http://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>, accessed 14/10/2016

³⁴⁸ Miller and Paola, p147

meaning by asking its readers to make leaps, to make a kind of narrative sense of the random and the chance encounter.³⁴⁹ The *Seneca Review*, a journal devoted to the Lyric essay form, proposes that essays of this form provide ‘an in-built mechanism for meditation. They require us to complete their meaning.’³⁵⁰ Form and content work together, as do writer and reader, to create new meaning from the text.

Don’t Expect to Have All Answers and No Questions by the End

Readers should not expect to reach the end of the essay left with all answers and no questions. Any sense of understanding or wholeness is likely and even intended to be temporary at best, Sinor claims: ‘the subject, the writer implies with the lyric form, cannot be held.’³⁵¹ A Lyric structure implies that perhaps one clear, unified meaning cannot be known at all. ‘What is so compelling about a lyric essay is that the meaning derived by the reader is often one filled with questions, hesitation and unknowing.’³⁵² The outcome might be that the reader is left questioning and curious, but this is not an unexpected or unwelcome response. ‘The writer, by surrendering to the fragmented form, denies a foregone conclusion.’³⁵³ The quest may be the focus, but the Lyric form does not even pretend to make the same promises as a traditional structure, to pose questions and determine clear answers. The Lyric form asks questions and leaves spaces within which new meaning can be found if the reader is willing to engage with the narrative.

³⁴⁹ Kitchen, p147

³⁵⁰ Tall and D’Agata

³⁵¹ Sinor, p190

³⁵² Sinor, p190

³⁵³ Miller and Paola, p147

Skill in Arrangement

The Lyric essay can take the form of a collage, a mosaic; when it does, it is ‘our [writer] selves displayed in fragments made beautiful by their juxtaposition’.³⁵⁴ Juxtaposition is a key part of the creation process for any Lyric essay, and the selection and arrangement of parts in the composition relies on the skills of the writer. As Miller writes: ‘Fragments must be carefully selected for how they’ll resonate off one another’. Creative writing skills are involved, and these skills can be learned and then improved on over time. Miller urges writers to listen for echoes and patterns and repetitions, and to seek out a path where one image ‘organically suggests the next’.³⁵⁵

Of course, this means the writer’s skill is also required to ensure the reader is not merely left feeling confused by the fragmentation in the text. Miller and Paola suggest that the Lyric essay relies on the writer’s intuition, on the ability to piece together perception into a coherent and cohesive essay.³⁵⁶ But Kevin Brophy’s idea on acquiring knowledge is that writers should develop an intimate relationship with theory, such that the theory becomes part of the unconscious; creativity then involves choices writers make based on the knowledge gathered there.³⁵⁷ This speaks of a writer’s craft, in the ability to assemble seemingly disparate elements into one work of art. Brophy notes that our creative writing decisions grow to seem like an unconscious choice but this is actually the result of absorption of knowledge, combined with our ever-growing experience in creative writing. This knowledge and experience becomes a subconscious toolkit through which we view the world, and therefore a kind of filter through which our writing emerges. This suggests that theory is most

³⁵⁴ Miller and Paola, p151, on the mosaic or collage Lyric essay form

³⁵⁵ Miller and Paola, p151

³⁵⁶ Miller p148

³⁵⁷ Brophy, Kevin 2010 ‘Planting higher order skills in the unconscious: a speculation on the role of the unconscious in education’ in *Strange Bedfellows: Refereed Conference Papers of the 15th Annual AAWP Conference*, online at <http://www.aawp.org.au/publications/the-strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers/>, accessed 20/12/2016

useful to our writing once we have become so familiar with it that it has become part of our frame of reference on everything we experience.

Charles Simic writes that when we submit to chance, we ‘reveal the self and its obsession.’³⁵⁸ We cannot help but create a portrait of our subconscious selves when we engage in this process of assemblage. The lyric essay, in its final form, presents a portrait of the subconscious self, ‘the part of us that speaks in riddles or brief, imagistic flashes’.³⁵⁹ The lyric essay skips back to a time before words, creating spaces into which we can read meaning, just as the Uncanny does. The writer can utilise the form of the lyric essay to combine elements of the ordinary with the strange, in ways which create space for the unknown, and so create an ideal environment for the uncanny.

The Braided Essay

In describing various common structural forms of the lyric essay, Miller and Paola define a form they call the braided essay. The idea of this form is to weave separate narrative strands through each other and the essay overall, to create a textured, braid-like structure.³⁶⁰

In the braided essay, each of multiple strands, broken up into its own linear series, contains its own meaning, but the weaving structure brings together the disparate threads into one greater meaning. In the finished essay, this should seem like an all-encompassing arrangement that needed to happen. The end result for the reader should be to feel as though each thread had to have been there for the greater meaning to emerge and to be understood. By fragmenting the narrative, the greater idea of the essay as a whole is revealed gradually to the reader. As each strand picks up a voice in the conversation, the conversation itself is formed. ‘The

³⁵⁸ Simic, in Miller and Paola, p148, where they refer to his book *Dime Store Alchemy*

³⁵⁹ Miller and Paola, p148

³⁶⁰ Miller and Paola, p153

braided form also allows a way for research and outside voices to intertwine with your own voice and experience,' write Miller and Paola.³⁶¹ Their advice to writers of the braided essay is to look for at least one external voice to weave into the essay and to shadow the writer's own voice, as this will grant the essay texture and substance.³⁶² For example, in the braided travel essay about New York, in this thesis, Dorothea Tanning's ghost provides this voice.

What this thesis aims for is form and structure working together to create a challenging and invigorating reader experience, one which causes the distancing of the Uncanny. In the case of this thesis, the braided essay form provides a comfortable yet open enough structure to complement the overall discussion and to work with each piece in the collection of travel essays.

Writing and Teaching the Braided Essay

Lyric essays are harder to read, but also harder to write. The further from a simple linear narrative the writer moves, the more work is required to create a cohesive, whole essay.³⁶³

In order to gather the information that will become a Lyric essay, Miller and Paola recommend the writer trains themselves to be ready to receive the gifts of new material, as the writer ventures in the world.³⁶⁴ Poet Carolyn Forché calls this writer's stance a state of 'meditative expectancy,'³⁶⁵ and Dominique Hecq suggests that writers are already always on the lookout for new material, even though they might not realise it.³⁶⁶

³⁶¹ Miller and Paola, p153

³⁶² Miller and Paola, p153

³⁶³ Sinor, p190

³⁶⁴ Miller and Paola, p148

³⁶⁵ Forché, in Miller and Paola, p148

³⁶⁶ Hecq, p139

Jennifer Sinor has developed a standard approach to teaching the braided essay form to writing students. Sinor explains that she prefaces the exercise with reference to Annie Dillard's idea, that: 'Nonfiction prose can carry meaning in its structures'.³⁶⁷

Sinor then introduces the idea of three strands, which are: a present tense strand, a research strand, and a past-tense strand. She emphasises, to her students, the need for writers to ensure the historical is not just a series of dry facts.

The first strand is a narrative through line that is also a present tense line. This strand is closest in time to the moment from which the narrator is narrating. 'Most writers begin their essays with this present-tense through line,' Sinor writes, 'as it grounds the reader in space and time before the writer begins tossing other narrative balls in the air for the reader to juggle. This present-tense through line unfolds linearly.'³⁶⁸ This through line is the closest thing to a narrative arc, and occurs largely in the present moment, and articulates shifts in the writer's thinking.³⁶⁹

The second strand is the research strand. One technique for generating this strand, Sinor suggests, is a site visit; from a site visit a story will often naturally emerge. The research strand will not necessarily unfold along a narrative line. What is important about this strand, Sinor proposes, is its ability to suggest metaphors and images.³⁷⁰ This strand often provides the catalyst for change or understanding.

The third strand typically found in a braided essay, Sinor writes, 'is a past-tense thread that appears in scene-based chunks. Often the past strand focuses on childhood memories, or moments from the more recent past. These chunks are 'dropped in''.³⁷¹

Sinor acknowledges that requiring students to use the braided form contradicts advice to consider the most appropriate form, but she suggests the braided essay is a good form to

³⁶⁷ Sinor, p188

³⁶⁸ Sinor, p192

³⁶⁹ Sinor, p193

³⁷⁰ Sinor, p193

³⁷¹ Sinor, p193

try. This is especially so for writers less familiar with experimentation with form. Sinor's is just one approach to writing a braided essay. But, while the approach might vary, the basic concepts remain the same across a wide variety of creative pieces using the form: disparate strands of narrative are arranged such that new meaning is created from the whole.

The personal essayist, as Kitchen writes, usually already has 'sensed the need to connect the lived life with another, more universal issue, setting the specificities of the personal smack in the middle of idea or concept.'³⁷² The writer, weaving separate strands from fragments, can use personal experience to provide an authority which the writer and reader can use to better understand what's at stake. The writer acts as a guide, a trustworthy source for both writer and reader to navigate the themes in the essay. This can be vital for subject matter so emotionally intense that it is difficult to approach the ideas directly.³⁷³

Chop Up Your Writing

As an exercise for a writer to experiment with creating a braided essay, Miller and Paola suggest taking to an essay draft with scissors, to physically rearrange the fragments:³⁷⁴

Cut apart an essay (or two, or three) with scissors and lay the pieces out on the floor or a long table. Start moving them around like pieces of a puzzle and see what kinds of patterns you can make through different juxtapositions.³⁷⁵

This technique is one I organically discovered in the process of writing what I, for a time, affectionately called mash-up essays. For want of a better term, as I began to write fragmented and woven essays, I called them mash-up essays after the music slang term mash-up, which is used to describe the patterned, rhythmic mixing up of several songs into one. What I was instinctively creating were pieces of writing which I later learned, in the course of

³⁷² Kitchen, p119

³⁷³ Miller and Paola, p153

³⁷⁴ Miller and Paola, p157

³⁷⁵ Miller and Paola, p158

my research, fits the concept of braided essays. My organic writing experience matches up with Miller and Paola's above exercise.

What I found was, writing the first draft, before the cut-up stage, my mind did find the freedom to jump around between the various essay threads it was exploring, but the strands emerged unevenly and this imbalance was reflected in the essay. While this is not what I intended, this is not inherently a problem for a braided essay, and the distributed weighting of different ideas is a tool which can be used by the writer to emphasise individual ideas in the essay, to affect the overall message of the essay. But then, by physically cutting up the essay sections and considering them once laid out, I found it much easier to see the weighting of different ideas, which I could then deliberately strengthen or decrease in line with my intentions for the writing.

At some points of the writing process, I would lose sight of the intricate connections I was trying to draw altogether, especially in the longer pieces. The process of cutting up and physically viewing the collection of pieces of paper (I used floor space as a relatively boundless space in the arrangement stage) offered extra clarity and a new perspective on the patterns I was creating.

Why Write the Lyric Essay?

There are many reasons writers could choose the lyric essay as a suitable form for their writing. Jennifer Sinor sums up the 'why?' of this perfectly, and I do not want to dilute her words, as she writes of those who might choose to use the lyric essay form:

Those on the outside of dominant society – those marginalized by race or gender or sexuality – might choose a lyric form because their experiences cannot be narrated within the confines of a narrative structure promulgated by those in power. Or a researcher might use a lyric form, pulling a personal strand through her research, because she understands that all knowledge is subjective and wants to highlight the porosity between knower and known.

A writer might choose a lyrical form for any number of reasons; the point to remember, though, is that it is an act of deciding. Or perhaps, more accurately, an act of discerning.³⁷⁶

The Lyric essay offers significant benefits for any writer seeking to articulate power structures, a common concern in creative writing. In approaching this form and considering it for use in their work, creative writers should not just consider how to use the Lyric essay form, but should also look to embrace the freedom in the variety of structures this form offers and the increased creative options this freedom provides.

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³⁷⁶ Sinor, p191

Essay 4: New Orleans – Dancing with Death, the Creative Stranger

A colourful leaflet in the tourist voodoo store advertises the St Louis #1 cemetery walking tour. It claims to be the real deal but I don't know what that means. Tourist trails are not usually part of my travels, but I also usually travel alone, and my friends are excited about the tour, and the start time is right now, and the starting point is just across the street, and anyway, I don't have a better plan for the next two hours. We don't even have time to pay the guide the twenty dollar tour fee. By the time we find the end of the line of people, he has already started telling stories. He is short and young and jacked up like a bantam rooster with the assurance of a life lived in the past and he tells the group he is a war veteran; he is dressed military street style, in cargo pants and a soldier's cap. One elbow leans on an old wooden cane as he introduces the tour with the showmanship of a circus ringmaster. He is busy with his words, and we can't catch his eye or a single moment of silence in which to pay him. We three non-payers are imposters, and so we lurk at the rear of the group, not yet belonging. And now he is already walking the newly formed group of fifteen or so tourists briskly up the street, away from the shiny buzz of Bourbon Street. Snippets of local information drift back over his shoulder as we walk, single file, down a narrow footpath, beneath the ornate iron balconies of grand old multi-story buildings.

We want to know about death and it is unknowable³⁷⁷. Death happens only once, and so it is outside of the realms of verifiable science, which looks for patterns in recurring events, says Robert Rowland Smith.³⁷⁸ We all and always secretly desire to die, writes

³⁷⁷ Smith, Robert Rowland 2010 'Memento Mori' in *Frontiers of Theory: Death Drive Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

³⁷⁸ Smith, Robert Rowland

Hélène Cixous. But our desire to die is not because we want to stop experiencing things; indeed, the opposite, and, Cixous says: ‘the desire to die is the desire to know; it is not the desire to disappear, and it is not suicide; it is the desire to enjoy’.³⁷⁹ We want to know what death is, to live that experience, too.

The heat closes in on us as we wait in a loose cluster at traffic lights and he tells us exactly where we are; a story of plague and overflowing graveyards and bodies piled high in the streets. People glance around at the gutter. Stench and infection and no escape, he says, talking of a time long past, two hundred years ago, but I think of a more recent time, and a hurricane.

We cross a wide road and the name sparks bright and familiar in my mind. It is the same road the young woman who is the host of our Marigny rental house warned us, only yesterday, never to go above, as she traced the line on a map with one tanned index finger.

‘When I moved here a few years back, people warned me, too,’ she says. ‘I listened and I stayed away for a long time. But one day, riding my bike, I got lost and I suddenly found myself in the wrong area.’ Her voice goes quiet. ‘It only took that one time to learn why you shouldn’t go above that line,’ she says, and I notice a scar on her jawbone, white and jagged. It might not be related. I don’t ask.

‘Stay in these lower streets, and follow *this* road to the French Quarter and back,’ she says, as she traces another line, along the base of a triangle grid of streets, ‘and you’ll be just fine.’

The promise of death is a promise of freedom. If we can reach what Cixous calls the burning point, the *last hour*, we will be able, Cixous suggests ‘to write or say everything we

³⁷⁹ Cixous, Hélène 1993 *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* New York: Columbia University Press, p34

have never dared say out of love and cowardice’.³⁸⁰ And this is why we desire to die so much: ‘because we desire to say so much.’

The tour group, grown straggly on the walk, bunches up again just outside the open gates to the cemetery. A tall and thin young man sits on an upturned plastic crate on the footpath, lean dark arms gleaming with sweat; a flash of white as he smiles. He fishes around in a large blue plastic tub of ice and bottled water. Most people on the tour buy a bottle. A portly old man dabs with a clump of wrinkled tissues at the sweat on his clammy, pale face. The guide stands near the gates, and soon he is some way into his story about the cemetery entrance.

Death is tied closely to the Uncanny, but, Nicholas Royle notes, death is conspicuously absent from Freud’s 1919 essay on *Das Unheimliche*.³⁸¹ But death is insistent; it cannot be kept out. Freud emphasises doubling as a key aspect of the Uncanny, and from his discussion of a study by Otto Rank emerges the idea of doubling as insurance against the extinction of self.³⁸² In the doubling of the Uncanny, we experience the self as simultaneously familiar and strange, less and more: I am me and not me, alive and dead.

Inside the gates, the high concrete boundary wall and the tall cement tombs trap the hot air and it hovers above the bitumen paths. Our guide leads the group a little way along a path that follows the cemetery wall to the right, and then he gathers them smoothly and swiftly into a circle so he can tell them the story of a concrete guardian angel that kneels gently atop a tomb. People lean in to hear what he is saying, murmur at the story he tells. But I slip away in the other direction, back past the cemetery gates.

In conversation about an exhibition of Uncanny art, artist Mike Kelley says ‘I’m proposing that art basically addresses death, it’s about re-presentation, using doubling as a

³⁸⁰ Cixous, p48

³⁸¹ Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The Uncanny: An Introduction* Manchester: Manchester University Press

³⁸² Freud, Sigmund 2003[1919] *The Uncanny* New York: Penguin Books, p142

defense against the fear of death.’.³⁸³ But in the Uncanny’s doubling, we find not only death, but also, as Freud suggests, we find all of the alternative possibilities for our lives, all of the unfulfilled wishes of our imagination.³⁸⁴

I wander along the path, the grit crunching softly beneath the soles of my canvas sneakers. I drift further away from the group and still further and I escape between two rows of tombs. At the end of the tomb corridor, I emerge before a partly shaded tomb which stands out from the rest. Its dirty cream cement walls are covered in an xxx pattern, furiously repeated across the surface on all sides, mostly in lipstick but also in chalk and eyeliner pencil. At the foot of the tomb lies a jumble of offerings: colourful beads, chocolates, perfume bottles, lipsticks, flowers, candles.

‘She likes rum on Tuesdays,’ a woman’s voice says at my left elbow. Words in this place, in this afternoon: how strange they seem. I turn and she is short and curved and close to me, light brown curly hair streaked with outdoor days and frizzed in the heat. Green eyes sparkle into mine. She is holding a white plastic shopping bag, hooked over her elbow. She grins at me, grins towards the decorated tomb.

‘And chocolates,’ the short and curved woman continues. Her accent might be Australian; it sounds like home. I laugh, in the friendliest way, and we grin at each other through the heat.

Doubling creates space for self-observation and self-criticism, Freud suggests.³⁸⁵ And when we write, we double ourselves. The writer separates into self and other in order to look critically at her writing, in the process of reflexivity described by Hunt and Sampson as:

creating an internal space distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of ‘self as

³⁸³ Kelley, Mike 1997 *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism* ed. John C. Welchman, The MIT Press, p60

³⁸⁴ Freud, p143

³⁸⁵ Freud, p142

other' whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self.³⁸⁶

She reaches into the plastic bag and pulls out a large unopened bottle of dark rum. She cracks the lid on it and passes it to me. I pause to cheers the tomb, and when I drink the rum it is spice and fire in my mouth. The woman takes some round chocolates, wrapped in red foil and clear cellophane, from the plastic bag, and she kneels to place them at the foot of the tomb, among the other offerings. She stands and passes me two of the chocolates. I take them and kneel as she has done to place them at the foot of the tomb. I stand and I hold the rum out towards her. She takes the bottle and raises it to the tomb. She tilts her head back and the amber liquid in the bottle flashes bright with trapped sunlight like the flash of teeth in a smile. We move slowly and deliberately in the heat, with the sacred precision of a ritual.

She twists the cap back onto the bottle and places it next to the chocolates, fidgeting with it to lean it upright against the base of the tomb. Once she is happy with its placement, she straightens, dusting her hands.

'Now we can ask her for something,' she says, squinting through the sun, raising one hand to cover her eyes.

I am slow and stunned, by the heat, by the moment. 'Oh, is that how it works?' I ask awkwardly, although I know already this ritual has been working up to something.

'Yep,' she says, not smiling now. 'I'm not going to tell you what I'm wishing for, but it's for somebody else,' and I can tell she is very far away from here and she steps around the side of the tomb and she traces three crosses. She leans in to rest her forehead and one hand on the concrete side.

So I walk to the other side, and I write three invisible crosses on the tomb, my finger lightly wandering across the rough surface. I lean my forehead against the concrete. I also ask

³⁸⁶ Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson 2006 *Writing: self and reflexivity*, 3rd ed. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p4

for something for somebody else and I think of a hospital room. I, too, am far away from this tomb and this heat and this city.

The space created in distancing the self is a useful space for writers. Writing attempts to speak what cannot be spoken, name the unnameable, asserts Dominique Hecq, and she proposes writers engage a ‘methodology of active consciousness’, to bring to the conscious things hidden in the unconscious.³⁸⁷ She suggests this mode of reflexivity is significant to an ‘explorer’ relationship of the writer to creative writing research. Writers need to go on adventures of all kinds: into the world at large but also into the interstices of creative writing practice and theory.

The wishing moment is brief and when it is done we meet again in front of the tomb and we shake hands and we don’t say anything much about it being lovely to meet, or any other small words, and she walks away, vanishing between the tombstones. I wake as from a daydream into the silence of the hot sun and I cut back between the tombs towards the tour group, following the echo of American accents until I find them, in the middle of a story about a family history and the tombs nearby. I search my bag as quietly as I can to find the bottled water, still cold from the plastic tub, and I drink deep, the coolness rushing down the back of my throat. I rest the bottle against the skin on the back of my neck and icy condensation mixes with sweat and creeps its way down into the thin space between my cotton shirt and my pale skin.

The group, of which I am a part and not a part, walks the paths in slow trance-like steps, the heat no longer spoken of by anyone, and the guide tells more stories of New Orleans. I drift away into thoughts of the people who were once not lying in these tombs. Some tombs have bells to help prevent people being buried alive. Deep in that dark coffin, waking from the sleep of illness, searching for a loop of string to alert topside listeners.

³⁸⁷ Hecq, Dominique 2015 *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* Bristol: Multilingual Matters, p73, 143

Digging up the coffin, rescue for the person not dead. The guide turns a corner and he is suddenly gathering the flock around him again, but even from the back, I can hear the beginning of a story about the criss-crossed tomb.

‘And here we have what people say is the tomb of the voodoo queen, Marie Laveau. But do you want to know the real story behind her? She was a hairdresser to the rich, and people would confide their secrets to her, and she would use those secrets to fool people into believing she was capable of magic. Some people still believe in voodoo. And, as you can see, people have left offerings at the foot of the tomb.’ He waggles his cane, dismissively, towards the bottle of rum. That golden brown spicy heat still running fast in my blood.

‘These will be stolen by tonight,’ he continues. ‘People don’t think these things through; they just follow beliefs blindly. Fools.’ The group murmurs and moves on, expressionless in the heat. I can’t tell whether anyone else is irritated by the guide’s story.

When we write, we travel as though to a foreign country: we make strangers of ourselves; we depart while remaining present. Cixous explains: ‘When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself, I am a virgin; I leave from within my own house and I don’t return’.³⁸⁸ In that moment when writers leave to write, we kill our children, our lovers, our selves. We do eventually return, Cixous reassures us, but ‘for the duration of the journey we are killers’.³⁸⁹

As the tour ends and we leave the cemetery gates and start back towards the drop-off point, I lag behind at the back of the group. The sun is still hot, the sky still too close, but it is cool relief compared with the trapped air of the cemetery. Most of the group gathers half a block ahead, stopping for traffic lights, at a street corner. I walk faster to catch up, but by the time we catch up, I hear only the last few words of the tour guide, as they float past me and away into the late afternoon air and then the tour guide himself is gone, disappearing up the

³⁸⁸ Cixous, p2

³⁸⁹ Cixous, p21

street into what might be a concealed doorway along the wall; I am uncertain. All I really know for sure is that, suddenly, he is gone.

We kill not only when we write, but also when we read, Cixous adds.³⁹⁰ And Peter Schwenger discusses the way in which reading is uncanny, how a reader willingly becomes temporarily possessed by a text in order to experience its ghost world reality.³⁹¹ While we read, we exist half in and half out of the text. The self exists but it is no longer familiar. We offer ourselves up as a host.

Back at the house that evening, we decide to spend a quiet night in, to recover from our adventures of the day, and we mix rum with juice in short glasses. My companions lounge and chat inside but I step out to the small front porch for a cigarette. The glass of rum is heavy in one hand and in the other I rest a cigarette as I sit in an old wicker arm chair, quietly taking in the street and the weatherboard houses and the moment of being in this place on this night. New Orleans breathes around me. The night is rich with small sounds and the smell of growing things and the air is viscous like honey and warm on my skin. Everything is dark and full of stories.

Half a dozen houses along the street towards the train line, two people stroll across the space where the narrow side streets cross. Street light reflects off dark skin. The sounds of their conversation carry but the words are lost. The man is swinging something long and solid in one hand; it looks like a length of pipe. They pass on into the night. From the other direction comes the sound of a car ignition firing to life and then I hear it rumble away down the dim street, headed elsewhere. The abandoned community hall across the road crouches in disrepair, broken windows and flaked paint on cracked wooden boards, in a pool of shadows that spills onto a lawn: deep, dark velvet black. I think about heading back inside. I sip the rum.

³⁹⁰ Cixous, p21

³⁹¹ Schwenger, Peter 1995 'Uncanny Reading' in *English Studies in Canada* 21.3, 333-345, p335

‘We don’t know,’ Cixous says, ‘either universally or individually, exactly what our relationship to the dead is,’ but it is important to our life, and we can think about this relationship through writing, if we dare.

‘Each of us,’ Cixous writes, ‘individually and freely, must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable. Writing originates in this relationship’.³⁹²

Stillness descends, in one fast moment, throwing a blanket over everything. All of the sounds of the night have left. There is only me and this quiet, empty street. The air is electrified with anticipation and the hair on my forearms stands up. In this stillness, something like a slight breeze moves down the centre of the street. It rolls in a round wave straight down the middle, filling the space between the cracked bitumen and the small damaged wooden houses and the dark night sky. I inhale deeply. And then the wave of silence passes me, gone just as quickly as it arrived. A slight breeze picks up and the swampy, rich, round sounds of the night start up again. I raise my glass to Marie Laveau and all of the other ghosts in my life.

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12: Picnic

She wakes lying on the share house couch, to weak living room daylight and the sounds of someone making tea in the kitchen. Elise stretches her arms, inventories the fuzziness in her head from the beers, and the ringing in her ears from the bands.

She flashes back to the night before: Audrey on stage, Audrey's face while they talked, Audrey's hand on her arm, Audrey's eyes looking so deep into hers. Her memories replay Audrey's expressions as lively but, looking back, Elise can recognise something more behind those eyes. She realises now what that was: a haunting. And her veering off the edge of the world from beer and jetlag, and not quite understanding. She remembers saying Emma's name, and Audrey's stunned face, as though a ghost had just appeared. Elise sees herself back in the alley conversation, and Audrey walking away into the night, and then Audrey's parting words: the picnic. Anxiety springs from a coil in her stomach as she begins to imagine all of the possible ways in which going to a picnic, and talking to Audrey again, could go really, horribly, wrong. Her spinning thoughts are interrupted by a young dark-haired guy, standing in the living room doorway. He introduces himself as Raf, a student from India, and he asks if she would like some tea. He says something about how very British that sounds, and they laugh. Elise says that would possibly save her life, and she sits up on the couch and stands to help make the tea. Raf grins and waves her back down to the couch, and she collapses, gratefully. As they chat, Elise runs her hands over her face, and into her eye sockets. She runs her fingers through her short, dark hair, a half-hearted attempt, at best, to straighten herself up. But Raf soon puts a cup in front of her and smiles and wishes her a good morning, and it all seems okay. And then he's suddenly gone, up the stairs.

She hears no other house sounds. She blinks, hard, and sits, with her cup of tea, waiting.

But she doesn't have to wait long, by herself, her thoughts beginning to race again. Soon, she hears the front door open and in bustles a rush of sound and energy as they enter the house: Minnie and Yannie, and the red-haired boy who first welcomed her at the door.

'Oh hey, you're awake,' says Yannie, as she walks through to the kitchen with the full shopping bags she is carrying.

They've just returned from the markets down the road. Minnie puts a coffee in front of Elise as she sits down beside her on the couch.

'Well?' Minnie asks. 'I mean, you never caught up with me after work, and when I got back here after a few drinks with some friends, you were dead to the world. Sooooo... did you find her, or not?'

'Well,' begins Elise, but just then the red-haired boy interrupts to introduce himself as Ian, with a quick, hesitant wave, before gliding away to his room at the front of the house, coffee in hand.

'Look,' Elise begins again. 'I met the girl you described, but it turned out to be... it was strange. I think, maybe, it wasn't her that knew this guy I'm looking for. I think it was her twin sister.'

'Wow,' Minnie says, excited by the intrigue, and she leans in closer. 'I mean, what?! I never knew she had a twin sister. That is really strange.' She laughs. 'I mean, I didn't know her that well or anything. She only lived here for a month or so. But you think I would have known that much!'

Elise squirms, because she already feels she knows Audrey better than Minnie, and that idea for some reason makes her face feel hot, but she figures Minnie's constant chatter probably means people sometimes end up knowing Minnie and the ghosts of Minnie's friends better than Minnie knows them herself. And Audrey did say to talk to Minnie about the picnic, and so Elise does.

Minnie knows about the picnic almost immediately; some of her friends will be there. A guy she thinks is cute in such and such a band might be there. Minnie says she'll come along, and that they should get going soon. She finds a spare towel and hands it to Elise, pointing towards a bathroom, before she flits away to her room to get changed into picnic clothes.

Elise tries her best not to stand in the shower for a very, very long time. She just can't stop seeing Audrey's eyes. She doesn't dare to hope too much from going to the picnic, but she definitely needs to talk to Audrey some more.

Elise emerges from the bathroom, in clean black jeans and an old band t-shirt, scruffling the towel through her hair. She pads barefoot across ancient floorboards, down the hallway and into the living room. Minnie is sitting, even more perky than before, on the couch, in a yellow daisy print jumpsuit, with screen siren dark sunglasses, and a floppy white hat. She pouts at Elise for a moment, holding her hands up like an invisible photo frame, and then she smiles, like a fox. She pulls a joint out of her handbag and she grins.

And then they are off. Minnie stalks the pavement in strappy white platform heels, stepping nimbly, like a mountain goat, down steep cement steps and along the tube platform, Elise mooching along close behind her. They swipe their cards and slide through the turnstiles and glide down stairs to the subway platform and they slink through open carriage doors and into cool, compartmentalised air. There are no seats free, and so they crouch

together near one of the doors, ignoring the businessman beside them. They wrap hands onto one of the shiny silver carriage poles. Elise leans into the weight and momentum of the moving carriage, and she looks out at the brick walls flashing past. Darkness around them: warm, sour-smelling darkness, and damp bricks. The momentum of the train picks up as it leaves the platform, and it begins to glide faster on steel rails, and then faster and ever faster. They accelerate into grease-flecked darkness. Stations momentarily interrupt the flow of the thick underground nothingness flashing past.

As they step out of the subway and into sunny streets near the edge of Hyde Park, Elise becomes suddenly anxious again. Or perhaps the anxiety had merely been absorbed by the strangeness of travel but had been lurking there, in the background, all along. Elise catches her breath. But Minnie is already twirling in the pale sunshine up ahead, arms outstretched, head tilted back, and Elise swallows her fears. She hurries to catch up.

Sound is their navigator to the picnic. They hear acoustic guitar and singing and someone playing some kind of handheld drum, long before they can see the picnic, and they follow their ears. When they do spy it in the distance, colourful beneath large trees, there are about thirty people, lounging around or standing chatting, or getting another drink from a cooler bag, or cutting up cake.

Elise scans the group but she can't see Audrey anywhere. Her breath catches in her chest. But then she suddenly sees her, pulling a guitar out of a case. Audrey takes the guitar in both hands and offers it to a guy with scraggly blonde hair and a thick curly ginger beard. Audrey seems to gesture towards him, *no, you play it*, and then she walks away from him, across the lawn, towards Elise. Audrey only takes a few steps before she looks up from the ground and directly into Elise's stare. Audrey smiles, and starts to move faster, towards Elise.

Elise feels a strange flip in her stomach, but then Audrey is standing in front of her and smiling and saying hello as though there had been no awkwardness at all the night before.

Elise can't see Audrey's eyes behind her gigantic round sunglasses, and Audrey's mouth gives nothing away. Her smile seems painted on as though to say this is any other sunny day, and that the night before was only a dream.

'You came,' Audrey says, the words purring from her mouth.

'I did,' Elise stammers, 'I hope that was okay.'

'Of course. I wouldn't have said anything. Just no talk about... ghosts, okay?'

Elise agrees, as much as she doesn't want to, and she lets Audrey lead her to a picnic rug laid out on the grass. Audrey fishes in a black canvas tote bag and produces a bottle of wine with no label, and then two plastic cups. She raises the bottle, questioningly, to Elise, but doesn't wait for an answer. Audrey unscrews the top of the bottle and pours some into one of the cups and hands it to Elise. She pours herself a cup of wine and raises it to cheers with Elise.

Elise thinks of ways to bring up the dark-haired boy without mentioning Emma, but just then a guy dressed in brown corduroy pants and a brown long-sleeved button shirt almost the same colour as his hair begins to play a guitar, and Ginger Beard joins in, playing Audrey's bass guitar, and then a woman with long hair the colour of honey begins to sing a sweet song. She has missed the moment. All Elise can do is sip her wine and try not to stare too hard at Audrey. The loose clusters of people sitting around on the grass fall silent and the sounds of the song drift across the heads of tiny white flowers dotted across bright green grass. Elise spots Minnie sitting over beneath a tree, where she chatters with excitement to two guys holding beers and smoking cigarettes. They seem transfixed by whatever Minnie is

saying. Minnie is smiling at them both and Elise can't tell which one Minnie has a crush on. Elise turns back to sneak a glance at Audrey but she is looking away, watching the impromptu band. She turns to Elise, and gives her a small smile from behind the dark glasses. Elise sips her wine and senses the gradual return of that feeling of being upside down and out of place. The song ends and a smatter of applause spurs the musicians on and they pause for a quick chat while the brown-clothed man tunes one of his guitar strings.

At the end of the next song, Audrey shuffles in closer to Elise and refills her glass. She grins at Elise.

'This is all that matters today, don't you think?' Audrey asks Elise, but it seems as though she doesn't expect an answer. Elise raises her cup to meet Audrey's 'cheers' and smiles back at her. It seems as though it is all that matters. Elise is having trouble remembering why she felt so urgent about finding the dark-haired boy, but as she looks around at the smiling faces and lets the wine warm her blood and flush her cheeks, she feels certain that coming across the world to be right here, right now, was the right thing to do.

By the time the band ends, they have gained percussion on an upturned plastic tub and deep sounds from one of Minnie's friends blowing across the mouth of his beer bottle. The final song ends with a flourish and much applause, and someone brings the singer a plastic cup of something, and conversations start up again.

Audrey leans towards Elise. 'Look, I have to go and sing now and then I have to leave to go back home. Will you come to Glasgow, and I'll explain better?'

Elise is frozen but she stammers, 'um, okay.' She focuses on the band members changing over, preparing for the next song, while Audrey takes a notebook out of a canvas bag and begins to write. Audrey tears a page from the notebook and hands it to Elise. She leans in and gives Elise a clumsy hug, even as she is rising to her feet, and then she strides

towards the small picnic band area. Elise sits silently, quickly reading the address but then folding the piece of paper and sliding it into her pocket, wondering what just happened.

Audrey collects her bass from Ginger Beard and slips the strap over her head and across her chest. The singer gets a yell and comes running across the lawn to jump into the band area of grass and grab the microphone. The crowd jeers and the singer takes a bow. The band begins to play.

The Double (*Der Doppelgänger*)

*So heißen Leute, die sich selber sehen.*³⁹³

(So people who see themselves are called.)

Doubling is a key aspect of the Uncanny,³⁹⁴ and ideas of self and the concept of the strange are central concerns of doubling. The dual nature of the double represents strangeness and opposition and otherness, but also familiarity and the self: it expresses a tension between division and unity which speaks to the nature of the Uncanny.³⁹⁵

Just as the Gothic and the Uncanny reflect the anxieties of their host societies, so too the concept of the double changes in relation to cultural context. Milica Zivkovic suggests that literary criticism overlooks a very important aspect of the double: like many other mythical symbols it has preserved its forms but altered in character in accordance with changing notions of what exactly constitutes ‘reality’ and ‘human identity’.³⁹⁶ Because it changes, the double always remains relevant to contemporary creative writing. And, because, as Zivkovic notes, the double defies the conventions of so-called realist text, it offers a device for writers to sneak the strange into the ordinary of realism, creating room for the Uncanny.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ Richter, Jean Paul 1959 [1796] ‘Siebenkas’, *Werke*, Munchen: Carl Hansen Verlag, p242, in Zivkovic, p122

³⁹⁴ Freud, p142

³⁹⁵ Zivkovic, p122

³⁹⁶ Zivkovic, p123

³⁹⁷ Zivkovic, p122

The Double in Early Literature

Doubling and the mirror motif appeared in literature well before either Freud's 1919 essay on the Uncanny or his earlier 1914 essay on narcissism, Zivkovic notes.³⁹⁸ The double as a literary device has long been used to articulate the experience of self-division, and, as an archetype, can be traced to early folklore and myth.³⁹⁹ The source of the double has been traced to 'twin-cult' superstitions of ancient peoples around the world. Joan Peternel connects early ideas of the double with superstitions around the birth of twins, which evolved into mythology involving twin figures. Peternel mentions as examples the Rome founding twins Romulus and Remus, and the eighteen sets of twins that sail the *Argo* with Jason, also one of twin brothers, in search of the Golden Fleece.⁴⁰⁰ The double in early mythology, Zivkovic writes, was born from the archetype of universal duality, and, in its earliest representations, symbolised the immortality of the self.⁴⁰¹

The German word *Doppelgänger*, which literally translates to 'double-goer', was brought into literature in 1796, by novelist Jean Paul Richter.⁴⁰² His one sentence footnote defining the term, as 'so people who see themselves are called', encapsulates the idea of the double, which exists outside the self but cannot exist without the self. When we see our reflection, we see not our original but our double, and 'the double, at its most basic, is a duplicate of an individual or a part of a divided individual'.⁴⁰³

Warner notes that the mirror has long been depicted as an instrument for taming wild things: animals, savages.⁴⁰⁴ Before the mirror became a common household item, reflections in pools of water featured in superstitions, such as in the idea of an uncanny spectre known as

³⁹⁸ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny* trans. McLintock, David, London: Penguin Books; Zivkovic, p170-171

³⁹⁹ Zivkovic, p122

⁴⁰⁰ Peternel, p453, in Garry, Jane and Hasan El-Shamy, eds., 2005 *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc.

⁴⁰¹ Zivkovic, p123

⁴⁰² Richter, in Zivkovic, p122

⁴⁰³ Peternel, p153

⁴⁰⁴ Warner, Marina 2006 *Phantasmagoria* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p170-171

a ‘fetch’, which might appear at any time to lure the living into the land of the dead.⁴⁰⁵ Rev Robert Kirk, Scottish author of *The Secret Commonwealth* (1691), learned from his parishioners about co-walkers, a fairy twin to the original person, who walks beside as a shadow through life and appears to others around the time of death.⁴⁰⁶

If we can believe in the ability of a phantasmic part of the self to split away and continue to act autonomously of the original, we can believe in a kind of life after death. The double reminds us that generation and death can be resisted only through artistic creation and its reality, but also that even this reality is still only an illusion, an echo of the original.⁴⁰⁷

Ovid’s *Narcissus*

The ‘Narcissus and Echo’ section of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* poem is an early tale of doubling, recognition and the self.⁴⁰⁸ In the poem, Narcissus’ mother, water-nymph Liriope, receives the double blessing and curse of a prophecy that her son will live a long life if he never knows himself.⁴⁰⁹ One day, after rejecting the nymph Echo, and many admirers before her, the young man rests by a pool of water and falls in love with his own beautiful reflection, not recognising it as himself at first, but soon coming to this realisation.⁴¹⁰ Heartbroken at his inability to reach out and touch his new love, Narcissus welcomes death and the prophecy is fulfilled. Wasted by love and consumed by a hidden fire, Narcissus’ body dissolves, mysteriously leaving no body behind.⁴¹¹

As Warner articulates, Ovid’s tale is concerned with the ‘enigmatic border between art and life, between representation and death,’ and Narcissus:

⁴⁰⁵ Warner, p173

⁴⁰⁶ in Warner, p174

⁴⁰⁷ Warner, p169

⁴⁰⁸ Zivkovic, p170

⁴⁰⁹ Ovid, p61

⁴¹⁰ Ovid, p63; and Zivkovic, p170

⁴¹¹ Ovid, p66

illuminates the perplexing, alluring, and perilous status of a self that can appear in every way real and yet lacks embodiment: it tells a literal story about reflection that bears on reflexivity, the foundation of selfhood.⁴¹²

When Narcissus bends to kiss his reflection in the pool, the object of his desire vanishes,⁴¹³ although it requires several instances of tactile failure before he recognises himself.⁴¹⁴ This tale reminds me that I cannot ever connect with my mirror image, my split self, my double, and can only know myself if I can create reflexive distance and stand outside of myself, disembodied. Art can create this distance, and the Narcissus myth represents the power of art to create and annihilate the self.⁴¹⁵ The Narcissus myth, and its explorations in self-knowledge and self-image, shows the presence of the mirror motif and doubling in literature well before Lacan's mirror stage lecture of 1949.⁴¹⁶

The Double as Good and Evil

Religious influence on literature divided the double from the self within a framework of values, expressing the split in terms of a dichotomy of good and evil, and viewing the double as an evil version of the self.⁴¹⁷ In this paradigm, defining the double as evil establishes the original as the opposite: a being working within an ultimate good. With this shift in thinking about doubling, immortality became a power to be granted by the church based on the good or evil merits of the subject, and transformed in meaning from immortality to become a reminder of our mortality, and even an omen of death.

⁴¹² Warner, p169

⁴¹³ Warner, p173; and Ovid

⁴¹⁴ Craft, p112

⁴¹⁵ Warner, p169

⁴¹⁶ Warner p172; also Lacan, Jacques 2006 (1949) 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function' in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W. W. Norton & Company

⁴¹⁷ Zivkovic, p124

Freud discusses a study by Otto Rank which identifies early ideas about doubling as ‘insurance against the extinction of self’;⁴¹⁸ as we move past what Freud terms a primitive narcissism, based on ‘boundless self-love’, the double becomes less an assurance of immortality and more a harbinger of death.⁴¹⁹

The uncanny quality of the double derives ‘from the fact that the double is a creation which belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development ... the double has become an object of terror’, Freud tells us.⁴²⁰

Relating the Uncanny back to its roots in the era of traditional Gothic literature, we can understand how the double was commonly portrayed as an evil other at that time. The dichotomy of good and evil was a strong theme of that milieu and its creative writing.

There are many texts from this era which feature doubles. To name just a few, other well-known texts involving doubles published around this time are: Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, of 1846, and *Brothers Karamazov*, of 1880; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, of 1886; and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, of 1890.⁴²¹

The Bertha-Jane Double

First published in 1847, Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* provides an example of the idea of the double as two separate but connected entities, one good and one evil.⁴²² As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar raise, in *Jane Eyre*, attic-wife Bertha Mason is the counterpart to Jane, representing all that is repressed in Jane’s nature and actions. Significant moments later

⁴¹⁸ Freud, p142; Rank, Otto 1971 *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* trans. and ed. Harry Tucker, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

⁴¹⁹ Freud, p142

⁴²⁰ Freud, p143

⁴²¹ Dostoevsky, Stevenson, Robert Louis 1992 (1886) *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and other stories* London: Everyman, Wilde; and Paternel, p456; see also Bannon, p57; see also Stone, p391

⁴²² Brontë, Charlotte 1996 *Jane Eyre* London: Penguin Classics

in the novel also involve Jane looking in a mirror, but Jane's first precursor to her doubling with Bertha is when, at a young age, she looks in a mirror in the red room and sees herself as a stranger.⁴²³ Jane is distanced from herself as she tries to process the idea that her options, as a woman in her society, are to sit still or be tied down, and she considers some drastic available exits, including an escape into madness.⁴²⁴

Bertha stands as an example of the madness and tying down that happens to a woman who does not conform to the constraints of polite English society. Bertha is Jane's 'truest and darkest double', as Gilbert and Gubar note: Bertha is the other.⁴²⁵ In its later textual double, Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), it is Bertha who talks about looking in the mirror, and this situates her as the subject of the text, rather than as the not-Jane she is in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha tells us:

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us – hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?⁴²⁶

Rhys establishes the connection between our idea of self and the mirror, and our double.

Bertha cannot quite reach herself through the mirror, and like Ovid's *Narcissus*, we are again shown the alienating distance between us and our mirror double.

In the early 1900s, with the development of the field of psychology, just as the focus of the Gothic turned inwards, so, too, the figure of the double became internalised, to be addressed as another aspect of the self rather than an unexplained external being or force.

Internalised, the double can be viewed as the unconscious, and the relation of the original to

⁴²³ Gilbert and Gubar, p359

⁴²⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, p360

⁴²⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, p360

⁴²⁶ Rhys, Jean 1990 (1966) *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., p147

the double as the relation of our conscious self to our unconscious, and to our repressed fears and desires.

Lacan and the Mirror Stage

Jacques Lacan's 1949 lecture on the mirror stage of psychological development provides some useful ideas about doubling.⁴²⁷ The moment in which the child first recognises herself as distinct from the world is a pivotal moment that Lacan calls the mirror stage.⁴²⁸ This stage most often occurs anywhere from six months up to eighteen months in the child's development. Prior to this, the infant experiences the self as what Lacan calls a 'fragmented body'; the child might know the self as an arm or a leg but not as a unified being.⁴²⁹

From the experience of recognising the image of our self in the mirror, in this moment of the birth of our double, we gain an idea of a unified ego-self. Lacan suggests that the function of the mirror stage is to 'establish a relationship between an organism and its reality.'⁴³⁰ The child's sense of its own body, its idea of self, changes to a total being. The *I* is born. It is from this position that we begin to negotiate our relationship with the not-I: the rest of the world.

Loss of the Gaze

We often use the term 'mirror image', to mean something that is identical to the original, but actually, the image in the mirror is only ever *almost* identical. Even as we gain a sense of a cohesive self, something is simultaneously lost. What is lost is the self looking at the mirror

⁴²⁷ Lacan, 1949 lecture, in *Ecrits*, 1966

⁴²⁸ Lacan, p79

⁴²⁹ Lacan, p76

⁴³⁰ Lacan, 96 p78

image, which Lacan terms 'the gaze'.⁴³¹ In the moment of recognition of the self in the mirror image, we separate from the gaze.⁴³²

Mladen Dolar explains: 'When you recognise yourself in the mirror, you see the loss of the self-being, the absence of the interior, only a representation of yourself'.⁴³³ In the mirror moment of recognising the self and forming an ego, the infant's relationship to her mother, to her own self, and to the rest of the world, changes forever. In the same moment we gain a sense of a distinct and powerful identity, we also experience a profound loss.

As Dolar notes, 'I cannot both be myself and look at myself at the same time'.⁴³⁴ In this moment of seeing, we are split in two: self and other. And, the very moment I recognise myself in a mirror, it is too late; the split has occurred. 'It is a profound paradox,' Marina Warner writes, 'that when I recognise myself in a mirror, I am seeing myself as an Other, as if seen by someone else'.⁴³⁵ I am a stranger to myself. When we look in the mirror, an image of self escapes and returns 'only as visible alienation ... his being-over-there coming back to himself here'.⁴³⁶ Even as the exterior image indicates the mental permanence of the ego, it also points to the alienating effect of the act of viewing our own detached image, and to the way individualised identity separates and distances us from the world.⁴³⁷ The splitting effect of the mirror stage will continue to happen repetitively throughout our lives.⁴³⁸

The Illusion of a Unified Self

In order to function, to deal with the world as a cohesive reality, we form the idea of a unified self. The absence of the gaze in the mirror image we see becomes part of the illusion of a

⁴³¹ Lacan

⁴³² Dolar, Mladen 1991 'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny' in *October* 58 pp5-23, p13

⁴³³ Dolar, p13

⁴³⁴ Dolar, p12

⁴³⁵ Warner, p173

⁴³⁶ Craft, p110

⁴³⁷ Lacan, p78

⁴³⁸ Warner, p173

unified identity, and that illusion of ourselves as one self forms an integral part of our everyday relationship with the world.⁴³⁹

Heidegger suggests that we spend most of our time forgetting the strangeness of the ordinary, lost in the 'they' of the world, and that anxiety individuates. Anxiety untangles us from the everyday familiarity of our existence in the world and reminds us of its inherent strangeness. Anxiety, he proposes, is the 'basic attunement' of our being in the world (*dasein*), which is strange and extraordinary, as much as we might forget this on a daily basis. 'Tranquilized, familiar being-in-the-world is a mode of the uncanniness of Dasein (being in the world)', Heidegger alerts us, 'and not the other way around.'⁴⁴⁰ Anxiety came first.

The Uncanny and the Loss of the Loss of the Gaze: Excess

Freud tells us that the common thread connecting the aesthetic elements of his list of Uncanny ingredients lies in the ability of the uncanny to return us to one of our earliest thresholds in our evaluation of the sense of self; the uncanny embodies a regression to times when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and separate from others.⁴⁴¹

When we experience the Uncanny, we experience a lack of the loss of the gaze. Uncanny moments shock us with a reminder of the instability of identity, shattering our illusions of a unified self. We become so familiar with the space between ourselves and our reflection, the distance from the world at the locus of our existence, that the memory of this unity and recognition of the lack of loss shocks us. To experience a loss of the separating distance causes us to feel anxiety about our existence. Mladen Dolar explains that the Lacanian theory of anxiety proposes that this anxiety:

⁴³⁹ Lacan, p76

⁴⁴⁰ Heidegger, Martin 1953 *Being and Time* Albany: State University of New York Press, p183, 190

⁴⁴¹ Freud, 1919, p143

is not produced by a lack or loss or an incertitude; it is not the anxiety of losing something (the firm support, one's bearings, etc). On the contrary, it is the anxiety of gaining something too much, of a too-close presence of the object. What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality.⁴⁴²

The uncanny is the self and the not-self, but in the excess there is a something else besides, of which Freud and Cixous and de Man write.⁴⁴³

In an encounter with the Uncanny, Bresnick suggests, we become very aware of our selves doubled and the anxiety this brings: '...in the uncanny experience, the subject palpably perceives the fact of his being inhabited by the constitutively foreign psychic agency of the unconscious.'⁴⁴⁴ Bresnick describes this experience as:

a moment of singular strangeness arrives as the perplexed subject obscurely senses the return of a memory long since repressed, a revenant mnemonic trace that occupies a kind of no-man's land, belonging neither to the conscious nor to the unconscious. The subject becomes uneasily aware that he is literally of two minds simultaneously, one conscious and the other unconscious.⁴⁴⁵

Bresnick suggests that Freud finds the Uncanny in the splitting of the subject self, rather than in any particular situation. This might be found in instances of everyday life or it might be found in literature, where the figure of the Doppelgänger betrays our idea of a character as a singularly unique individual. As reader identifying with someone else in the text, we might experience doubt as to the boundaries of our self, and even substitute the external self for our own.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴² Dolar, p13

⁴⁴³ Freud, p155; Cixous, p528 in Lydenberg, Robin 1997 'Freud's Uncanny Narratives' in *PMLA* 112.5, 1072-1086, p1073; Paul de Man, p8, in Lydenberg, p1073

⁴⁴⁴ Bresnick, Adam 1996 'Prosopoetic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffman' in *The Germanic Review* 71.2, 114-132, p117

⁴⁴⁵ Bresnick, p117

⁴⁴⁶ Bresnick, p117

Luke Johnson proposes that what we might think of here as a literal mirror, might more productively be thought of as the sight of the self reflected in another.⁴⁴⁷ From this, Johnson proposes that perhaps Freud's suggestion of castration is more an idea of a castration from our real selves; perhaps 'the egos or identities we acquire through symbolic castration cut us off us from our real selves.'

Language and the Divided Self

This separation from the self and from the rest of the world is reflected in our relationship to language. When we learn to speak, we engage words in our relationship with the world; yet, even as they help us to communicate with others, they become a form of separation.

Kristeva calls this time before our separation from our self and before language the pre-semiotic state, and she proposes poetics as a means by which we might find our way back to that lost place.⁴⁴⁸ To experience the Uncanny is to momentarily return to a time before words, to a time when we were unified with everything. By studying ourselves and our writing, and the distance in between, by paying attention to our rhythm and ways of communicating, we can reunite our conscious self with our unconscious.

And so we come to understand the Uncanny double as representative of the dual nature of the self. It speaks of the gap between conscious and unconscious experience, and of the distance between our existence and our words. It symbolises the dual relationship of the writer and reader. Any idea we might have of a complete and stable self is destroyed by the

⁴⁴⁷ Johnson, Luke 2015 'Reading through the mirror stage' in *Writing the Ghost Train: Refereed conference papers of the 20th Annual AAWP Conference, 2015*, online at <http://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Johnson.pdf>, accessed 21/10/2016, p3

⁴⁴⁸ Kristeva, Julia 1989 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview' in Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 128-134

double.⁴⁴⁹ In conversation about an exhibition of Uncanny art he curated, Mike Kelley concurs with this idea, saying:

I'm proposing that art basically addresses death, it's about re-presentation, using doubling as a defense against the fear of death. And death strikes me as an important issue in relation to postmodernism'.⁴⁵⁰

And Freud writes that, in the idea of the double, we find all of the alternative possibilities for our lives, all of the unfulfilled wishes of our imagination.⁴⁵¹ The double gives us a useful concept in explorations of identity.

The Uncanny Double and Contemporary Creative Writers

The Uncanny destroys the illusion of a fixed, unified self. As Adam Bresnick explains:

The uncanny thus would not merely be something a given subject experiences, but the experience that momentarily undoes the factitious monological unity of the ego, producing what Freud describes as an effect of 'doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self'.⁴⁵²

The concept of the double is useful for literature because it enables us to think about individuality in ways rational thought cannot as easily unlock. As Amit Marcus asserts:

Double narratives [...] highlight existential questions that science and rational thought cannot satisfactorily answer: what constitutes individuality? Is the human subject unified or split? What are the mental, social, and cultural processes that destabilize and dissolve the subject, and how do they function?⁴⁵³

In pathology, the double manifests in dissociative conditions such as multiple personality. Mark Stone notes that 'Creative writers have often been more masterful than clinicians in describing this condition [manifestations of a double] and providing insight'.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁴⁹ Marcus, p369

⁴⁵⁰ Kelley, p60

⁴⁵¹ Freud, p143

⁴⁵² Bresnick, p117

⁴⁵³ Marcus, p369

⁴⁵⁴ Stone, p389

With the further development of psychology, and with the evolution of such theories as those grounded in postmodern, postcolonial and queer perspectives, we have come to understand the dangers inherent in viewing the not-self as evil.⁴⁵⁵ A repression of fears and desires speaks of a culture's control over the subject. Zivkovic recommends we instead view the double in terms of its abilities to speak back from the margins to the dominant discourse, and its powers of transgression. Ultimately, Zivkovic advises, the common meaning of the double in literature is the questioning of the interrelationship between I and not-I. But, far from construing this attempt at destabilization of "the character" as a simplistic embrace of barbarism or chaos, it is possible to see it as a desire for something excluded from cultural order – more specifically, all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in western society over the last two centuries.⁴⁵⁶

Doubling creates space for self-observation and self-criticism, Freud suggests.⁴⁵⁷ And when we write, we double ourselves. The writer separates into self and other in order to look critically at her writing, in the process of reflexivity described by Hunt and Sampson as:

creating an internal space distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both 'inside' and 'outside' ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of 'self as other' whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self.⁴⁵⁸

The writer takes the position of both host and stranger, deliberately creating distance, in order to write from a place in the margins. Manu Bazzano urges us towards this position: 'we must become strangers to ourselves; in such estrangement a space opens, an invitation to sift

⁴⁵⁵ Zivkovic

⁴⁵⁶ Zivkovic

⁴⁵⁷ Freud, p142

⁴⁵⁸ Hunt and Sampson, p4

through the cultural contents which constitute us'.⁴⁵⁹ We must find a way to make ourselves strange, run away from home, and leave the familiar.

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⁴⁵⁹ Bazzano, p33

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13: Train to Scotland

Once the finely groomed business woman leaves the train, a couple of stops out from London, Elise sits alone in the velvety cocoon of the double seats. She is grateful for the kindly crinkle-eyes the tea cart lady gives her and she accepts the hot, sweet tea just as gratefully. Fields and hedgerows slide by in a blur of emotion, and at one cold and windy stop, a cheerful midlands couple get on and sit across from her, all bright jumpers and rosy holiday-going cheeks. She tries not to let them see her cry, staring so hard through her reflection in the carriage window and out into the misty pine-covered hills beyond. She imagines she catches a glimpse of a cold sea far away in the distance, beyond the edge of the forest.

She couldn't explain why she is crying if she wanted to, but tears keep escaping from her eyes and finding their way down her cheeks as she tries to surreptitiously mop them up with her sleeve. She fumbles around in her shoulder bag and soon has headphones and music but the random selection has chosen Iron & Wine and the sorrowful folksy sounds sweep her into the mood even more. She concentrates, hard, on a loose thread on the sleeve of her wool jacket and manages to push the water back down into the well inside her.

She takes the piece of paper Audrey has given her out of her purse and looks at it again. The address scrawled in black ink across the lined page means nothing to her now, but in a day or two from now it will. She can't tell whether she is excited or frightened to see Audrey again, but she knows without doubt she needs to.

The rest of the picnic had been a blur. In the moments of stunned shyness immediately after the band played, Elise's wine cup was yet again refilled and Audrey had somehow wandered between the small clusters of other people, away across the lawns.

Minnie had swept in to grab Elise by the elbow and stream chatter at her as she took Elise around to meet everyone left there. She remembers Audrey's invitation to come visit her in Scotland in two days' time.

'I can't talk now, but you can come find me in Glasgow, if you want. I have something to show you.'

I have something to show you. Elise tries to act casual about it all, overwhelmed with being a bit upside-down, not wanting to press too many questions, awkwardly silent. Elise, thinking how she might actually visit Scotland. Remembering an old friend in Edinburgh, Rhoana, who she could stay with for a bit before heading across to Glasgow, to Audrey.

Audrey, walking off across the grass to leave the picnic with some other muso friends, turning to wave a friendly goodbye at Elise through the sunshine. A smile.

She is filled with dread at the thought of what might lie ahead, but she also can't think of a better plan right now.

~

It's 4pm but it feels closer to midday, the sky bright and calm outside the windows of the small pub. She leans across the table towards Rhoana and speaks in a small, quiet voice, a conspirator in an old wartime movie. Elise's eyes are heavy and her bones are stone and her joints are filled with liquid lead and she is most definitely upside down now. She tells Rhoana about her travels so far and her apparently pointless quest and how foolish she feels. It's easier to confess halfway down her second large pint of the local ale.

'I am probably the most pathetic person ever to live. I mean, what am I doing? No reasonable person would wander all over the world hunting a ghost.'

‘Aw hen,’ Rhoana says, her words beginning with a quiver of uncertainty but growing stronger with the force of sympathy for an old friend, ‘actually, it’s pretty romantic. I mean, how many people would travel across the world for someone these days? Sure, it happens in the films, but does anybody actually get the courage up to do it? And I’ve known you for a long time, and I know you’re not daft, so by my thinking you’ve got a damn good reason in your head. Could you call it love, maybe?’ Rhoana raises her glass to Elise. ‘And if it makes no sense to anyone else, well... it’s your life, anyway!’ Elise’s long-time friend laughs, deep in her belly.

The rich chestnut ale slides down Elise’s throat, warming her whole body with its touch. The dark wood panelling of the room folds around her. At a table by the fireplace, a family coos at a chubby blonde baby with a broad flat face. The younger of two women scrubs at his rosy cheeks with a napkin. The baby wriggles, pulling away from the rough cloth. He arches his back to throw himself back in his high chair and he beams across the room, drool running down his firm round chin.

Elise hugs her arms around herself and tries to fight the sensation of sitting upside down on the planet. She contemplates telling Rhoana about Audrey but it’s been a long time since she has seen Rhoana and that piece of the story is too precious, too new. She simply says she’s heading onwards to visit a friend in Glasgow, but she might also head back this way.

Instead, Elise plunges back into the grey darkness of the recent past to tell Rhoana all about the failed relationship back home. How stupid she feels for buying a house so young and so soon, but also how lucky she feels to have escaped a slide into suburban oblivion.

Rhoana is comforting but stern.

‘What I don’t understand, never have, is why you Australians get so deeply involved so fast. I mean, you only really knew this person for a few months and the next thing you’ve moved in and then you’ve bought a house. I mean, didn’t you want to be sure first?’

Elise is taken aback by these words. She’s always considered Rhoana to be romantic, traditional.

‘But,’ she stammers, fumbling for thoughts and words, ‘I mean, I did think we were in love. I guess it just seemed like what I had been looking for all along, since I was a kid. I was never a girl to plan a wedding, but I guess deep down somewhere I just always wanted to own my own little place, you know?’

The shadows of the room creep in closer around them. Elise is reaching the end of the large glass and her mind lazily wanders to the idea of buying another one. But first she will need to find a toilet. She scans the room for a sign.

‘Anyway, how can you ever be sure?’ Elise asks her old friend. ‘I thought I knew exactly who he was. I thought I knew more or less who I was. In the end, I’m not sure I did, Rho, or whether that even mattered.’

Elise sighs and tips the last of her beer into her mouth. She pushes her chair back, to stand on slightly unsteady legs.

‘I mean, isn’t it just so weird that it’s mostly just that... I mean, sometimes, the people you thought you were most familiar end up actually strangers to you? So strange.’

The Stranger

Exploring the double leads us to recognise an inextricable connection between the self and not-self. The not-self can also be conceptualised as the stranger, and it is useful to explore this position to better understand the uncanny double of the not-self. Any discussion of the stranger begins with the acknowledgement that we cannot ever entirely know the thoughts and feelings of the not-self. We can never really know how similar and how different the not-self is from the self, but to put oneself in the position of stranger is to release the hold of the ordinary on the self and our ways of seeing. As Julia Kristeva writes, ‘When we grasp ourselves as other, the familiar becomes utterly unfamiliar. We discover that we are a “stranger to ourselves”’.⁴⁶⁰ Taking a position as stranger is useful for anyone, but especially so for creative writers.

The experience of the stranger reminds us of the infinite and beautiful diversity of people in their individual, ordinary lives. At the same time, the stranger reminds us that we do share significant common experiences, which can lead towards community, and a shared understanding. Kristeva writes that: ‘the foreigner’s face reveals the nonexistence of banality in human beings yet it is the commonplace that constitutes a commonality for our daily habits’.⁴⁶¹ If we can recognise the position of stranger in ourselves, we can understand that difference helps us to know ourselves and also helps us to understand that difference does not make the stranger the other in a sense of being disconnected from us. As Kearney and Semonovitch note:

⁴⁶⁰ Kristeva, in Kearney, Richard and Kascha Semonovitch 2011 ‘At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Other’ in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* New York: Fordham University Press, p4

⁴⁶¹ Kristeva, Julia 1991 *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. L Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, p3

Kristeva claims that if we recognise that we are foreign to ourselves then there is nothing really foreign outside of us at all: “The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners.”⁴⁶²

The value of taking the position of stranger relates to Marotta’s assertion that, if we observe the stranger’s everyday experience, we can see for ourselves how the familiar can become strange.⁴⁶³ Marotta writes that:

the stranger signifies both a figure and a social and spatial relation; it represents both an internal and external other, and it overlaps but is sometimes distinct from other categories such as marginality and otherness.⁴⁶⁴

The stranger, Marotta comments, after Alfred Schutz, cannot and does not take the ordinary for granted, because the stranger is unable to be sure of cultural assumptions and norms.⁴⁶⁵

As a consequence, the stranger is a question mark at the end of every sentence.

At the heart of the experience of situating the self as stranger is the opportunity to startle ourselves into seeing the self and our relationship with the world in a new way. Travel outside of our familiar spaces, whether those spaces are physical or psychological, can startle us into new ways of seeing.

The stranger has left the familiarity of home, even as they carry something of home with them. The stranger has come from somewhere else, and speaks a language of mobility and transience. Kristeva proposes that the stranger is not bound by the same roots as we are; that, in fact, ‘the space of a foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping’.⁴⁶⁶ The stranger exists here but reminds us of elsewhere; exists in the present but reminds us of the past. But because the stranger is here and now but always also somewhere else, something more, sometime other, the stranger belongs nowhere, Kristeva

⁴⁶² Kearney and Semonovitch, p21

⁴⁶³ Marotta, Vince 2012 ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’ in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33.6, 585-590, p585

⁴⁶⁴ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p585

⁴⁶⁵ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p585

⁴⁶⁶ Kristeva, p7

writes.⁴⁶⁷ The stranger is shaped by the possibilities of constantly being other. The stranger is not settled in their current place in the world, and this suggests that, as Kristeva writes, ‘settled within himself, the foreigner has no self.’

Travel is one means of deliberate distancing that can create this useful space for creative writers to inhabit. Travel to and through new places situates us as the stranger. This position can be experienced by travelling to cities in the world not known to us, or we can step into this space without physically leaving home, by learning to look at home with a stranger’s eyes.⁴⁶⁸

In *Strangers on a Train*, writing about her travels around America by train, Jenny Diski espouses the value of deliberately becoming a stranger, through travel, when seeking a new perspective on the world. Diski writes: ‘I can see other people so much better in my strangerhood. Strangeness brings people into sharp focus.’⁴⁶⁹ Jenny Diski asserts that this perspective can be gained close to home, but she finds it a stronger sensation when travelling as a stranger:

I could sit alone in a coffee shop in London and get a little of that feeling, but it’s stronger being geographically elsewhere, being sure that no one you know is going to pass by and greet you as yourself. I thrill at being a stranger.⁴⁷⁰

When we see through the eyes of the stranger, we can more clearly see the ordinary. We can more clearly see the familiar, which becomes too close through its everyday familiarity. A clearer view on the familiar includes gaining the ability to better see, through the eyes of a stranger, our so often taken-for-granted self. Diski explains that her travels were driven by an urge to reach a new vantage point on the self:

⁴⁶⁷ Kristeva, p10

⁴⁶⁸ Indonesian author Agustinus Wibowo, speaking at the 2016 Ubud Writers and Readers Festival; and Kristeva, p8

⁴⁶⁹ Diski, J 2002 *Stranger on a Train: Daydreaming and smoking around America with interruptions* New York: Picador, p154

⁴⁷⁰ Diski, p154

The opportunity to see myself was another central motive. Being looked at, being known, even just being acquainted, fogs the glass between me and myself. I can't see what I am.⁴⁷¹

Diski writes of feeling some initial trepidation about her travels, particularly around leaving the familiarity of home, but she also espouses the immediately realised benefits of the position of stranger and she writes, 'once I had set off, only got as far as New York City, I remembered also how much I like *being a stranger* alone and unidentified in a place I don't belong.'⁴⁷² This duality within the nature of travel appears again when Diski advises those who travel to expect adventure and uncertainty but later describes how overwhelming a dislocation from the familiar can feel, in what we recognise as an encounter with our Uncanny double. Diski particularly comments on how this can often become too disorienting:

On the first, accidental journey I travelled, delightfully, as a stranger; with the second, planned trip my deliberate strangeness became both stranger and more familiar than I had intended. When the unexpected becomes the bizarre and spirit-draining, it's time to go home and wonder what you thought you were doing.⁴⁷³

There is benefit in looking outwards from the position of stranger but the perspective also enables us to look at the self, and to change our idea of self. Our sense of self is shaped not only what we perceive but also by how others perceive and label us. We give identities to ourselves but also have them foisted onto us by others. Distancing myself from my familiar ties, through travel, can help to clear some of the preconceptions which come with identity assumptions. When I travel, I am still your childhood friend, your daughter, your co-worker. But in addition to these identities, I am given new identities from my new context, where distance creates room for a shift. While this can be disconcerting, this act of distancing can enable us to better see the shape of how we fit into a global community.

For these reasons, writers should endeavour to understand the position of themselves as a stranger, not through mimicry of another person, but through their own subjective

⁴⁷¹ Diski, p54

⁴⁷² Diski, p154

⁴⁷³ Diski, p6

experience. Perhaps this is a position with which the writer is already familiar. ‘The sociological stranger has come to be associated with those who do not belong to the ‘established group’, Marotta writes; in its more radical manifestation this ‘established’ group usually consists of cisgender Western, white males.⁴⁷⁴ However, to say that some writers who already feel more on the margins of society, or writers who are already displaced from home, will write from a marginalised position promotes a view of society as centred on one dominant locus. While this view is promoted by some, it is more useful to our future as people to view the self in relation to many centres and intersections of identity and power and mobility. Further, while the experience of the stranger might come by default with the migrant experience, Marotta cites a study on voluntary migrants which found that those who experience the position of the stranger, on the outside, often choose to migrate away from that place where they felt marginalised, and not the other way around.⁴⁷⁵

Bringing new perspective on the world and the self, the stranger signals a liminal position of duality. The place that we meet a stranger is always a threshold: either at a doorway or a political or ideological border or at the threshold of the body or at the limits of a culture.⁴⁷⁶ Kristeva asserts that we recognise a threshold in the face of the stranger; that ‘the face that is so other bears the mark of a crossed threshold that imprints on the observer as peacefulness or anxiety.’⁴⁷⁷ She describes the foreigner’s face as a cryptic invitation to an inaccessible place and writes of a border that exists in the foreigner’s appearance.⁴⁷⁸

The stranger, Kristeva writes, is a ‘melancholy lover of a vanished space’.⁴⁷⁹ ‘The elsewhere symbolised by the stranger is invisible and inaccessible but it confirms the existence of the not-here and the not-self,’ Kristeva notes. Invisible and inaccessible. Because

⁴⁷⁴ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p585

⁴⁷⁵ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, citing Madison 2006, p587

⁴⁷⁶ Kearney and Semonovitch, p4

⁴⁷⁷ Kristeva, p4

⁴⁷⁸ Kristeva, p4

⁴⁷⁹ Kristeva, p9

it exists in dreams, it therefore must be called a beyond, Kristeva asserts.⁴⁸⁰ This connects directly with the Uncanny. In fact, Kearney and Semonovitch describe the uncanny experience of meeting the stranger in our own home:

Sometimes we meet strangers when we are not at home: when we are in a foreign land or a foreign part of our own land. Other times we encounter strangers who arrive at our house. These entries and exits often provoke a sense of not-being-at-home, even at home.⁴⁸¹

This sensation of feeling anxiety while at home is one we recognise by now, because it is, of course, the Uncanny.

Harman (in Marotta, on Georg Simmel) proposes that we need to find ways to rethink ideas of home, community, and identity, and that these ideas should be based on what we know rather than a kind of nostalgia. It is not enough to think of strangeness as a temporary and unusual experience but rather as a way of life.⁴⁸² The body is the original home. It is the first familiar space we know. When we are displaced from our body, we become a stranger to ourselves. Women, positioned as the other, are violently driven away from their bodies, and reclaiming the body as home is vital, Cixous urges, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.⁴⁸³

Kristeva draws a direct connection to Freud's Uncanny, to suggest that we have a strong tendency to externalise our fears onto the stranger in the same way as we do with the double.⁴⁸⁴ In the case of the Uncanny double, we have already discussed how this is viewed by psychoanalysis as an internal double, a doubling of the self.

⁴⁸⁰ Kristeva, p5

⁴⁸¹ Kearney, p4

⁴⁸² Marotta, Vince 2012 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the Sociology of Knowledge' in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33.6, 675-689, p677

⁴⁸³ Cixous, Hélène 1976 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Cohen, Keith and Paula Cohen, in *Signs* 1.4, 875-893, p875

⁴⁸⁴ Kristeva, p181-184

‘The existential version of the stranger is related to the inner, introverted, psychological, anxious, alienated self,’⁴⁸⁵ Marotta writes, and notes that this is the stranger of Camus, Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Sartre. This self-estrangement has traditionally been associated with artists and intellectuals positioned on the outside of ‘the establishment’.⁴⁸⁶

To look at the stranger only by looking outwards is to view ourselves narcissistically, at the centre of the universe. To view the stranger is also about an inner perspective; we recognise the double as part of ourselves, rather than merely an external difference. Marotta suggests that ‘A psychoanalytical account of the stranger connects the state of strangeness to unconscious processes.’⁴⁸⁷ To understand the stranger, we must understand the uncanny existence of the stranger as simultaneously the self and not-self.

Kearney and Semonovitch suggest that the stranger is both like us and yet not like us at all, and because of this, the stranger strikes us as uncanny. ‘The stranger is doubled in that it is always similar and dissimilar in a play of unsettling ambivalence. It is because it is like us and yet not like us at all, hovering between the knowable and unknowable, that it strikes us as uncanny.’⁴⁸⁸ Marotta, after Kristeva, writes that our own difficulty in seeing ourselves as the stranger separates us from others: ‘Without coming to terms with our ambiguous relationship with our own uncanny strangeness, there will always be an abyss between the rooted person and the uprooted foreigner’.⁴⁸⁹

However, Marotta, urges, we must not dismiss and condone the harmful aspects of political and personal xenophobia, in its expressions through racism and aggressive nationalism, as merely an internalised struggle of the subconscious.⁴⁹⁰ More than just our

⁴⁸⁵ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p586

⁴⁸⁶ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p586

⁴⁸⁷ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p587

⁴⁸⁸ Kearney and Semonovitch, p5

⁴⁸⁹ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p587

⁴⁹⁰ Marotta, ‘Theories of Strangers: Introduction’, p588

internal struggles, the stranger is affected by external and broader economic, political and sociological inequalities.⁴⁹¹

As Kelly Oliver writes, the boundary of our individualisation isolates us and positions us as both the stranger and the self:

Heidegger suggests that it is our finitude that accounts for our in-between status and therefore our uncanny homelessness. It is through our finitude that we become individuated and unique and therefore alone. Each human being is unique because each is finite. And our finitude results in our solitude. But man's uniqueness, his finitude, is also his solitude.⁴⁹²

The stranger is simultaneously me but is also beyond the border of the self; both at the same time. I know the stranger in their universal humanness but I am constrained by my own insistence on individuality, and I can never truly experience the position of the stranger. Concerns with differences contribute to this sense of individualisation. But perhaps, when I recognise the stranger in myself, I recognise myself in the stranger, and we can become part of a bigger, shared experience. When we can both celebrate diversity and relinquish the significance of individuality, we balance our position to better connect with universal humanness. The stranger reminds us that we have so much to learn from listening to one another's stories.

Of our encounter with the stranger, as the observer looking into the face of a foreigner, Kristeva writes, 'I am at least as remarkable, and therefore I love him; now I prefer my own peculiarity, and therefore I kill him.' There is a violence tied up with a separation into self and stranger.

When I see the stranger in need as myself in need, I can welcome the stranger into my home and celebrate our differences. As Kearney writes, 'Hospitality [...] involves a self who welcomes and a Stranger who is welcomed. This means acknowledging both an other within

⁴⁹¹ Marotta, 'Theories of Strangers: Introduction', p588

⁴⁹² Oliver, Kelly 2015 *Earth and World. Philosophy After the Apollo Missions* New York: Columbia University Press, p119

myself *and* an other beyond myself.⁴⁹³ Kristeva suggests that we can see in the stranger's appearance that they signal themselves as an addition,⁴⁹⁴ and this echoes Freud's and Cixous' idea of a 'something more'.

Kearney and Semonovitch distinguish between Stranger and Foreigner, writing: 'the Stranger occupies the threshold between the Other and the Foreigner.'⁴⁹⁵ The named Stranger, Kearney proposes, is no longer fully strange but foreign. Once provided with passports or visas, defining one as resident or non-resident alien, legal or illegal immigrant, stowaway or refugee, the Stranger becomes a Foreigner, someone who can be tracked, classified and computed, someone who is no longer uncanny, frightening, or surprising. As soon as someone is given a name or other identity marker, they are no longer a stranger; they are a foreigner.⁴⁹⁶ This discussion interchanges the terms more loosely.

Schwieler proposes that learning is itself closely connected to a feeling of strangeness, and therefore to the stranger and the double.⁴⁹⁷ When we encounter new knowledge, we are pushed outside of our familiarity, in a confrontation with the unknown. As we acquire knowledge, it becomes part of us; a stranger no more.

Readers enter into a relationship with the stranger when they engage with creative writing. Readers invite themselves into the text, always inhabiting a space of consciousness which is half in and half out of the text, as both the self and the stranger. Writers, too, can find a useful space in the position of the stranger. Hélène Cixous writes that she likes books that begin in the body, and that:

These are books you can read. These are real books. You open the book and you have already crossed the border. You are in the text. You are in the world of the text. You are already in the other country. It already shines of the other country. We are already there by a

⁴⁹³ Kearney and Semonovitch, p22

⁴⁹⁴ Kristeva, p4

⁴⁹⁵ Kearney and Semonovitch, p6

⁴⁹⁶ Kearney and Semonovitch, p6

⁴⁹⁷ Schwieler, Elias 2013 'Being a Stranger and the Strangeness of Being: Joseph Conrad's 'The Secret Sharer' as an allegory of being in education' in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 45.4, 409-419, p410

multitude of signs. And yet we understand nothing. This is how we enter a book. We are blind and ignorant and gradually things become clearer.⁴⁹⁸

Cixous's articulation of this experience of the unknown which gradually becomes the known speaks to the idea of the Uncanny and the idea of the stranger.

Marotta notes that Georg Simmel speaks of a 'type of 'strangeness', in which we deny 'the humanity of the other'. Simmel's further idea on the stranger is that, when we lose our ideas of self as a unique individual, with our own individual lived experiences, we experience strangeness.⁴⁹⁹ But Simmel also recommends that we do not position ourself as self or stranger, but instead, focus on the relationships between the two. This idea Simmel calls a third type of consciousness.⁵⁰⁰ Marotta writes, after Simmel, that:

the in-between aesthetic consciousness refers to an ability to be close, yet distant, to objectify, but also be immersed in the subjectivism of the phenomenon under study.⁵⁰¹

Mervyn Horgan concurs with Simmel on the value of this space, and proposes a focus on 'strangership', the relationship between the two bodies of self and stranger, where we look at 'the characteristics of associations between strangers rather than characteristics of individual strangers.'⁵⁰² Once again, the recommendation is to focus on the relationship rather than creating a duality of disparate parts.

This idea of strangeness is useful for creative writers, particularly around the idea of a space in which writers focus on neither only the writing nor only the self, but on the relationship between the two.

⁴⁹⁸ Cixous 1993, p82

⁴⁹⁹ Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the Sociology of Knowledge', p680

⁵⁰⁰ Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the Sociology of Knowledge', p682

⁵⁰¹ Marotta, 'Georg Simmel, the Stranger and the Sociology of Knowledge', p682

⁵⁰² Horgan, Mervyn 2012 'Strangers and Strangership' in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33.6, 607-622, p608

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14: Glasgow

Green velvet hills hunker silent and steady in the distance as cottages and railroad crossings glide by. A whole village of homes and lives and everyday slips into her life and out again in one liquid, gliding moment, on the clicking track of an old slide projector carousel. A red car races beside the train for a while before it follows the black curves of the road and veers away, to disappear between bright green fields. Elise's reflection in the thick window is blurry but colourful against the black slag heap rising from dark earth. Cradling the plastic mug of tea between her hands, in her mind she is somewhere in between the bright orange, blue, and cream train carriage interior, and the grey sky outside and above. The seat velour rests plush against her and she is alive with anticipation. She can almost feel each individual fibre resting beneath her legs and pressing along her spine as her legs tense up in an involuntary contraction of muscles. The train slows and stops at each weathered station. People board and wander the aisle to find a free seat. Some people leave the carriage. She is surrounded by a thick skin of her travels.

The train rolls on into and through the outer suburbs of Glasgow and, finally, slowly pulls into Queen Street station. The smell of old grease intensifies and the shuffle and strain of other train engines rises in volume. The grey sky is sliced into an alien spacecraft channel down the centre by dark metal arches high above her. Elise feels suddenly certain that she has dreamed about this place but she immediately shakes off the uneasy sensation that thought brings. She holds back as the crowded carriage stands up and departs in a surge. She leaves the carriage somewhere in the middle of the stream of passengers, rolling the small black travel case behind her.

Elise steps one foot and then two across the gap and onto the old bitumen of the platform. She walks towards the gates, trying not to grin. Just play it cool, play it cool. Don't want to be that grinning person everyone changes their path slightly to avoid. Don't want to give any room to that. And when they reach the turnstile, the whole jittery straggle of arrivals from Edinburgh, the flow stalls and stutters here and there as people pass their tickets through the gate scanner slots and push against the shiny heavy turnstile bars, and then, click, they are through. And some slip away onto the street but for others there is hugging and laughter and even a kiss for one pretty young red-haired girl, a shy kiss from a blonde boy.

Elise spins in a slow half-circle, scanning the strangers for familiarity, looking for dark hair. They are too old or too young, faces too broad and eyes too narrow and just not her. She is alone in Glasgow. She remembers Audrey, and she senses a way of wandering through life, but she also remembers the text message from the night before confirming they would meet at Queen Street station. She resists the urge to double-check the message.

For a few minutes, she mooches around a souvenir stand in a small station stationery store, bored for quite some time by a rotating display stand full of magnets which make fun designs out of thick Scottish accents and localised sayings.

'No, no sugar, thanks,' she replies to the mousey girl behind the coffee shop counter at the cafe in the corner of the station. The girl hands her ten pence change and smiles warmly. A phrase about the kindness of strangers swims through the back of her mind but she can't quite remember it.

And then she is seated at a corner table with a large waxed paper cup of coffee, her bag on the ground beside her. From here she can see both entrances to the station, as well as the platforms and turnstiles.

Her gaze is drawn to the steady pattern of people who pause their stride abruptly in front of her. She is thrown by this behaviour until she notices the huge arrivals and departures board above her to her right: the pause and the concentration on the upturned faces before her are not about her. She idly scans the board for her own arrival. From Edinburgh, there it is. She realises her train arrived five minutes early, and she breathes out with relief. She concentrates on drinking the coffee despite her stomach butterflies, trying to keep an eye out for Audrey, but also not to too constantly and intensely scan the faces in the station.

15: You'll find it someday

And then, across the cold space, she sees the dark hair. Audrey's face is turned to the side, as she searches the crowd towards the platforms. A mirror of Elise's earlier face. Elise stands, the case very unhelpfully tipping over onto one wheel and almost capsizing. She struggles with the case and sets it back into balance, and then she glances back in the direction of the familiar face. *Still there, she's still there*, her heart beats nervously in her ears. She walks on the balls of her feet towards Audrey, slowing as she enters what must be the edges of Audrey's peripheral vision, the earliest possible point of recognition. Time seems to slow in the moment the dark-haired girl's face changes from blank scanning of the crowd to seeing the face she is looking for, the face she knows.

They embrace, firm and fierce and quick, and Elise's smile is shy.

'I'm glad you came.' Audrey.

'So am I.' Elise.

And they begin to talk at the same time, words tumbling out over one another. They laugh, and begin again, small talk about train timetables and temporarily lost apartment keys and the eventual success of their plans to meet. As long as they don't talk about the ghosts, everything will be okay.

And then Audrey turns suddenly and starts to walk briskly out of the station, glancing back only once to encourage Elise on. Elise has to speed up her pace to follow and then they are off, racing through the streets of Glasgow. The flagstones are uneven and the hole in her

left black sneaker starts to take in water, from recent rain on the streets, almost immediately. But the dark-haired girl strides on, not stopping for a breath. She is the siren Elise must follow, leading on across the rocks.

Lit up shop windows flicker past in a whirlwind of signs and displays and Elise skips around people, darting to keep pace with Audrey's fast stride. She wants to stop and ask questions and take in these first moments slowly but the back of Audrey's short black jacket hurries on just a few steps ahead and the gathering cold is a good reason to move quickly, anyway. All she really knows is that the footpaths are narrow and uneven and the city is old and grey around her but it folds in on her like a familiar old grey cardigan and she likes that feeling.

But she must also move her legs quickly to keep up with Audrey. The brisk pace has her heart beating fast and the cold air flushes her cheeks and stings the tip of her nose. She has no idea where they are as they turn left, go down a hill, and take a few more turns to head left and then right. They stand and wait for the rounded black shell of a taxi to pass before they cross another road. The sky, so close above, gathers in heavy grey cobwebs.

Soon, she is sitting at a booth table, somewhere in Glasgow, in a small bar called Mono, tucked into the corner of a concrete plaza. From the outside, it has the feel of a run-down retro country town cinema at the far end of a shopping centre carpark. But inside, they have large beers and a booth and Elise is looking at Audrey across the table as she talks, watching the girl's brass arrow earrings dangle from her ears, noticing her bright blue eyes sparkle in the dim light, animated in lively conversation. She looks so much like the dark-haired boy. When the dark-haired girl goes to the toilet, Elise picks up her beer and wanders into a zine shop in a partitioned off section at the back of the bar.

She browses the zines and buys one with 'Do You Know / This Is Real' printed in typewriter font across the front, handing over one dull two-pound coin to a bespectacled boy tucked away in an alcove amongst the racks of zines. He is leaning back in his wooden chair, with a heavy book, a large glass of water, and a tin moneybox on the small wooden table before him, and he seems a little reluctant to lean forward to put the coin into the moneybox.

While she waits for Audrey to return, Elise sits back down in the booth and flicks through her new zine. A dozen pages from a colour photocopier, stapled in two places on the spine. Pages filled with distorted photographs of hills and cloudless skies, perhaps from local countryside. There is a very small story about a bus and a guitar and an angry bus driver, stapled to the front cover. The rest of the zine is mostly just pictures. The centre pages of the zine are a double-spread, full colour map of the Indian Ocean, the map cut down to fit the size of the other pages. Across the middle of the centre page are words, written in silver permanent marker capitals: YOU'LL FIND IT SOMEDAY.

But the thing is, once Audrey returns, it somehow doesn't seem right to ask about Emma, and about the postcards, and about the boy. And anyway, Elise is already so caught up in trying to feel right-side-up and to see, through a beer haze, every detail of Audrey's eyes and dark hair. But she needs to know, and so she asks.

'Wait, and I'll show you. Back at my flat,' Audrey says, and she begins to tell Elise a story about her band and a rock and roll mishap. Soon, they order large bowls of veggie curry and more large beers and Elise begins to feel everything will end up okay.

Essay 5: *Eilean Munde*

Rolling along between walls of salt-licked, sandstone buildings, I wonder about the lives of strangers beyond the windows of second story flats above shops and restaurants.

Conversation keeps the chill grey sky out of the hire car. We are leaving Edinburgh. We pause at a roundabout and, from the driver's seat, my mother talks about a place not far from here. She says we should go there for lunch, when we return from Skye in a few days from now. She waits as other cars make their way around the roundabout and she turns to me. She says she wants her ashes scattered near the place she has just mentioned. She describes more specifically where, and names a song she'd like played. It's a song I've never heard before. She sings it to me, in a lilting voice and in a moment I will never forget.

I ask, 'but what about that different place and a different song you told me you wanted?' I remind her she talked to me about her death a long time ago, when I was only small. She says oh no, she never wanted that place, that song. My memory is wrong. But it's such a sharp and strong memory. Wrong. We drive. I look to the back seat and roll my eyes at my sister, grinning, and I wave to my tiny niece. My sister smiles and looks out of the window. I hum a few bars of the old, forgotten song. We pause at another roundabout, and my mother leans across from the driver's seat and taps me heavily on the shoulder. She tells me I'm terrible for teasing her. I say I'm not teasing her. I wind the window down just enough to let a gasp of icy cold air rush hard onto my face.

Ghosts of the living and dead alike, of both individual and collective spirits, of both other

selves and our own selves, haunt the places of our lives, writes Michael Bell.⁵⁰³ Ghosts are much of what makes a space a place.⁵⁰⁴ And the layers of presence and absence, built up over time, can be cut through with sharp new connections to the collection of ghosts, as we bring our own meaning to a place, when we go somewhere we've never been before and leave behind our own ghost.

My mother was born in Scotland, in a small town called Wishaw, near Glasgow. She arrived in Australia with her parents when she was three years old. Sixty years later, still living in Australia, she remains a Scottish citizen. Age three, I made the journey in reverse, travelling from Australia to Scotland with my parents. I have some memories of it but I can't say how true they are. They are ghosts in my life, and they shape me from the corners of my eyes, these maybe-memories.

The first time I travelled to Scotland as an adult: wow. I caught a train from London and up the east coast, to Edinburgh. As we crossed the border into Scotland, tears suddenly began to roll slowly down my flushed face as I wiped at them with a rough paper napkin from the tea lady. I saw my grandfather and then my grandmother, growing up in small Scottish towns, and all of the ghosts of ancestors before them. I had a strong feeling I was coming home.

But this trip right now is another time, later in my life. This time, I caught the train from King's Cross in London, with my mother, and we travelled together to Edinburgh and my sister's house, drinking cider from an aluminium can and giggling softly in the quiet carriage.

⁵⁰³ Bell, Michael Mayerfeld 1997 'The ghosts of place' in *Theory and Society* 26, 813-836, p813

⁵⁰⁴ Bell, p815

Derrida insists that we acknowledge the ghosts of place and time, converse with them, and, for Derrida, ghosts are not a marginalised presence locked in some disconnected past, but central to our ability to determine a future. ‘It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost, and with it,’ Derrida urges us, ‘from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.’⁵⁰⁵ In any place, we are not alone, but in the company of all those who are no longer there and also those not yet there, and it is from within this context that we can contemplate who we are and where we want to go next.

My sister changes the subject and we quickly fall back into a car full of familiarity, on a road trip across the country with these women I love, and the little one in the back, as the streets lined with buildings change to countryside. Family. Familial. Familiar. Some words lose their meaning when we hold them too close. We are driving to songs I love, because I’ve been voted in as the road trip deejay, and the music rolls in waves across the car as the highway stretches out before us. Pine tree verges brush softly against us with cool, feathery fingertips and we glide past.

We experience death only once, and so we think we know little about death and a lot about living. But, if I reach the point where I decide I want to learn to live, Derrida proposes it is from death I will learn:

⁵⁰⁵ Derrida, Jacques 1994 *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge Classics, pxviii

To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only by the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life.⁵⁰⁶

Learning to live, Derrida explains, happens between life and death, not in only one or the other. And what happens in the space between any two, Derrida writes, such as between life and death, is talking with and about ghosts.⁵⁰⁷ And so the living learn from the dead, in the in-between places where we pause to sit for a while with ghosts. We, strangers to a place, carry with us our own stories, our own ghosts, from our past to the place and time of here and now. We leave behind a ghost of our past in that place when we travel on towards our future. In between, we can learn from the ghosts of place what it means to be present, to exist in that place and time.

After our lunch stop, I switch seats with my sister. In the back of the car, I talk to my tiny niece about the sky and about birds and we dance with our hands in bird shapes and we float them across the horizon like choppy ocean waves as I sing along to Belle and Sebastian. The little car rolls across the seas of the road, and familiarity draws us in, close and warm, and, soon, the little one falls asleep, flopping soft and heavy in her car seat. Her closed eyes remind me how tired I am. I curl myself along the rest of the back seat and lay my head on a folded jacket. I nap, too, jetlag wrapping me up like an old blanket.

And so King Billy, William II of Scotland, William III of England, William of Orange, reluctantly agreed to pardon those who had fought against his cause in the recent uprisings.⁵⁰⁸ In August 1691, a proclamation was issued, ordering every rogue clan from the Lochaber region of the Scottish Highlands to swear an oath of allegiance to the

⁵⁰⁶ Derrida, p xvii

⁵⁰⁷ Derrida, p xvii

⁵⁰⁸ Laing, Malcolm 1814 (Jan 31) 'Historical Account of the Massacre of Glencoe: from Malcolm Laing's History of Scotland' in *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 12.66, 24-27, p24

government of King William. Clans were instructed to take the oath by January 1, 1692, or else suffer the penalty of military execution.⁵⁰⁹

The clan chiefs sent word to their exiled king, James II, in France, asking for his guidance and permission to sign the oath without betraying their loyalty to him.⁵¹⁰ As days turned into weeks and then months, no reply came. At last, as the window of forgiveness slowly closed, approval arrived from James and the chiefs travelled to Inverlochy and took the oath. But not so Alistair MacIain, the 12th Chieftain of the Glencoe MacDonalds, who attempted to swear the oath at Inverlochy in the very last days of December. The governor of Fort William at Inverlochy refused, as he was not of proper office to accept the oath, and redirected Alistair to Inverary, but this meant MacDonald arrived in Inverary after the deadline.⁵¹¹

Whether it was MacDonald's contempt for the English government, delays engineered by his enemies, misunderstood communications, or the difficulties of travelling for days through snow on rough winter roads, all accounts agree he arrived too late.⁵¹² However, five days past the deadline, the Laird of Glencoe was finally permitted to swear the oath. He professed allegiance and then returned directly home to Glencoe, with assurances that the oath was valid, and that word would be sent on his behalf assuring the king the oath attempt had been made in good faith, and that he was under the protection of Fort William garrison.⁵¹³

I wake to a feeling of crispness in my head; now we are in the highlands. The car steadily climbs along a winding road, high above a broad glacier-carved valley. We slow on one wide curved shoulder of the road, and my mother veers the car into the gravelly lookout area, and we get out and stretch. I look down across the valley, across heather and spiky grasses and the wide bends of a river, sweeping moors dotted with electricity pylons, pale stone buildings small in the distance. I balance on one leg and spread my arms like eagle wings, pretending to fly from our high lookout. My sister takes a photo of me and we laugh in delight at living this moment. But even in summer the air is sharp with cold and we are soon back in the car, driving on.

⁵⁰⁹ Birkett, Bill 2005 *A year in the life of Glencoe* London: Frances Lincoln Limited, p38; and Laing

⁵¹⁰ Wilde, Thursa 2016 (Feb 25) 'Glencoe Massacre: Truth or spin?' online at <http://community.highlandtitles.com/2015/02/the-glencoe-massacre/>, last accessed 14/08/2016

⁵¹¹ Birkett, p38

⁵¹² Birkett, p38; Laing

⁵¹³ Wilde

Despite the fact that he had sworn the oath, MacDonald's enemies took the opportunity to get rid of the troublesome clan chief.⁵¹⁴ Using the missed deadline as a reason, orders for the execution of the MacDonalds of Glencoe were arranged. Orders given to the Campbells of Glen Lyon specified that they were to ensure the 'old fox and his cubs do not escape with their lives'.⁵¹⁵ The mountain passes in and out of Glencoe were to be securely guarded. The soldiers were instructed to be 'sudden and secret' in their terrible plan. No need to cause further trouble for the government by creating prisoners.⁵¹⁶ It was recommended that the cold and long nights of winter would be the best time for the execution, when the Highlanders could not escape to the hills with their wives and children, and when, left in the snow without the protection of their houses, nobody would survive.⁵¹⁷

I'm still unsettled when we arrive in Glencoe in the late afternoon. Out of sorts. It might just be the jetlag. I once heard that the trick is to never think of the time back home. Just stay with the present location and time. But it's hard not to calculate the time as soon as you think about it. We are only ever planning to pass through Glencoe, one night's stay in a village that is one small dot on a ragged line we are weaving across Scotland, coast to coast, on the way from Edinburgh to Skye. I don't know anything about Glencoe. It looks similar to the other small towns we have passed through earlier in the day, except more hidden, tucked away in the deep valley, between steep cloud-topped peaks.

We roll the car slowly into the carpark of a hotel by the side of a loch. We wake the child and crunch across grey gravel towards a front door and reception area.

Back at Glencoe, Alistair MacDonald returned to the challenges and comforts of daily life in winter in the Highlands, assured he had taken the oath in time.

When Captain Robert Campbell of Glen Lyon and his troops arrived unannounced in the vale on a cold day early in February, 1692, MacDonald spoke at length with the commander. Campbell told MacDonald he was in the area collecting taxes.⁵¹⁸ Despite a bloody

⁵¹⁴ Laing, p25

⁵¹⁵ *Gallienus Redivivus or Murther Will Out* 1695, Edinburgh, online at <http://digital.nls.uk/scotlandspages/timeline/1692.html>, last accessed 14/08/2016

⁵¹⁶ Laing, p25

⁵¹⁷ Laing, p25

⁵¹⁸ Wilde

and tangled history of past clan conflicts, one of Alistair's sons was married to Robert's niece, and it was winter and harsh travelling conditions in the Highlands, and so MacDonald decided to extend his trust to Campbell.⁵¹⁹

MacDonald offered generous hospitality to Campbell and his troops, requesting of his clan, the community of Glencoe, that they take the travellers in and treat them like family. Temporary homes were found for the 130 officers and soldiers. Robert Campbell stayed as a guest in the MacDonald chief's own home, and spent time with his niece and nephew-in-law daily.⁵²⁰ For fourteen days and nights, the people of Glencoe opened their homes to their guests, cooked communal meals from their winter stores of food, and shared songs and stories by warm hearth fires. In highland culture at the time, to invite a stranger into your home and break bread with them made the person a trusted friend; no longer a stranger.⁵²¹

In the calm waters of the cove, watched over by the many dark eyes of the hotel, a small boat lies anchored, sails drawn in close like folded arms. White wooden railings, a bright green hull lapped gently by ripples on the surface of slate grey water. It is here that the broad loch narrows to a small inlet and the water's edge marks the curve of the main road and the fringe of the village of Glencoe. Like us, the road is just passing through, and it dances its way along the edge of the loch, from past to present to future.

On the far side of the loch, the land rises steeply to hilltops blunt with rocky chunks against a grey sky. But the rough peaks soon slide down into wooded slopes; at the base, a thin strip of gravelly brown beach slips into dark waters. A hawk drifts in slow, wide circles overhead. The double-story hotel building hunkers down into its surroundings but the white walls stand out starkly against the earthy backdrop, its sharp lines resisting the soft, insistent pull of the loch's watery depths. The pale face of the hotel stretches along neatly clipped green lawns, a row of orange and yellow kayaks drawn up on the shoreline. Just beyond the hotel grounds boundary, towards the mouth of the cove, the grass gives way to a tangle of flowering native bushes, spiky brown grasses, and dark green heather. Beyond, I can roughly

⁵¹⁹ Laing, p25

⁵²⁰ Laing, p25; and Wilde

⁵²¹ Wilde

make out where the finger of land ends, jutting out towards the middle of the loch, where the dark waters ripple with strong currents and rumours of depth and danger. The finger points to a small island, crouched in the middle of the loch end, overgrown trees trailing into the waters. At the low end, a rocky beach, and the high end rising to a steep cliff face pressed against the wind sweeping in from the wider end of the loch. Too picturesque to seem real but too isolated to fit the pastoral warmth of tourism, the island is a strange and dark postcard.

While much of the evidence of ghosts of place is drawn from personal experience, subjectivity is an appropriate position from which to form our thoughts, because of the specificity of place, Bell proposes.⁵²² This is significant in our understanding of the social experience of place.⁵²³

We check in, taking a room at the rear of the hotel, with two double beds and a view out over the lawn and the kayaks and the green sail boat and this tiny cove of the loch. It is summer now, but the silent memory of winter months runs beneath the bubbling murmurs of the few other tourists in the dining room at dinner, beneath the clink of glasses behind the bar, beneath the sounds of telephones and doors opening and closing and the other ordinary hotel sounds. Some visitors here are hikers, using this hotel as their base camp from which to climb the surrounding mountains. Others, like us, are just passing through. Most hotels have a sense of passing through, but the visitors here are somehow more absent already, ghosts of the futures they are headed towards, already apparitions of somewhere else.

‘We often use the word ‘ghosts’ to refer to the scary spirits of the unsettled dead – to

⁵²² Bell, p816

⁵²³ Bell, p831

disturbed souls who came to a bad and frequently unjust end, and who haunt our anxious memories,' notes Bell, but, he explains, what he means when writing about ghosts of place is the broader idea of a sensed presence that haunts a place and makes it seem socially alive. 'Ghosts in this broader sense may be unsettled and scary, but they can also be rooted, friendly, and affirming – and they are never dead, although they may be of the dead, as well as of the living. The ghosts of place may seem uncanny at times, but they are nevertheless a familiar and often homey part of our lives.'⁵²⁴

My sister and my mother settle into conversation in high-backed armchairs in an alcove in the small communal lounge area, looking out through bay windows across the water. I take the hand of my tiny, fidgety niece, and we head outside and crunch along a gravel path beside the hotel and onto the neat lawns. Around the side of the hotel, the lawn opens out into a long and steep grassy slope leading down from the hotel car park area to the water. We run down it, climb back up, and then we lie on our sides and tumble down it, and then we run back up again, rolling down it again, and again, and again, filling the silence with our squeals of laughter and broken, breathless chatter. Never too close to the dark water, though. We keep rolling and running until we are worn out and happy. We stop on the lawn in front of the hotel's rear windows and we wave to ours inside and they wave back. We puff and laugh and talk about stuff, and then we start to head back around the side of the hotel and up the slope one last time. As we walk around the corner of the hotel, I idly notice the end of a small dirt path that leads away into long grass, up a gentle rise and along the ridge of the finger of land, away from the hotel, towards the water, towards the island.

On February 12, Robert Campbell of Glen Lyon and his nephew-in-law, Macdonald's son, sat around a table late into the evening, playing

⁵²⁴ Bell, p815-816

cards. They made plans to dine with Alistair the next night.⁵²⁵ Later, dreadful orders arrived. The soldiers were to attack their hosts at five in the morning, as they slept, and to kill every Glencoe man under the age of seventy.

One of Alistair's sons was less trusting than his father or brother, and stayed up watching from a corner of his brother's house after the others went to bed. He noticed the guards doubling at their posts, and overheard some of them talking about their reluctance for what lay ahead. He roused his brother and, after a lengthy discussion, managed to convince him they were in the imminent danger. The two brothers then rushed to try and warn their father, but they were unable to save him.⁵²⁶

Later, as the light fades, my sister carries my sleepy tiny niece to our shared hotel room and to bed, and my mother and I wrap ourselves in extra layers and head out for a walk. We start along the dirt path beside the hotel. The path quickly rises and then flattens out, following the ridged spine of the small jut of land towards the loch and the island. We don't talk much. Near the end of the ridge, the path curls away to the right, towards the sail boat cove, and dips down towards the water. We follow it around, peering through velvet dusk at leaves and flowers on strange plants, we who have travelled here from far away, we who are the strangers in the home of these weathered bushes. We point out, to each other, the oddities we see: an alien flower here, a curiously curled tree branch there. At the top of the ridge, we pause before a large information panel, printed text and diagrams on weatherproof board. In the dusky light, we lean in to read the story of this place. The Isle of the Dead. The plaque provides a brief history, which tells of three clans in the area who, no matter their disagreements, would all come to mourn and bury their dead on the same island. I wonder who wrote this plaque, and whether they live in the area (still).

In the morning, I wake thinking of the island.

⁵²⁵ Laing

⁵²⁶ *Gallienus Redivivus*

Bell expands further on the idea of an inherent social meaning of ghosts, noting how, in the process of living, as both an individual and a part of a wider community, we conjure up the ghosts of place:

The ghosts of place are, of course, fabrications, products of imagination, social constructions. The ghosts we find in places are always our ghosts, that is, ghosts of our own imaginations. Because they are our ghosts, what we make of them is what counts.⁵²⁷

As we connect place with meaning, we converse with the ghosts of place. In this interchange, the ghosts contribute to our constructed meaning of place even as they are constructed by our understanding of where we are.

In front of the hotel, at the water's edge, the orange and yellow kayaks lie in a gaudy, grinning row. I can see them from the hotel room window. They call to me.

Over breakfast in the hotel dining room, as the little one stabs a fork into a bread roll and eats it like a toffee apple, I announce that I want to go to the island. I'll hire a kayak and paddle across the short stretch of water. The only other building in sight of the hotel is a small Swiss-chalet-styled shop right next door, with a sign out the front advertising boat hire. I lean into the heavy wood frame and the front door reluctantly swings open. Inside, the shop is dim, empty of customers but busy with racks of wet weather gear and boat accessories and gift cards and kayak paddles and other boating bits and pieces, crowded into every corner of the wooden building and across the walls, tall racks of equipment climbing towards the open, peaked roof. A woman with a cloud of dark hair and a rugged woollen jumper smiles warmly at us from her seat at a chunky wooden counter.

⁵²⁷ Bell, p831

We smile back, and mooch over to a low shelf displaying pieces of slate painted with bright impressions of local wildlife. We murmur about how great the little paintings are, and my mother picks up a hand-sized piece with a fox, sparks in its eyes and rusty orange fur bright against the smooth dark grey. She turns it over in her hand and then passes it to me. The cool flat stone is heavy in my hand but alive with the colours of the painting and a shiny gloss of varnish over the top.

‘Do you paint these?’ my mother asks the woman, across the room.

‘Yes,’ the woman says, her eyes brightening, ‘on local slate. Pieces from the old mines.’

She gestures somewhere behind her, in the direction of the glowering hills. She tells us that she lives locally, in an old miner’s cottage, and how she came here for a change from the borderlands down in England, came to find somewhere to get away and just... paint.

‘And run a boat shop,’ she laughs, spreading her arms wide to indicate the overstuffed room around her.

She tells us that it was nice at first but she didn’t realise just how dark those tiny miner’s cottages get in winter. How very dark the days are; short days with little sunlight, and so much cold. Her initial joy at her new solitary freedom had soon turned to isolation, loneliness, and depression. She’s not sure she’ll stay here another winter; might have to change again, move on.

The loch looks slightly more ruffled than yesterday, but the waves don’t seem large and I ask about kayaks. The woman rustles up a man from somewhere in the back of the shop, and he almost seems to appear from beneath a large pile of orange life jackets. His face is ruddy and his grey hair reminds me of the small waves skidding across the dark water. He

is short on words but he seems to be trying his best not to laugh at the image of us struggling to steer small boats in a direction other than anywhere the deep undercurrents would have us go. Danger, he mutters from beneath a thick moustache, shaking his head patiently, eyes firm but kind. There is danger deep in those dark waters. This much he knows. The strength of my disappointment surprises me, when it was until now only a whim to visit the island, and we have plans to leave this place soon, anyway. But there is another boat, with a motor, and this man with his deep and untroubled understanding of the danger in the loch agrees to take us out to the island. He arranges to meet us in fifteen minutes, at a small boat dock within easy walking distance from the entrance of the hotel car park.

We wait on a short wooden pier to which three or four small boats are moored. As the sun comes out from behind clouds, I take a photograph of my mother standing on the wet boards, rugged up and ready in an orange life vest. Slim brown corduroy pants. Camouflage gumboots speckled with gold glitter, twins of the boots on my feet, bought yesterday, for five pounds, from the basement of chain store Primark, in the centre of Edinburgh. The wind tousles her short, bright red hair and flushes her cheeks with cold. Her eyes narrow against the glare of the sharp, white daylight, and she smiles. I will remember this.

Bell comments that Walter Benjamin referred to the sense of memory in an object as ‘the aura of the original’. Perhaps, too, our memories of place take the form of a ghost of place, imbuing the place with a certain aura, a feel to the place.⁵²⁸ Perhaps we not only take our memories with us, but also leave some shadow of them behind.

⁵²⁸ Bell, p.

The brushy man tromps down towards the small dock in his cabled jumper and sturdy black rubber boots. He greets us and begins to unmoor a small metal motorised dinghy. He guides us as to how to get in and where to sit in the boat. I make my way onto a flat metal bench seat in the bow of the boat, and my mother sits in the middle. As he is preparing to cast off the boat, he asks about our reasons for visiting. I try to explain the walk the night before, happening across the island, the view from the hotel room. I struggle to explain the sensation in my gut that pulls me towards the island. But he's just making conversation and he doesn't seem critical of my answer. He tells us it's not the first time he's had this request. A lot of people visit the island to spend time at the graves of ancestors, tracing family trees. That seems to make sense to him.

'Do you have family on the island?' he asks, from beneath shaggy eyebrows.

'Oh no!' says my mother. 'Our family is from Wishaw, down South, near Glasgow, and also across on the West coast.' She doesn't explain how long ago we left Wishaw, and that we have another place we call home, now, but that she still carries with her the ghost of the small village, homesick for it not just in her dreams, but also in her waking moments, heart strings singing, sometimes gently and sometimes painfully strong, dragging her across the oceans and back there in any moment of memory. What she doesn't specifically say is that we are not Campbells; a name she doesn't want, a name that she knows often causes heads to shake and eyes to look away.

'Our sense of the rightful possession of a place depends in part upon our sense of those

ghosts ... ghosts makes claims about the territories of social life. Ghosts are political.⁵²⁹

I turn my face towards the front of the boat and I hold on to the metal edges as the man climbs into the rear of the boat. I look out, away from the dock and across the broad mouth of the loch. We sit not much above water level in this small boat, and I can feel the strong currents gently pulling at the bottom of the boat, whispering promises of sinking, of cold, sweet depths, and of the darkness of death and time passing slowly, forever.

The growling motor and the rushing wind silence us. One hand on the tiller, the man steers the boat out into the loch to clear the tiny pier but almost immediately veers right sharply, in a large arc around the finger of mainland. Within minutes, our left side is aligned with the tip of the island, its small cliff faces topped with long grass and some melancholy trees. The man continues to follow a curved, invisible path, sweeping us along towards the low end of the island and a landing point of large flat rocks. He allows the motor to idle as he guides the boat to shore, jumping out to drag the boat in close to the rocks and hold it steady while we cautiously climb out.

Loud roars the spirit of the storm
On rending, roaring, whirlwinds borne,
And whistling flies the heath ;
But not the ruthless tempest's rave,
Nor the loudest fury of the wave.
Nor storms fierce pouring from the north,
Was half so loud, as howling forth,
Approach'd the ghost of death.⁵³⁰

The boat man says he'll be back in an hour and my mother and I give him a brief wave as he leaves. We laugh, but we hope he really does come back.

⁵²⁹ Bell, p832

⁵³⁰ R.G. 1810 (June 30) 'Glencoe Massacre' *The Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 4.23

We make our way across rocks slippery with algae, onto a tiny beach of dark grey stones. We spy a barely-worn path, trailing up a small slope from the beach to disappear over a crest into the main part of the island. My mother unclips her life jacket and discards the bright orange skin on the beach. I take a bit longer, fiddling awkwardly with cold hands at the buckle, and when I look up, my mother has already started to climb the short stretch of dirt path. I pick my way carefully across both loose and anchored stones and by the time I reach the bottom of the path, my mother has already vanished over the crest, swallowed from view by the tangle of bushes and long grass.

At five o'clock in the morning, on February 13, in those darkest hours before dawn, the MacDonalds were brutally killed: shot, stabbed, burned alive. Alistair MacIain was shot as he rose from his bed to greet the guests of his house. 'His wife was stripped naked by the soldiers, who tore the rings with their teeth from her fingers.'⁵³¹ She died the next morning, from the injuries and trauma of the night's events. Thirty-eight people died that night, hosts killed by visitors in their own homes. The clan's cattle were driven off or slaughtered on the spot. Homes were burned to the ground. Women and children were undressed and left to wander in the snow, to find shelter or to else to die. Those who could fled the vale, with around 300 people seeking some kind of desperate respite in the hills, hiding in the wind and raging storm, wrapped in a dark, cold cloak of mid-winter snow and nature. Alistair's two eldest sons were among those able to escape, along with his baby grandson, the future 14th MacDonald Chief.⁵³² The newly homeless fugitives crouched among heather on the same peaks they had seen every day from the warmth of their homes. Many died from the cold.

The vaulted cliffs rebound the cries,
Of thousands sunk ne'er more to rise,
To death's dark kingdom driven ;
Death raises all his voices round,
The hills give back the dismal sound,
The ghosts of night on aether borne,
Encrease the roaring of the storm ;
And rend the vault of heaven.⁵³³

⁵³¹

⁵³² Birkett, p39

⁵³³ R.G.

I climb the short, steep slope, with the help of some exposed tree roots, and I follow a path of dark earth between long green grasses and overgrown bushes, beneath the arms of large trees thick with flat green leaves, blossoming with tiny white star-shaped flowers. The path opens out onto a small plateau, and ahead I can see the tip of the island and the loch stretching out deep and blue into the distance. To my right, a field of long grasses scattered with arched gravestones gently slopes down to meet the cliff edge of the island and the sea, the side of the island not visible from the hotel. Beyond them, the loch waters again, and beyond that the pine tree slopes creep up to rocky crags. The sky is gunmetal grey and wind blows in off the water and across the island, enough to move the grasses in the field like the rolling waves of an inland ocean. The wind whips my hair across my eyes and out behind me and cuts me off in a solitary traveller's silence.

Death's done his worst, the deed is done ;
Now groans are dying all around,
Now calms the bloody wave ;
While from the north the driving sleet,
Pelts heedless on the sons of date,
The clotted gore's their winding sheet,
The drifted snow their grave !⁵³⁴

The overgrown path leads me alongside a small cluster of weathered tombstones, Celtic crosses and ornate decorations, all cut from dark grey slate dug from the timeless deep of nearby mountains, and covered in lichen. I come across my mother: she has wandered off the path to the left and she squats, silent, before a small grave. There is enough wind that I couldn't speak to her from this distance even if I wanted to and I wander away along the path, following it as it gently rises towards the cliff tops at the head of the small island. I tread lightly along the path, trying to avoid walking on graves, and I am slow and steady in my steps. I stop to read a tombstone's engraving here and there, pausing for an extra moment at the grave of a reverend writer.

⁵³⁴ R.G.

I reach the end of the island. I am cautious, unsure of exactly where the solid ground of the island tumbles over the cliff edge to rocks and loch waters below, unsure if the height would be enough to kill me or if it would be the cold waters of the loch and hidden currents that brought my death. I can't see much through the thick, long grass but I guess the solid ground is where the tombstones stand straight and the path does not wander. At the highest point of the island, the furthest most tip of the land, two identical tombstones stand side by side, their thick, flat curves of dark stone looking down across the full length of the loch, the speckled green and brown mountainsides enfolding them in arms of highland stone and long days and months and years, centuries, of history. This view across the waters, this view I share with the stones and the grass and the overgrown path. The view of the sleepers is eternal, still; mine transient, to be carried away with the wind and my memory when we leave this place.

‘When we, through ghosts, make space place, we treat that spirited space with ritual care. We approach it with more measured step. We find that its aura calls out from us our faculties of wonder. We resent as defilement practices that fail to do homage to the ghost of ghosts within.’⁵³⁵

I read the names and feel some kind of significance attached to them in my stomach, but I don't know if I am connected to them. I don't know anything about this place, other than the brief description of a tourist plaque and a feeling in my gut. I am a stranger.

Turning away from the cliff edge, I look to the field in the centre of the island. The edge of the island is dotted with headstones, but the centre patch looks entirely clear. I think of the plaque's story of three clans in the area, who would put aside their quarrels to allow

⁵³⁵ Bell, p820

each clan to bury their dead on this island. I can see them now, meeting in the centre of the field. I begin to move towards that clear patch in the island's centre, but the long grass, whipping in the wind, hides a sharp slope down from this higher ground to the field below. Suddenly, I am slipping, and my legs are sliding out from under me, and when I do manage to find my feet, unsteady, I am standing chest deep in long grass, at the bottom of the slope, no hope of returning back up.

And all across the field, the wind bends the long grass, rattles the straw heads heavy with arrow seeds. Overhead, a steel grey sky balloons with dark clouds.

I stand tall, find my balance in the strong breeze, on the uneven ground, and I pick my way through the long grass to the centre of the field. There are no headstones in this part, as far as I can tell. Just tall grasses with moss and tiny blue flowers at their feet. I don't know why, but it feels right to lie down in the long grass, sinking slowly down below the brittle straw surface of the tall dry grasses, down through layers of light green, until the short dark green tufts at the base cushion me. I lay my head back among the tiny blue flowers, and I lie with my hands folded across my stomach. I look up at the grey clouds scudding across a dark grey sky. I can feel the wet brown earth beneath the thick fabric of my duffle coat. I think of the sleepers resting deep in the ground all around me. I try to imagine lying here for a very long time, for eternity, but I can't imagine that much time. I wonder if there are creatures crawling through the moss and grass towards me or if there are ghosts in the spaces between the long grasses, whispering to me. I lie there for a while.

'The ghosts of place are not only ghosts of the past; they can be as well of the present, and even the future. However we locate them temporally, the ghosts of place are always

presences and as such appear to us as spirits of temporal transcendence, of connection between past and future.⁵³⁶

I begin to wonder whether I am lying on old graves. Rationally, I am okay with my own quiet respect but, regardless, a little voice somewhere in my mind asks any ghosts to forgive me any trespasses. I lie in the field, silent, in this place. The grasses above me sway pale green and golden against grey. I sense living things in the dark, damp earth beneath me. I am on their island. Maybe they are just insects but maybe also not. I don't really understand what I am sensing but I feel a weight, and I feel the here and now of this moment.

Ah ! Who can hear, or who can tell,
The bloody deed, the mournful tale,
Without one feeling tear ?
Each homely roof, a grave the while !
Each rural cot, a funeral pile !
Each bed a bloody bier !⁵³⁷

When I rise from my resting spot, I stand tall and I take a deep breath, filling my lungs to bursting with crisp, clean air. I look down at the vague impression where the grasses have bent with the weight of my body, but there is already little trace of my ever having been in this place. I pick my way back through long grasses, down the length of the field, to find my way back to the path where I began my circuit of the island. I find the little path and soon I am sliding back down the steep slope of the path to the beach, where my mother is already standing on the rocks, fastening her life jacket. The boat is slowly approaching the landing through dark ripples. I pick up my life jacket from the beach and slip my arms into it.

⁵³⁶ Bell, p816

⁵³⁷ R.G.

‘Did you stay in that one spot?’ I ask my mother.

‘Oh, I explored a bit’ she tells me, ‘but something drew me to that section and I spent most of my time looking at each grave there. I wanted to see the names, read the stories.’

News of the massacre rippled in a wave of horror across not only Scotland but all across Europe, including an account in the *Paris Review*.⁵³⁸ The plan to suppress the clans and impress the might of the king on the Scottish people backfired in public sentiment, and, additionally, instead of being cowed and silenced, the Scottish clan subjects were loud and angry.⁵³⁹

The king wagged his finger sternly at his ministers, who turned to point their fingers at each other. But despite a formal enquiry, the soldiers involved in the massacre were not punished but exonerated.⁵⁴⁰

Although some argue that the Campbells were just pawns in a cruel game of politics and power, the name has been dirtied in the Lochaber region. Even today, the front desk of the Clachaig hotel displays a plaque stating ‘no hawkers or Campbells’.⁵⁴¹ Robert Campbell of Glen Lyon never recovered from the weight of the deeds done under his command that cold February night in Glencoe, and eventually died of alcoholism.⁵⁴²

I tell her, briefly, of my own circumnavigation, drawing an arc in the air with my finger to illustrate. I try to remember the names on the graves but they are already fading. But this place and its ghosts, I will remember.

My mother laughs. ‘Oh yes, I did keep going from that spot. I just wandered where the paths and my instinct led me. I found older graves, older names, some with very unusual carved symbols, and I just... I sat with them for a while.’

The man springs his sturdy bulk lightly from boat and holds its nose steadily pointing at the shore as we clamber in. He eases the boat out and we head back across the rippling water; motor rumbling, spray flicking up in our faces. At the dock, we thank the man and he

⁵³⁸ Wilde

⁵³⁹ Laing, p26

⁵⁴⁰ Laing

⁵⁴¹ Birkett, p39

⁵⁴² Wilde

farewells us but he doesn't ask what we saw, what we felt. No doubt he knows what the island is like. We leave him to tie the boat to the small landing, and we head back to the hotel.

Before nightfall on February 13, survivors began to come down from the hills, to return to Glencoe and mourn and bury their dead. The body of Alistair MacIain, 12th Chief of the Glencoe MacDonalds, was laid to rest in a grave on Eilean Munde, the Isle of the Dead.⁵⁴³

The island is still tended by local MacDonald descendants, who make an annual trip across the dark waters of Loch Leven for this purpose.⁵⁴⁴

Nearby, in Glencoe Village, a small monument stands in memory of the massacre. Surrounded by a spiked fence, the small cairn is built from rocks most likely brought from the slate quarries that opened in the area one year after the massacre. From the top of the cairn, a tall celtic cross rises into the sky; at the base, a plaque with these words:

This cross
is reverently erected
in memory of
McIan chief of the Macdonalds
of Glencoe
who fell with his people
in the massacre of Glencoe
of 13 Feb: 1692
by his direct descendent
Ellen Burns Macdonald of Glencoe
August 1883

Their memory liveth for evermore⁵⁴⁵

'You know, ghosts don't just appear. They come back. In French, we talk of them as 'returning', Derrida tells us. 'Now that presupposes a memory of the past that has never taken the form of the present.'⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴³ Wilde; and *Eilean Munde*, online at http://macinnes.org/eilean_munde/eilean_munde.html, last accessed 15/08/2016

⁵⁴⁴ *Eilean Munde*

⁵⁴⁵ Wilde

⁵⁴⁶ Derrida, in *Ghost Dance* (film) 1983 dir. Ken McMullen, West Germany: Channel 4 Films

We collect my sister and the small child, and we pack our things into the hire car. As we drive away from this place, I put on a song we all know the words to. The summer sunshine brightens the road as it stretches out before us. We sing along, the little one in the back bobbing her head and curving her hands, moving them like the small waves on the surface of the dark loch.

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The Uncanny, the Reader, the Writer, the Unconscious, and the Creative Self

The position of the self in relationship with the stranger relates to creative writing, in that this is also the relationship of the creative writer to their writing. This thesis advocates an engagement with the Uncanny by occupying the space between self and writing in order to treat writing and the ordinary as uncanny strangers, so that writers might see in new ways.

Sigmund Freud writes about the paradox of the Uncanny in creative writing: the way some things which are uncanny in real life are not uncanny in literature, and how literature provides many opportunities not present in real life in which to experience the Uncanny.⁵⁴⁷ Freud suggests that the Uncanny is better experienced in literature because writers have control over the effects of their writing, and can therefore create a sense of the Uncanny. Freud asserts that the experience of the Uncanny found in literature provides a much richer understanding of the concept than we can readily find in real life, and that writing involving the Uncanny ‘embraces the whole of this and something else besides, something that is wanting in real life’.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁷ Freud, Sigmund 2003 (1919) *The Uncanny* trans. McLintock, David, London: Penguin Books, p156

⁵⁴⁸ Freud, p155; and noted in Schwenger, Peter 1995 ‘Uncanny Reading’ in *English Studies in Canada* 21.3, 333-345, p342 as Freud p249

The Something Else Besides

But what is this ‘something else besides’, this remainder, of which Freud writes? Hélène Cixous writes of a remainder in literature, a something more which is beyond thematics.⁵⁴⁹ And Paul de Man notes that the elusive ‘something’ that inhabits literature and language cannot be reduced to a simple matter of aesthetics, any more than to a theory of psychoanalysis, as Freud suggests.⁵⁵⁰ Robin Lydenberg notes that Freud’s essay on the Uncanny is soaked through with this something else, allowed to seep into Freud’s text through the narrative techniques he uses in his anecdotes.

What this suggests, as articulated earlier in this thesis, and as proposed by Freud, is that perhaps the Uncanny is best experienced in literature, but perhaps, also, as discussed earlier, writing the Uncanny is not merely a matter of using Freud’s list of uncanny ingredients to construct a story. The writer seeking to engage with theory of the Uncanny would be well-advised to cross a threshold of knowledge; to move beyond aesthetics and enter into a deeper relationship with ghosts of place and time and literature. To dive deeper into an immersion in theory.

The Uncanny is inherent to the experience of both reading and writing. When we engage with words, we take ourselves to a between place. Nicholas Royle remarks: ‘One tries to keep oneself out, but one cannot. One tries to put oneself in: same result’.⁵⁵¹ Reading and writing, like the Uncanny, are simultaneously both familiar and strange, and we are doubled when we engage in either.

⁵⁴⁹ Cixous, p528 in Lydenberg, Robin 1997 ‘Freud’s Uncanny Narratives’ in *PMLA* 112.5, 1072-1086, p1073

⁵⁵⁰ Paul de Man, p8, in Lydenberg, p1073

⁵⁵¹ Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The Uncanny: An Introduction* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p16

Reading as Uncanny

Most of the time, we forget the strangeness of reading.⁵⁵² But, as Peter Schwenger suggests, reading is itself an uncanny experience, in ‘its ability to call up phantasms, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar’.⁵⁵³ We willingly lose ourselves to the haunting of a text’s ghost world, offering our consciousness as a host to become temporarily possessed by the text, a cohabitation chosen by the reader. Schwenger writes: ‘Not merely being absorbed in his book, the reader is absorbed *by* it, to the point of being taken over by an alien existence’.⁵⁵⁴ We become just a phantasm in the pages of the text, in between words, and we forget who we are, for a while. We enter into a strange succubus relationship with the text, feeding on the text, bringing it from the past into our present, even as the text also feeds on us, ‘prolonging its life like a vampire, by feeding on the present.’⁵⁵⁵ As Schwenger suggests, ‘language alone allows us to conceive of what is always absent: the supernatural.’⁵⁵⁶

Reading takes advantage of our ability to imagine a whole other range of identities for ourselves; for a while, we become both ourselves and others. Following Poulet’s ideas, Schwenger describes the divided subject of a reader, when part of the reader’s consciousness is entirely absorbed into the book:

There is a certain critical distance in any act of reading. Most readers will agree with Poulet that their subjectivity while reading is in a sort of divided trance. Vigorous actions are received by us passively; there is a certain delay between our feelings and those of the book’s subject; the book’s events concern us greatly and at the same time have nothing to do with us.⁵⁵⁷

When we read, we are happy to be submerged because we recover the lost, earliest experience of an absence of distinction between mind and matter,⁵⁵⁸ in the uncanny space of reading. What we find ourselves facing in this space is our experience of self as double, both

⁵⁵² Schwenger, p340

⁵⁵³ Schwenger, p341

⁵⁵⁴ Schwenger, p333

⁵⁵⁵ Schwenger, p335

⁵⁵⁶ Schwenger, p340

⁵⁵⁷ Poulet, in Schwenger, p334

⁵⁵⁸ Schwenger, p340

familiar and strange. This sensation is unsettling but one we recognise from our earliest experiences of the world. As Schwenger explains:

Hesitating on the boundary between natural and supernatural, the boundary created by language, we are disturbed but this is a familiar sensation, we recognise it from that time in our childhood when we stood between mind and matter and saw our self.⁵⁵⁹

The dividing moment of the infant seeing themselves in the mirror returns, and our self is not erased but doubled. Schwenger, after Poulet, asserts that the greatest advantage of reading: ‘is that I am persuaded by it that I am free from my usual sense of incompatibility between my consciousness and its objects’.⁵⁶⁰ The self is divided between being in the text and out of the text, and we are aware of this, Schwenger asserts: there is a ‘separation from the interior while reading’.⁵⁶¹ Our consciousness doubles and merges with the book; as Schwenger, after Poulet notes: ‘Reading creates a common consciousness between exterior reader and interior book / meaning of words – between author and reader’.⁵⁶² Such is the radical effect on the self of doubling through reading that, before people came to understand internal doubling, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century medical writers warned against excessive reading in case it caused the reader to hallucinate.⁵⁶³

Language, through our structured relationship with words and knowledge, encourages us into this space. Where the mind would project images onto the no-space of a blank page, type creates those images, restricting the mind to them. This constraint is even more obvious since the printing press and standardised text; the act of reading such neat words causes the page to disappear.⁵⁶⁴ The page becomes that space within which we are an integral part of the

⁵⁵⁹ Schwenger, p341

⁵⁶⁰ Schwenger, p334

⁵⁶¹ Schwenger, p334

⁵⁶² Poulet, in Schwenger, p335

⁵⁶³ Castle, in Schwenger, p337

⁵⁶⁴ Schwenger, p338

text. But, Schwenger reassures us, we are never completely taken over: ‘We are never lost in a book to the point of no return.’⁵⁶⁵

In fact, most of the time, we forget the strangeness of reading.⁵⁶⁶ This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s view that, most of the time, we forget the strangeness of existence.⁵⁶⁷ The liminal status of fiction and our engagement with it, existing both here and not-here, is a reminder of language’s reality-making properties. The writer-reader relationship, through words, allows the repressed to return, in the spaces created by language’s natural slips and cracks.⁵⁶⁸

Distance and Words and Silence

The Uncanny is about words but also and even more about spaces and gaps and silences. Royle notes that Freud’s ‘*The Uncanny* is a great text about how to do things with silence, as much as “how to do things with words”’.⁵⁶⁹ Psychologist Deborah Britzman advocates for an engagement with a text that acknowledges the spaces within it and constructs meaning involving and from those spaces.⁵⁷⁰ Britzman writes: ‘Psychoanalysis proposes that we learn to read between the lines, study what we dismiss, read for the gaps, mishaps and misrecognition, and read for where the text resists our meaning.’⁵⁷¹ Julia Kristeva explains that both poetic writing and madness signify a return to the repressed maternal, to the semiotic stages that exist pre-language or at its limits. In the semiotic stages, our identity is

⁵⁶⁵ Schwenger, p340

⁵⁶⁶ Schwenger, p340

⁵⁶⁷ Heidegger, Martin 1953 *Being and Time* Albany: State University of New York Press, p54

⁵⁶⁸ Schwenger, p341

⁵⁶⁹ Royle 2003, p86

⁵⁷⁰ Britzman, Deborah P. 2012 ‘What is the use of theory? A psychoanalytical discussion’ in *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education* 19.1, 43-56

⁵⁷¹ Britzman, p44

not stable.⁵⁷² Where we encounter the Uncanny, we once again experience this forgotten pre-language stage, and this can disrupt our sense of self.⁵⁷³ Kristeva suggests that poetic language is connected to the semiotic, the pre-language mirror stage, through sound, rhythm, and bodily feelings, and, therefore, poetic language disrupts our tendency to become stuck in the symbolic.⁵⁷⁴

Perhaps, then, the key to creating writing in response to the theory of the Uncanny is to remind the reader of the anxieties of existence and the instability of identity. This can be achieved by exploiting language's ability to make the ordinary strange. According to Jacques Derrida, our identity exists as an uncanny visitor in the realm of language.⁵⁷⁵ Within narratives, writers can destabilise the reader, which can lead to the reader thinking in new ways about the ideas and voices within the text.

Deborah Britzman suggests that narrative has the ability to acknowledge and make room for the difficulties inherent in language, and this allows us to consider our relationship to words and to the unspoken language of the unconscious:

Imaginative works freely admit the difficulties of the speaking subject: for instance, the fictions made when our motives forget their objects or hold them too close; or when, for example, our words mean more than we want and carry wishes for things we cannot have. Literature, or the world of words, permits free association to the drama and reverie of language and invites us to wonder about our own magical thinking, and the shock of its disclosure'.⁵⁷⁶

This 'shock of disclosure' Britzman refers to is the Uncanny, in its sense of the bringing to light that which was hidden, and the shock of recognition which accompanies that revelation.

⁵⁷² As noted by Laura Deane in her essay 'Psychotic Fictions and Terrible Truths' (2005: 78), referring to Kristeva's 'A Question of Subjectivity: an interview' (1989: 129 and 131). This realm is inhabited most frequently, Kristeva says, by the artist, the saint and the mad person (in McCredden, p25). It is only after the stage of development defined by Jacques Lacan as the mirror stage that childish narcissism is repressed, in an act of forgetting.

⁵⁷³ Kristeva 1989, in Deane 2005

⁵⁷⁴ Kristeva, in Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson 2006 *Writing: self and reflexivity*, 3rd ed. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p7

⁵⁷⁵ Derrida, in Royle 2003, p129

⁵⁷⁶ Britzman, p44

Through language, we are united and also divided, doubled. Todorov, citing Jean Piaget's ideas on a child's perceptions, notes that 'early in mental development, there exists no precise differentiation between the self and the external world' ... 'what creates that differentiation is the subject's accession to language'.⁵⁷⁷ We imagine, as a fantasy of perfect communication, the ability to communicate without words, a wish for a world without uncertain theory, and words break our sense of omnipotence.⁵⁷⁸ But writing is unifying and restorative. Writing attempts to speak what cannot be spoken, and to name the unnameable, writes Hecq.⁵⁷⁹ In moments when we lose our ability to speak, and almost lose our self, such as when we are faced with overwhelming grief, approaching mourning through creative writing is a 'necessary process to the restoration of selfhood', according to Hecq.⁵⁸⁰ This is the doubled, uncanny nature of writing.

'Writing is bound by two silences: the one from which it emerges, and the one towards which it tends,' Hecq writes. The writing process involves a duality of conversation between the self and the non-self. Until we experience death, this can only be understood as a dialectics of death and other: 'its twins, doubles, mirrors, ghosts, daemons, antagonists or secret-sharers.'⁵⁸¹

Reflexive Practice and Writing as Uncanny

Nicholas Royle urges us, feverishly, to create writing that veers. He asserts that it is:

a writer's responsibility (which can include a certain irresponsibility) to make language veer, show it veering and be faithful to its veering, to attend to a spectral strangeness, the foreignness within a language, to explore the limits of language and what is beyond.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁷ in Schwenger, p340

⁵⁷⁸ O'Shaughnessey, in Britzman, p54

⁵⁷⁹ Hecq, Dominique 2015 *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* Bristol: Multilingual Matters, p143

⁵⁸⁰ Hecq, p190

⁵⁸¹ Hecq, p137

⁵⁸² Royle, Nicholas 2009 'On creative and critical writing, environments and dreaming: veering' in *Textual Practice*, 23.6, 913-933, p919

Creating with this imperative in mind leads to the kind of writing which leaves room for ghosts to creep in. Self-aware writers who can see the ordinary more clearly can see the familiar and the unfamiliar and Cixous' 'something else besides'.⁵⁸³ Acknowledging and creating from a position on the threshold, in in-between spaces where words exist and do not exist, between language and the unconscious, enables us to create new knowledge. Writers can transport existing knowledge into new and strange territory, and writers can also return from strange new encounters, to bring new ideas into the mesh of knowledge already stored in the unconscious.

Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson suggest that it is only when we stop trying and become absorbed in the work, when we lose ourselves in the writing, that the process of writing begins in earnest.⁵⁸⁴ They request that writers create a space between themselves and their writing, 'in order to let it develop a life of its own'.⁵⁸⁵

But writing is often an intensely personal experience, a process of 'wriggling through [one's] own labyrinthine psyche', as Jennifer Diski describes it.⁵⁸⁶ As Hunt and Sampson write, this separation from the self can feel traumatic.⁵⁸⁷ We might advocate distancing, but 'if we think about this carefully for a moment, the idea that creative writing is a process of moving away from our own self seems insufficient to describe what is often an intensely personal experience: especially when we are drawing on our memories or trying to capture in words a particularly strong or painful experience'.⁵⁸⁸ For many established authors, writing isn't possible without a deep connection with the self.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸³ [Cixous reference](#)

⁵⁸⁴ Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson 2006 *Writing: self and reflexivity*, 3rd ed. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p1

⁵⁸⁵ Hunt & Sampson, p2

⁵⁸⁶ Diski 1998, p45, in Hunt and Sampson, p1

⁵⁸⁷ Hunt and Sampson, p2

⁵⁸⁸ Hunt and Sampson, p2

⁵⁸⁹ Hunt and Sampson, p1

Hunt and Sampson highlight the obvious contradiction this creates. Writing is deeply personal and intrinsically linked with the self but it also involves ‘moving away from the self, and becoming impersonal’.⁵⁹⁰ This ‘impersonality’ is really a matter of adopting a different stance towards the personal, to create a kind of internal distancing, and, as Hunt and Sampson suggest, ‘allowing space to open up between ourselves and our material, so that it can develop a life of its own in our imagination.’⁵⁹¹ This approach lets us bring our skills in creative writing to the work but to create work which includes the something else. As Hunt and Sampson write, this distancing creates a writing space within which we can ‘bring our already-incorporated knowledge of the craft of writing to bear on this material, so that it can be transformed into art’. But the dilemma remains, as to how writers might stand in a space which is dually personal and impersonal, home and yet not home. Hunt and Sampson pose the question: ‘How can we simultaneously access and objectify our deeply felt material?’⁵⁹²

In answer to this question, Hunt and Sampson propose that one approach lies in reflexivity. Creative writing is a reflexive practice,⁵⁹³ and ‘reflexive practice gives us the ability to distance ourselves from ourselves’.⁵⁹⁴ At the heart of reflexivity, they write, is a particular kind of engagement with an ‘other’.⁵⁹⁵ In this way, as Hunt and Sampson articulate:

reflexivity involves not *getting rid* of the self, but *doubling* the self: distancing ourselves from ourselves to a greater or lesser extent, so that we have a sense of standing outside ourselves and observing what we are doing and thinking.⁵⁹⁶

Hunt and Sampson, as well as Scott Lash, are very specific in defining reflexivity in comparison with reflective practice.⁵⁹⁷ Where reflective practice contemplates the ‘I’ as the

⁵⁹⁰ Hunt and Sampson, p1

⁵⁹¹ Hunt and Sampson, p2

⁵⁹² Hunt and Sampson, p2

⁵⁹³ Hunt and Sampson, p5

⁵⁹⁴ Hunt and Sampson, p4

⁵⁹⁵ Hunt and Sampson, p4

⁵⁹⁶ Hunt and Sampson, p4

⁵⁹⁷ Hunt and Sampson, p4; Lash, Scott 2003 ‘Reflexivity as Non-linearity’ in *Theory, Culture & Society* London: SAGE 20.2, 49-57, p50

subject writing, reflexive practice is the subject immersed, writing both personally and impersonally. 'Where reflection could be said to involve taking something into oneself ... for the purpose of contemplation or examination,' Hunt and Sampson write, 'reflexivity involves putting something out in order that something new might come into being.'⁵⁹⁸ The reflexive writer is not a fixed single ego outside of the writing but is themselves a work-in-progress, both the work and the writer constantly shaped by the people and structures and pre-existing writing they encounter.

For Jacques Derrida, there is an unbridgeable gap or *différance* between ourselves and our words, and therefore the use of words in speech or writing always involves a doubling of the self, or 'being two-to-speak'.⁵⁹⁹ This way of describing doubling provides an apt illustration of the position of the reflexive creative writing researcher. There exists a creative tension between action and reflection within the writing process. This tension holds a space between processes we understand and those of which we are less conscious⁶⁰⁰ This space matches Adam Bresnick's description of the position of the subject of an uncanny experience, where, he writes: '...in the uncanny experience, the subject palpably perceives the fact of his being inhabited by the constitutively foreign psychic agency of the unconscious.'⁶⁰¹ The self is doubled, both conscious and aware of the unconscious. This pushes the uncanny experience beyond a passive observer experience, into one which fundamentally undoes the idea of a single, unified self. Bresnick writes:

The uncanny thus would not merely be something a given subject experiences, but the experience that momentarily undoes the factitious monological unity of the ego, producing what Freud describes as an effect of "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self."⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁸ Hunt and Sampson, p4

⁵⁹⁹ Derrida, 1992, p153, in Royle, p127, and in Hunt and Sampson, p5

⁶⁰⁰ Hunt and Sampson, p7

⁶⁰¹ Bresnick, Adam 1996 'Prosopoetic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffman' in *The Germanic Review* 71.2, 114-132, p117

⁶⁰² Bresnick, p117

Responding to Breton, Kevin Brophy suggests that we have engaged in a new way of writing after psychoanalysis, which involves surrender to our unconscious double. Ying-hsiung Chou describes the process of writing as more than an act against the backdrop of power structures, but rather as a process involving the self. Chou suggests that:

writing often has more to do with coming to terms with self, or more prevalently in modern times with the transcribing of the loss of self. More often than not, writing involves constant releasing and retrieving of self.⁶⁰³

Chou states that writing is about representation, and that representation changes according to time and place. This means that contemporary writers seeking to represent the personal, including the unconscious and the un-representable, are affected by the uncanny tendencies of representation that make it so specific to time and place.⁶⁰⁴ ‘A still-life belongs to time, and we, speaking beings, to the stillness that encompasses the experience of the unconscious,’⁶⁰⁵ writes Dominique Hecq. She advocates for a consideration of subjectivity, of the Lacanian Real, that realm we describe as the unconscious, in discussions of creativity. Hecq describes the surrender to our unconscious as a turning point for writers, and this suggests to her that creativity cannot be forced.⁶⁰⁶ These theorists all articulate the idea of a relationship between self and not-self, conscious and unconscious, as significant to creative writing practice.

Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe discuss creativity as a generative outcome of the cycle between the creative practitioner and their research, through a methodology driven by

⁶⁰³ Chou, Ying-hsiung 2007 ‘Can the Uncanny Be Represented?’ in *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 23.1-4, 97-121 and 375-376

⁶⁰⁴ Chou

⁶⁰⁵ Hecq, p171

⁶⁰⁶ Hecq, p138

reflexivity.⁶⁰⁷ Reflexivity in creative practice occurs, they write: ‘when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response.’⁶⁰⁸ The generative cycle of stimulation and creative response relies on the creative practitioner knowing the familiar so well that they can recognise the unfamiliar, the new and the strange. Haseman and Mafe, after Sullivan, describe a ‘shock of recognition’ that comes from a new research finding, and its significance in practice-led research cycles:

It is this “shock of recognition” that marks a key step in the way practice-led researchers find their way through the ongoing state of emergence which characterises their research studies.⁶⁰⁹

Creative ideas may arise which are unexpectedly and radically distinct from the inputs that serve as the groundwork for the creative product.⁶¹⁰ As processes and methods are followed, emergent, novel outcomes occur. The patterns of the creative process create an environment of continuity, familiarity, against which the new and unfamiliar create a visible and identifiable contrast.⁶¹¹

As Scott Lash points out, reflexivity presumes non-linearity, because it involves destabilisation and disequilibrium.⁶¹² And according to Laurel Richardson, to be accessible, contemporary research should engage the reader using different forms of narrative.⁶¹³

Dominique Hecq advocates a ‘methodology of active consciousness’, which she defines as a process of acquiring new knowledge in three steps: inductive, deductive, and retroactive. New knowledge emerges not from dialectic between conscious and unconscious,

⁶⁰⁷ Haseman, Bradley and Daniel Mafe 2009 ‘Acquiring know-how: research training for practice-led researchers’ in *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, eds. Smith, Hazel and Roger Dean, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 211-228

⁶⁰⁸ Haseman and Mafe, p219

⁶⁰⁹ Haseman and Mafe, p219

⁶¹⁰ Goldstein, 2005, p3 in Haseman and Mafe, p219

⁶¹¹ Haseman and Mafe, p219

⁶¹² Lash, 2003

⁶¹³ Richardson, Laurel 2004 ‘Writing: A Method of Inquiry’ in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, and Patricia Leavy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 473-495

but in relief, Hecq proposes.⁶¹⁴ Using theory to trigger creative work is different from using theory to inform creative work, Hecq writes. In order to inform, theory needs to resonate with the emotions as well as the intellect. Hecq advocates for creative writing research to be approached as ‘a triangulation of two seemingly mutually exclusive discourses, one recognising the reality of the unconscious, and the other the importance of rational and critical process’.⁶¹⁵ In other words, theory needs to connect with something in the unconscious. This can be achieved through an immersion in theory.⁶¹⁶

Freud says the creative type is better able to access the unconscious and can use this, in conjunction with rational writing tools, to transform his fantasies into art and allow others to enjoy them without shame.⁶¹⁷ Hecq concurs, with her suggestion that writers are more actively connected with the unconscious than other researchers while reading theory, as we are always on the lookout for new material, whether or not we realise it at the time, and, therefore, we proceed from this position in our research.⁶¹⁸ We are already seeking out new knowledge in the space between familiar and unfamiliar. Hecq notes that psychoanalytic theory makes the unconscious its organising point, but the unconscious is largely inaccessible to us. However, we can access it, to a certain extent, through self-examination or reflection on process.⁶¹⁹ The new knowledge produced through this kind of research can involve writing concepts and hybrid forms, a new focus on poetics and style, or new research findings on the meanings of language and subjectivity.⁶²⁰

Hecq’s ‘methodology of active consciousness’ involves a process of bringing to the conscious something that had been hidden in the unconscious.⁶²¹ The term ‘methodology of active consciousness,’ Hecq writes, ‘highlights the active participation in the reflexive

⁶¹⁴ Hecq, p69

⁶¹⁵ Hecq, p156

⁶¹⁶ Hecq, p68

⁶¹⁷ Freud, 1908, in Hunt and Sampson, p4-5

⁶¹⁸ Hecq, p69

⁶¹⁹ Hecq, p69

⁶²⁰ Hecq, p69

⁶²¹ Hecq, p73

method of inquiry'.⁶²² Hecq suggests that this kind of reflexivity is significant to an 'explorer' relationship of the writer to creative writing research. She explains that, by 'explorer', she means writers who take a problem-finding approach, starting from a question, not knowing what they are doing until they have done it. Rather than following a plan, an explorer starts from a question, which may be an image, a phrase, or just a rhythm. Through a series of small insights, we can construct meaning through a process where we rework, analyse and connect many small insights to each other consciously.⁶²³

What Hecq's idea of an explorer relationship to research offers writers is a practical approach to learning to see the other more clearly, and also to see the self in new ways. In this process of connecting creative writing with the unconscious in a reflexive approach, the writer is herself transformed: exploring the relationship between ourselves and our writing process can lead to a changed sense of the self.⁶²⁴ As Donald Winnicott suggests, both creativity and self-development occur in the space between inner and outer: in creating art, the artist opens up the possibility of being transformed.⁶²⁵

Reflexivity, Hunt and Sampson suggest, involves the writer making a home in this space between inner and outer:

It involves creating an internal space distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both 'inside' and 'outside' ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up the experience of 'self as other' whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self.⁶²⁶

Grounding in a familiar sense of self relates to a particular time and space, and, when writers take a reflexive approach, these aspects of experience can form an important and integral part of writing. Dominique Hecq writes: 'an alertness to ideological positions enables writers to

⁶²² Hecq, p73

⁶²³ Hecq, p73

⁶²⁴ Hunt and Sampson, p6

⁶²⁵ Donald Winnicott, 1971, in Hunt and Sampson, p7

⁶²⁶ Hunt and Sampson, p4

become aware of the underlying influences of their own socialisation processes'.⁶²⁷ Heather Hopkins firmly locates the self in time and space and the structures around it, and she writes: 'Through reflexivity, the individual is able to assign meaning to experience and assume responsibility for a self which is rooted in time and space, and has a unique matrix of meanings to which reflexivity continually affords coherence.'⁶²⁸ Reflexivity gives us a way to perceive the position of self within an engagement with the other. Connecting reflexive practice to the social sciences, Etherington embraces the ability to display, in writing, the full interaction between the writer and research participant, 'so that our work can be understood, not only in terms of *what* we have discovered, but *how* we have discovered it.'⁶²⁹ For creative writers, the unconscious is often the research participant, the subject of enquiry, as well as the other. In this thesis, I have embodied my research through the presentation of creative and critical writing, and I have engaged the reader as participant in the making of new meaning. I have embodied myself, as writer, in the series of braided travel essays that form some of the creative components of this thesis.

Anxiety and Writing

The reflexive creative writing researcher, positioned in such a way as to gain a new perspective on the ordinary, is at great risk of anxiety. This is a significant part of the process. With the unfamiliar in the familiar, with the Uncanny, comes anxiety. As Hecq describes it, when we create cracks which enable new knowledge to slip out from the unconscious, we destabilise our self enough to let in angels or demons. And this catches us off guard; as Hecq writes, 'Suddenness as a way of perceiving something unexpected, accidental, out of context,

⁶²⁷ Hecq, p68

⁶²⁸ Hopkins, Heather 1986 'Temporality and Reflexivity: Toward the Creative Engagement of Consciousness' in *Human Relations* 39.7, 635-645, p636

⁶²⁹ Etherington, Kim 2004 *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Ourselves in Research* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, p32

entirely new, entirely alien, outside of the planning of anticipation, is one of the forms in which anxiety surfaces in narratives.’⁶³⁰ From a framework of psychoanalysis, Hecq suggests that ‘it would be fair to say that we all write out of the need to negotiate anxiety’.⁶³¹ Even as we embrace the shock of recognition in encounters with new knowledge, practice-led research is ‘unruly, ambitious and marked by extremes of interpretive anxiety for the reflexive researcher.’⁶³² The transformation of the researcher comes with some anticipation that change will be difficult, and this brings with it anxiety.

Something quite personal must be killed off in order to play with new theory, Deborah Britzman explains.⁶³³ The writer’s unconscious resists the death of the unknowing, former self, which must occur for new knowledge to be realised. Britzman writes: ‘Anxiety anticipates that a great deal will be lost should something more be thought and brings, through phantasies of learning and teaching, the emotional logic of resistance to theory.’⁶³⁴ But we can train ourselves to tolerate this opening of the mind to new and creative thought, by actively listening to the many alternative understandings constructed by the mind’s defensive mechanisms of closure, leaving the researcher mind and research questions open where possible.⁶³⁵ ‘To change one’s mind,’ Britzman proposes, ‘means one must be willing to question what is already in the mind and perhaps learn why reasons are not an alibi.’⁶³⁶

Britzman proposes writers learn a theory of reading that pays attention to life, the life ‘where passion turns against its best made plans, where accidents devise meaning, and where words defy and are deceived by the gravitational pull of the mind’s lost objects – to notice what else communication carries.’⁶³⁷ We must subscribe to the proposal of psychoanalysis mentioned earlier, that we ‘learn to read between the lines, study what we dismiss, read for

⁶³⁰ Hecq, p191

⁶³¹ Hecq, p94

⁶³² Haseman and Mafe, p220

⁶³³ Britzman, p44

⁶³⁴ Britzman, p44

⁶³⁵ Britzman, p44

⁶³⁶ Britzman, p46

⁶³⁷ Britzman, p44

the gaps, mishaps and misrecognition, and read for where the text resists our meaning.⁶³⁸

Our best playground within which to think about our theory of theory is a space of creative writing. As Britzman writes, one hundred years after Freud's endorsement of creative works of literature to help us to navigate the world, Julia Kristeva also advises us to keep reading; or rather, she tells doctors that if they are to enter into relations of suffering, they must read very long novels.⁶³⁹ Writers should continue to put themselves into in-between spaces, while acknowledging the path taken to arrive at this place.

In offering a greater understanding of our position and biases from and within an existing conversation, reflexivity helps writers to question the ordinary, and its existing knowledge, and to seek out new knowledge. As Hunt and Sampson write:

Taking responsibility for the time and place we occupy is part of the challenge we take up when we choose to become writers. Another is to develop a relationship with the literary traditions out of which we write.⁶⁴⁰

The significance of this space and time, these words, in the conversation of literature across time: this position right here, right now, helps us understand better the relationship between the self and the not-self, of the conscious to the unconscious.

Encounters with the Unconscious

Lessons learned become part of the unconscious 'toolkit' in the background of our writing process, once we have acquired new knowledge and gained confidence in our new skills.⁶⁴¹

As discussed earlier in this thesis, Brophy writes that we know we have acquired new knowledge when the knowledge becomes a higher order skill, one that we can access with the familiarity of a kind of 'second nature', when the knowledge and the skills it brings have

⁶³⁸ Britzman, p44

⁶³⁹ Britzman, p44

⁶⁴⁰ Hunt and Sampson, p54

⁶⁴¹ Hunt and Sampson, p7

become relatively automatic or unconscious.⁶⁴² ‘These unconscious or preconscious processes,’ Brophy writes, ‘are not merely automatic sequences of learned behaviour, but are resilient, versatile, sophisticated and flexible learned thinking and decision-making processes.’⁶⁴³ At this point, the conscious, our self-awareness, and the unconscious work together in constructing creative writing. ‘It (consciousness or self-awareness) merely ‘receives’ the results of memory, associations, analysis and decision-making conducted out of reach of this conscious awareness.’⁶⁴⁴ Creative writing can help us to develop a more fluid and flexible relationship with ourselves, to become what Kristeva calls a ‘subject-in-process’ with a non-fixed identity, an identity shaped by experience as an ongoing process.⁶⁴⁵

When we immerse ourselves in theory, we agree to be shaped by an immersion in theory. To become familiar enough with theory of the uncanny, to bring this stranger into the home to the point that it becomes part of the writer’s unconscious writing toolkit, the writer’s best approach is to put herself into the space where the uncanny resides. But in doing so, she is likely to herself be transformed.⁶⁴⁶ The writer is a subject in progress. The writer is a work in progress.

⁶⁴² Brophy, p2

⁶⁴³ Brophy, p2

⁶⁴⁴ Brophy, p2

⁶⁴⁵ Hunt and Sampson, p7

⁶⁴⁶ Brophy; Winnicott and Hunt and Sampson

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16: Sister

Elise drinks more pints with the dark-haired girl, and, when they finally step out into the chilly Glasgow evening, the sky is dark with a foggy orange glow. It has rained at some point, while they were inside. In the black cocoon of the taxi, some strange kind of jetlag vertigo hits again and Elise looks out at the slick streets gliding past and she looks across at the girl. Audrey's profile is sharp and suddenly that of a stranger and Elise wonders, for a brief moment, where she is. Audrey chats to the taxi driver as they travel. He has a thicker Glasgow accent than Audrey and Elise can't understand everything he says, but she catches some of it. The driver asks about Elise and about the reason for her visit to Glasgow.

‘Aye, to visit me, of course,’ Audrey replies with a grin. ‘Am I not worth it?’

Oh yes, the taxi driver replies, with a wink in his voice. And Glasgow is a fine place. But he's just returned here, after living in Belgium for a year, and he is not yet sure it's not the biggest mistake of his life. Elise doesn't understand the last part of what he says, and turns to Audrey with a quizzical look.

‘He says,’ Audrey explains in a low voice, ‘that it might be home but the living here isn't as easy.’ And then she is talking to Elise about the places they are passing and then they arrive in a small side street and everything looks different again, and the vertigo subsides.

The cab stops where Audrey points and they pay into the slot behind the driver's plexiglass screen and spill out together onto the paved footpath. Audrey leads the way inside, off the street, through a security door and into one of the blocks of flats of the many on the

small street, and into a tiny foyer area and up some stairs. The green walls of the staircase are severe and the grey steps do nothing to help her feel comfortable.

‘Ex-tenement,’ Audrey sings, over her shoulder as she starts up the stairs. Her quiet voice echoes in the stairwell, bouncing off the cement walls.

The rail curves away under Elise’s hand as they climb. She makes way on the second floor landing for Audrey to use a key in the lock of a heavy door, and then they step inside.

Audrey shows Elise down the tiny hallway to the living room and she gestures towards a couch. Elise sits on the couch, her back to a window looking across the narrow street and into the windows of another old sandstone tenement building. Audrey stands tall on her toes to reach two wine glasses in a high cupboard of the open corner kitchen. She fishes out a bottle of red wine from a cupboard below the sink, and a corkscrew from a drawer next to the stove.

Audrey, fingers full of future wine-filled conversation, sits beside Elise, and hands her a wine glass. They sip wine and they talk about things. Any things. All kinds of things. Everything, except for Emma and the dark-haired boy.

But somewhere, sometime, in the cosiness of the flat and the wine and the bubble that seems to have formed around them, Audrey begins to talk about her sister.

‘When we were little,’ Audrey says, ‘a friend of our mother’s told her she should dress us the same. How cute it would be. But she thought it would be cruel, kind of not letting us each be ourselves, do you know the way? So she would dress us similar but not quite the same. Maybe I’d have a wee blue dress and she’d have a wee red one. That kind of thing. And we’d wait for our time and we’d swap our clothes. I’m almost certain our mum knew

we'd done it, but she wouldn't let on. And we'd get more and more giggly until we just couldn't hold it anymore and then we'd just...' Audrey takes a deep breath.

'We'd just be falling about on the ground, laughing.' Audrey stops abruptly, staring hard at the carpeted floor. She wipes the back of one hand into the corner of an eye. Elise reaches her arm out towards Audrey, not knowing what to do. She rests her hand there on Audrey's shoulder for a moment but then, after a very brief moment, she takes it back to her lap, awkwardly.

Audrey stands and moves to the small corner kitchen. She fills the kettle from the kitchen sink tap and flicks the switch to start it boiling. She keeps her back to Elise, and when she asks if Elise wants tea, the words are muffled and she sounds far away.

'Uh, sure,' Elise replies.

The few feet of night air between them is crispy and Elise pulls her cardigan closer around her. She sits perched on the couch and watches silently as Audrey makes tea. Audrey pours the boiling water into two cups and carries them to Elise. She sits beside Elise and places the cups on the carpet at their feet. She seems nervous, and Elise wonders what she can do, wishes desperately to bring the space between them back to a more comfortable place. She wonders whether Audrey might kiss her. While Elise is wondering what to do, Audrey takes a sip of tea, and seems to make up her mind about an idea far away.

'And now I have something to show you.'

And the vertigo sweeps across Elise like a huge wave. It crashes down around her head and spins her down in a spiral towards the floor, through her whole body, but she tries to focus on Audrey.

Audrey is reaching into a small wooden box.

She pulls out three photographs and she hands them to Elise.

Elise looks at the first photograph: the back of two dark-haired heads. Two twin heads of long, dark hair, and a lake and a pine-covered mountain in the background.

Elise looks at the next photograph. She is stunned into a moment of sharp intensity as she sees what she, for the briefest instant, thinks is her own face. The girl is standing, close up, with Audrey, and in that same realisation Elise feels a chill run up her spine. She leans in harder, to look more closely at the photograph. The two young teenagers stand beside each other, arms draped behind their backs, leaning into each other and smiling. Audrey's hair is long and dark and the other girl's hair is the same. She reaches one hand up towards her chin, to touch the blunt ends of hair. And then, the sliding sensation is gone, and Elise sees that the photograph is clearly of Audrey and a twin.

'She looks a lot like you,' Audrey says.

In that moment, Elise understands. She understands mostly that she can't just handle what is happening here. She understands that the boy doesn't matter and she has found whatever she came seeking. And she understands that she can never get to know Audrey because the ghosts are too large. Death and a missing twin are ideas too big. She understands that she needs to stop looking. She needs to go home.

'I'm going to leave in the morning.' Elise.

'Okay.' Audrey.

As they brush their teeth together, side by side reflections in the tiny bathroom's mirror, Elise can't help seeing the similarities between her reflection and Audrey's. But she only looks in tiny glances. Audrey catches Elise's gaze in the mirror and smiles, a sad smile,

and Elise tries to smile back through toothpaste, but her heart feels cramped and sore, and she definitely doesn't know where she is anymore.

17: Edinburgh, stone heart

Elise walks on the beach, late afternoon, with Rhoana. It is a small, secluded beach; only one or two other people have come down from the houses to stroll with a dog or poke the ground with a long stick. The sky is dim with the darkness creeping in, grey with potential rain, and it suits her mood. The colours in her friend's scarf are muted but still stand out from the surrounding pebbles of the beach and the still grey water. They stop to look back across the river at the more familiar parts of Edinburgh, and also out to sea, across dark, calm waters to small islands full of military relics, across at the danger lights of the Forth Bridge. A train glides across the bridge, lights golden and bright against the indigo creeping into the darkening sky. Elise stands on the hunched back of a dark grey rock sticking out from the beach and she spreads her arms wide. She breathes in and she breathes out. She jumps down and runs to the sea but hesitates near the water's edge, mindful of the hole in her shoe and the cold of the wet sand. Right at the point where the water blows bubbles at the seeped shore, she finds a small stone shaped like a love heart. She picks up the stone and brushes the sand away with one thumb while she listens to her friend imagine her future. Elise thinks of the dark-haired girl and she slips the stone into her coat pocket, holding it there, feeling its cool, hidden curves.

They walk further along the beach, talking about the small specks of islands in the distance. Neither of them knows enough local history to do anything more than guess, so they make up stories about them. On one, forgotten people, still living in a deserted mental institution, left behind when the staff returned home forever one day. On another, an old man

who watches the sea every day through a brass telescope, waiting for a ship to return, a ship that will never appear, as his life story draws to a close, day by alone day.

Elise presses her chin deep into her scarf and remembers saying goodbye to the dark-haired girl. Audrey, standing out on the footpath as Elise climbs into a cab. Audrey, wrapped in a blanket against the chill of the early morning air. Audrey, dark hair tousled and eyes soft with sleep and sadness. Audrey, assuring her they would see each other again, putting on a stern tone to stifle Elise's welling tears. How she knew that Audrey was lying and that this was a final goodbye.

Elise takes the stone from her pocket and throws it into the water. They turn to head back along the beach to Rhoana's home, where a meal and a bottle of red wine are waiting for them. Rhoana pauses to wait for Elise's dragging feet to catch up.

Conclusion

Starting from a very broad and simple question of how to represent the darkness of life in contemporary creative writing, this thesis embarked on an exploration of the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny. Through all strange lands explored, I have carried the question of what this exploration of the Uncanny might offer to contemporary creative writers.

The exploration changed shape as the critical theory immersion took hold. Initially, the creative writing that came out of this exploration too artificially exposed the Uncanny and this led to a large discard pile. At one stage, I considered presenting a collection of failed writing experiments as a thesis. But then a different kind of writing slowly began to emerge from my reflexive consideration of my work within a framework of all of the theories encountered in my research, and this grew into writing that expressed the concepts of the Uncanny at a deeper level. In the end, this thesis moves beyond its simplistic starting point and demonstrates valuable ideas about the relationship between creative writing and theory, using the Uncanny as a pivot point. As my exploration continued, the research question changed, to ask what an immersive engagement, through creative writing as research, in the Uncanny, might look like, expressed in contemporary creative writing.

The thesis presents an exploration into many different aspects of the Uncanny and its value to creative writers. This thesis holds the form of a many-sided structure, which the thesis discussion flips in order to spend some time immersed in the ideas on each side. I have travelled to the beginnings of the Uncanny, its roots deep in Gothic fiction. I have tracked the Gothic to my homeland of Australia, when the idea of home is significant to the Uncanny. I have located examples of the Uncanny within contemporary fiction, and identified how

Uncanny motifs such as loss of home and submerging can introduce the Uncanny and the disruption it brings. I have played with creative processes to produce writing that uses these motifs and concepts in contemporary realistic fiction, and it is from these that the *Stranger* fictional piece emerged. *Stranger* provides a significant contribution to this discussion as one of the main threads in the overall braided essay of the thesis, and as an example of research-led practice in creative writing. This is contemporary fiction developed in close engagement with theory of the Uncanny.

I have engaged in an ever deeper immersion with the Uncanny, examining what the Uncanny double might represent and how it has appeared in creative writing and how it has been perceived, from earlier times to now. I have bounced from the double to the stranger, exploring how writers adopting the position of stranger can gain new ways of seeing.

Seeking an appropriate form in order to talk about this writing, I found the braided essay, and my exploration paused for a moment to discuss the braided lyric essay form. The collection of braided travel essays forms one strong thread of the overall thesis structure braid, and these nested braided essays lend a shell-like form to both the thesis thread and the individual creative nonfiction pieces within it. These fragmented essays present representations of the conversation which occurs between research and practice when a writer is truly immersed.

I have traced the Uncanny to reading and writing, and this illuminates how enmeshed the Uncanny is in our basic relationship with words. I have discovered that my exploration in the space of the Uncanny is an experience similar to a space advocated by contemporary theories of reflexive creative writing.

I have discovered that perhaps travel writing is the contemporary ghost story: when we travel, we speak with the ghosts of place, past, present and future. The Uncanny is about

home and not home, familiar and not familiar, and one way to express this relationship is to locate the estranged ordinary.

In the end, I have constructed a strange mosaic from my adventures into each area of this discussion on the Uncanny. And here, at the end of the thesis, I find that along the way I have established several significant and practical points of interest to creative writers.

Creative writers seeking to represent ideas of home, borders, community, travel, identity and strangers would be wise to consider an immersion in the theory of the Uncanny. Once the Uncanny is part of the unconscious, the writer can engage in reflexive writing that will draw on this embedded knowledge.

Fiction written in response to theory on the Uncanny should be realistic, as it is from within this established ordinary that the strange can emerge. The key to creating writing in response to the theory of the Uncanny is to remind the reader of the anxieties of existence and the instability of identity, and this can be achieved by exploiting language's ability to make the ordinary strange.

Writing creative nonfiction that invites the Uncanny into the text best suits a form which fragments narrative and creates spaces, and the braided lyric essay is one such form. When writers chop up their writing and weave multiple narrative threads together, from this duality of fragmentation and unification new meaning can emerge.

Writers are best to position themselves in a space between the self and the writing, embodying the writing by including themselves, but staying true to the writing overall. Travel, literal or psychological, can bring new ways of seeing the ordinary. Writers should seek to temporarily distance themselves from their own experience of home, in order to find that reflexive space and to adopt a spirit of exploration in research and practice. An

engagement with theory on reflexive practice for creative writers can suggest some useful approaches.

These are all useful ideas for creative writers but also suggest some areas for further research. As will by now be quite evident, this area of research is broad and leaves a lot of room for further exploration. For example, I wonder whether this writing approach of immersion, reflexivity, fragmentation, and braiding, can provide new ways of writing stories told by multiple people or representing multiple contested histories. I would like to take my new approaches to writing into a research project tracing my family back home to Scotland, using a braided essay form to write creative nonfiction that merges my family history with current political and cultural discussions. Another further research question is how writers might focus, as this thesis proposes, on neither the self nor the not-self but on the relationship between different experiences to find productive new ground in writing about topical issues such as borders, ideas of community, and strangers, at both a personal and political level. Also, this thesis has touched briefly on but not found the scope to explore ideas around homesickness, and I propose a framework of theory of the Uncanny and the writing approaches discussed in this thesis could be useful in explorations into writing about homesickness.

The immersion in theory of this thesis exploration reaches across fields and ideologies and schools of thought. I have made full use of the liberties afforded me as a researcher within the field of creative writing, to borrow theory from my own discipline but also others, where it suits the discussion. I have taken passing snippets of theory and more fully fleshed ideas from various sources, as I saw fit to complement each idea explored. This thesis embodies a research process that fits what Doreen Massey describes as an ideal creative practice space, which is:

filled with constellations of connections, which serves as a vital incubator for risk taking, reflexivity and fearless critical thinking. Higher degree by research candidates working in this space move fluidly between thinking and making, allowing their creative practice to become informed and innovative. They draw on a community of practice – of thinkers and makers – to make the connections that form constellations in order to extend and expand what they would usually do.⁶⁴⁷

I have followed the advice of Laural Richardson, who writes that, to be accessible, contemporary research should engage the reader using different forms of narrative.⁶⁴⁸ I have found a friend in the eloquent articulation of Arianne Reis, when she describes her decision to present a reflexive doctoral dissertation:

In the case of my doctoral dissertation, a ‘traditional’ form of presentation would mask my own journey through this research, my contributions to the experiences, and my way of understanding them. The ‘messiness’ of the material I wish to present required, at least for me to be able to make sense of it, a rejection of linearity and an embracing of the idea that our thoughts, feelings and perceptions are formed in a circular process of ongoing negotiation and interpretation (Ronai, 1992).⁶⁴⁹

Hoskins also argues that the researcher’s voice should feature in the research text:

...how the researcher’s subjectivity becomes part of the inquiry opens the way for creative ways of writing research. One way to explicitly acknowledge researcher subjectivity is to integrate the voice of the researcher into the research text.⁶⁵⁰

At first, I tried to keep myself out of this thesis, but it was impossible. And so I have presented my exploration in its many forms and from all of the different perspectives I have inhabited in order to write about this exploration. I write from the position of a feminist, queer, cisgender, white, Australian woman with a Scottish heritage, and this flavours all of my writing and affects each of my research decisions.

⁶⁴⁷ Massey, in Batty, Craig and Marsha Berry 2015 ‘Constellations and connections: the playful space of the creative practice research degree’ in *Journal of Media Practice* 16.3, 181-194

⁶⁴⁸ Richardson, Laural 2004 "Writing: A Method of Inquiry" in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, and Patricia Leavy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 473-495

⁶⁴⁹ Reis, Arianne Carvalhedo 2011 ‘Bringing my creative self to the fore: accounts of a reflexive research endeavour’ in *Creative Approaches to Research*, 4.1, 2-18

⁶⁵⁰ Hoskins 2000, p56, in Reis

As I write this, at the end of a long process of research and practice, I am looking back at the past few years, and they have involved so many changes: death and illness and a complete fragmentation of my writing focus on more than one occasion. My sense of self and my perception of life in this time have changed and this influences my writing. This thesis is writing formed as a result of a creative writing explorer's immersion in theory but my identity also been shaped by my travels, both across the world and in encounters with new knowledge. I no longer remember how it felt to be the writer at the start of this process and I acknowledge that I am a work in progress.

It seems only fitting to return to Nick Cave at this final point. Cave, too, has been changed by time and events. After the tragic death of one of his fifteen-year-old twin sons in 2015, Nick Cave submerged himself in his work. His recent work includes a new album, and a documentary written and co-directed by Nick Cave, which portrays a fictional 24-hour period of his life. The film, titled *20,000 Days on Earth*, heavily features Cave's song writing process. At one point, speaking in haunted, earthy tones, the disembodied voice of Cave says:

Sometimes it feels like the ghosts of the past are all about and crowding in, vying for space and recognition. They are no longer content to be kept down there in the dark; they have been there too long. They are angry and gathering strength and calling for attention. They're clawing their way into the future and will be waiting there. Have I remembered them enough? Have I honoured them sufficiently? Have I done my best to keep them alive?⁶⁵¹

Cave's thoughts on his own process speak directly to the Uncanny and to other critical theories about death and ghosts and the way we tell stories involving them. He articulates his own position as subject and his relationship with his creative work.

In a documentary directed by Andrew Dominik, about Cave and his family after Arthur's death, Nick Cave comments on the way that life circumstances sometimes effect an immediate change, to the point where you look in the mirror and no longer recognise

⁶⁵¹ *20,000 Days on Earth* (film) 2015 dir. Pollard Jane, and Iain Forsyth, UK: Drafthouse Films

yourself. It seems so long ago that I travelled to see an exhibition of Cave's work, and wondered about the mood of the work and his creative process; a day of sunshine in another lifetime, so long ago. Cave's words are relevant to my sense of self, to my writing, and to ideas about the instability of identity held deep in the heart of the Uncanny:

Most of us don't want to change, really. I mean, why should we? What we do want is sort of modifications on the original model. We keep on being ourselves, but just, hopefully better versions of ourselves. But what happens when an event occurs that is so catastrophic that you just change? You change from the known person to an unknown person. So that, when you look at yourself in the mirror, do you recognise the person that you were? But the person inside the skin is a different person.⁶⁵²

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