LITERARY SUBJECTIVITY

A Lacanian Approach to Authoriality

&

POSTCARDS FROM DESOLATION ROW

Twelve Stories

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Ph.D.

2013

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Previous Publications

Sections of this thesis have been published elsewhere. 'The Cuckold, and Me' was first published in *HEAT* (2009); 'Gutted, for Carl Solomon' was first published in *Going Down Swinging* (2010); 'A Clean Heart' was first published in *Island* (under the title 'A True Heart') (2011); 'The Supermarket Play' was first published in *Text*: *Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* (2011); 'A Near-Death Interruption' was first published in *Mascara Literary Review* (2011); 'L'Inconnue de la Plage' was first published on The Lifted Brow blog and then in *The Lifted Brow eBook* (under the title 'Intravenous') (2012); 'The Rat in the Wall' was first published in *Hide Your Fires* (2012); 'Of Rivers and Blood was first published in *Overland* (2012); and 'The Ghost of Electricity' was first published in *Going Down Swinging* (2013, forthcoming).

Contents

Abstract

At the heart of this thesis is a seemingly simple set of questions: What is a reader? What is an author? And what relation do these two figures bear to one another? Taking as my starting point Roland Barthes's 1968 'Death of the Author' manifesto (and the subsequent amendment Barthes makes to this idea only a few years later), I draw on the work of Jacques Lacan to suggest we might come to think of the reader and author as one and the same figure, albeit at different stages of their psycho-literary development. Distinguishing between reality and the real, Lacan accounts for certain moments of symbolic rupture by introducing a second-order real: a jouissance after the letter. I propose that such moments occur in literary texts when the author manages to shrug off subjectivity and return, if only for the briefest instant, to readerly jouissance. Complementing this study of the real's continued encroachment on the symbolic is a discussion of the subject's progression from reader to author—in other words, the subject's shift from real to symbolic. As I show, the push toward authoriality is promoted in the first instance by the breakdown of a reader-author unity analogous to the child-mother unity seen in Lacan's writings and seminars, which introduces the necessary dimension of desire. In the final chapter of the thesis, I suggest ways in which this application of Lacan's theory can be used to support current creative writing pedagogies.

Exploring themes of identity, sexuality, masculinity, intertextuality, religion and family, the twelve stories included in the creative suite deal in some way or another with writing itself. Although no explicit link is made between the theoretical and creative components of this thesis by way of an exegesis, there is a noticeable relationship between the ideas espoused in the first section and the self-reflexive development of the

stories' narrators. Relying heavily on irony, pastiche and humour, these twelve stories complement the theoretical component by attempting to demonstrate the psychic interconnectedness of the reading and writing experiences.

Introduction

Psychoanalysis, Lacan and Literary Theory

It is necessary to remind oneself from time to time that Jacques Lacan was a psychoanalyst and not a literary or cultural theorist. This is especially so in academia, where Lacan's cross-disciplinary significance has all but eclipsed his status as a clinical practitioner—so much so that it does not seem ill-founded or unfair to suggest his name probably bears more weight in the humanities departments of today's universities than in the psychology departments. But, then, the same argument might be made of psychoanalysis in general, be it Lacanian, Freudian, Kleinian, Winnicottian, or any other branch of theory. A recent article published in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* looked at the prevalence of psychoanalysis in undergraduate programs across 150 highly-ranked colleges and universities in the USA and discovered that the number of humanities-based courses teaching psychoanalytic theory outweighed the number of psychology-based courses by a figure of 650 to 148. When broadening this search to include all academic areas, psychology was represented by a figure of just 13.6 per cent across the board. The authors of the article, Jonathan Redmond and Michael Shulman (2008), cite an attitude of incredulity, wherein psychoanalysis is viewed as lacking in scientific merit and thus not suited to studies in cognitive or behavioural "science", as a possible reason for the results. While this goes some way towards accounting for the absence of psychoanalysis from areas of psychology, it does not really explain why psychoanalytic ideas remain so popular outside of such departments.

To explain psychoanalysis's popularity outside of psychology, two answers tend to be put forward above all others: (1) that psychoanalysis is fundamentally more suited to areas within the humanities than psychology, and (2) that, as a theoretical set of

ideas, psychoanalysis's development, and even its survival, depends upon interdisciplinary scholarship. The well known feminist literary theorist, Toril Moi, for example, has noted that while the majority of practising analysts have rightly discarded Freudian and Lacanian femininity theories, such ideas remain central to the teaching of literary theory and cultural studies, where they 'are taught every year all over the world' (2004, pp. 843-4) and where they continue to open up new pathways both within and across fields. A similar point is made by Jean-Michel Rabaté (2003), Professor of English at University of Pennsylvania, who goes so far as to insist that Lacan owes his endurance and fortune in the English-speaking world to literary criticism. Pejoratively, the inference here might be that Lacan has taken refuge in the social sciences, following an exile from the hard sciences on grounds of psychoanalysis being "bad science". More positively, however, one might take Lacan's foothold in the humanities as evidence of him having found his way home. Either way, there can be no denying the extent to which Lacan's ideas have permeated the humanities. To scholars in fields such as literary theory, gender studies, feminism, queer theory, cybernetics, film studies and even socio-economic theory, Lacan has become as prominent and important a figure as any other and shows no sign of disappearing anytime soon.

Having said this, it is not within the scope of this thesis to determine the clinical worth of Lacan's ideas, nor for that matter to prove he makes a better literary or cultural critic than clinical analyst. I take for granted that Lacanian psychoanalysis has not yet come close to exhausting its clinical relevance, just as I am sure it still has a great deal to offer to the humanities. My reason for drawing attention to Lacan's academic status is to establish his particular set of ideas as a valid and accepted framework through which to undertake a study of literary subjectivity, which is ultimately what this thesis aims to do. Taking as my starting point a very basic set of questions—What is a reader?

What is an author? What relation do these two literary subjects bear to one another?—I draw heavily on Lacan's teachings to show how we might come to conceive of the reader and author as one and the same subject, albeit at different stages of their psycho-literary development. I am motivated by an incredulity toward all those theories that seek to empower one figure at the expense of the other, be it reader over author, author over reader, narrator over author, or any other dichotomy. Promoting this incredulity is my belief that every author is first of all a reader, that because nobody ever wrote a sentence without first reading a sentence there can be no study of authoriality without a contemporaneous study of readerliness, and vice versa.

It seems unlikely to me that Lacan would have been one to object to such an application of his ideas, either. With his own approach to psychoanalysis so heavily influenced by the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (not to mention the contemporaneous influence of non-psychoanalytic thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes), Lacan did not hesitate in distancing his ideas from the broader spheres of psychology and sociology, which he saw as the domain of behaviourists like Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. In Seminar XI—the seminar given in 1964, and commonly taken as the starting point of his "middle period"—Lacan tells his followers that psychology might succeed in shedding light on inversely reciprocal relations between beings within the animal kingdom, but where people are concerned, '[e]verything emerges from the structure of the signifier…human psychology cannot be conceived in the absence of the function of the subject defined as the effect of the signifier' (1998, pp. 206-7). At the heart of this claim, and in fact at the heart of Lacan's entire system of thought, is the proposition that for human beings language plays a *constitutive* rather than *constituted* role; and it is on this point that Lacan distances psychoanalysis from other schools of psychology. In its simplest form, Lacan

argues that it is language that shapes people, rather than the reverse. As social subjects, we are outcomes of the language we speak—or, more accurately, of the language that "speaks us".

The importance of language in Lacan's theorising is not limited to its early constitutive effects on the individual. It is true that for Lacan each subject must, at a young age, come to terms with themselves—that is, sketch out an ego—through a sort of internal negotiation process involving symbolic (linguistic) and imaginary (specular) registers. Added to this, however, is the understanding that language continues to temper the subject's experience of the world around them even after the formation of a relatively stable ego. Lacan extends this argument to the point of insisting that anything unable to be brought into the linguistic realm by the subject—that is, anything that cannot, for whatever reason, be symbolised through language—does not in the strictest sense exist. Psychoanalyst Bruce Fink explains Lacan's position as follows: 'In Lacan's terminology, existence is a product of language: language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized or put into words' (1997, p. 25). For Lacan, it is as simple as stating that there is no existence outside of language. Outside of language there is only *ex-sistence*: a term he borrows from the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, in order to refer to that which resists or comes before language. In his own terminology, Lacan also refers to this "outside of language" as the *real*, a concept Malcolm Bowie says, 'comes close to meaning "the ineffable" or "the impossible"' (1979, p. 134).

It is not surprising that such ideas should have resonated so strongly with literary theorists and critics. After all, attempts to outline the relationship between art and the real go back at least as far as Plato, who was of the view that 'God…created only one real bed-in-itself in nature' (1987, p. 424) and that the artist's interpretation is

at least a three-times-removed version of this first real object. Because literature, in a quite blunt way of speaking, is made of language, it too can be thought of as a kind of "effect of the signifier". What is a literary text, anyway, but a highly concentrated collection of signifiers working with and against each other so as to produce, in turn, some sort of affect or effect themselves (whether in the mind of the reader, or across texts, or whatever the case may be)? By construing reality as a symbolic abstraction—or structural phenomenon, to combine the language of Saussure and Heidegger—Lacan provides a model of the world that appears not too different from the one literary theorists and critics are used to working with, a world built entirely out of language. Taking Saussure's well known formula for the linguistic sign—that of the signified placed over the signifier—and flipping it on its head, it might even be argued that Lacan manages the feat of reducing the world to a kind of literary text itself—a space where signifiers, invested with desire from the unconscious, polarize, structure and finally give rise to new realities. As Lacan says in, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis': 'a language's [*langue*] world of meaning is born, in which the world of things will situate itself' (Lacan 2006, p. 229): surely an appropriate enough adage for those who subscribe to the view that it is life which imitates art, and not the other way around.

Of course, this is a very selective and deliberate interpretation of just one of Lacan's ideas. And as compatible as the notion may appear, it must be pointed out that Lacan never went so far as to completely align literature and reality, nor as far as I am aware did he ever speak of them as one and the same thing. But this is not to say that he was blind to the parallels between the two spheres. Following on from Freud's classic reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Lacan showed that he was equally aware of both the latent and manifest value of literature in the development of the psychoanalytic

enterprise. From his well known analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', to his response to Freud's reading of *Hamlet*, to his tongue-in-cheek suggestion that on account of 'his prick being a little craven…it was [James Joyce's] art that supplied for his phallic being' (1975-76, p. 7), Lacan did more than establish a whole new approach to literary criticism and theory; he showed himself to be the first practitioner of this new method, this *Lacanian* method. In this regard, then, we need hardly speak of "a literary application" or "literary interpretation" of Lacan's ideas, since such approaches have been present all along.

But as willing and active a participant in the discourse of literary criticism as Lacan himself may have been while he was still alive, there are those who have expressed some concern with the idea of the psychoanalytic-literary partnership. In the second paragraph, I used the term 'pejoratively' as something of a caveat, a recognition that it is not only psychoanalysts such as Redmond and Shulman who question the direction psychoanalysis has been forced into taking following its contact with the humanities, but literary theorists too who are often just as uncomfortable with this merger. Peter Brooks, who only reluctantly categorises himself a psychoanalytic critic[1] (despite his reputation as one being quite cemented), worries about the legitimacy psychoanalysis claims when applied to the realm of literature. In the opening chapter to his book, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, he writes: 'If the enterprise [psychoanalytic-literary criticism] has recently been renewed in subtle ways by post-structuralist versions of reading, under the aegis of Jacques Lacan, a malaise persists, a sense that whatever the promise of their union, liter-ature [sic] and psychoanalysis remain mismatched bedfellows' (1994, p. 20). For Brooks, part of the problem of applying psychoanalysis to literature is that the humanist origins of the discipline seem invariably

[1] 'I find myself resisting the label "psychoanalytic critic" – though no doubt I am one, in some sense still to be defined' (Brooks 1994, p. 20).

to result in humanist-style readings—readings directed toward either author, reader or character—rather than purely textual, rhetorical readings, as he would clearly prefer to be the case. For Brooks, if psychoanalysis is to prove a useful tool in analytical literary practices, it must stop viewing literature as a representation of the mind and look for deeper commonalities in the belief that 'the structure of literature *is* in some sense the structure of mind' (1994, p. 24).

A second critic to have expressed concern is Juliet Flower MacCannell. MacCannell is notably less dismissive of Lacanian psychoanalysis than Brooks, however, arguing instead that where Freudian approaches threaten to devalue the worth of literary texts by reducing them to little more than manifestations of an irreducible Oedipal drama, Lacan's ideas may actually be employed to win something back for literature. As she explains in her article, 'Oedipus Wrecks', it is by historicising the structures Freud takes as universal that Lacan shows the source of Oedipus's symbolic potency to be a basic linguistic paradigm and not an essential "truth" about human sexuality (1983, p. 915). As MacCannell sees it, Lacan challenges the classical Freudian approach by showing that the unconscious too is subject to the laws of language, meaning that there is an historical reality in everything—even the most apparently universal of narratives: Oedipus. To acknowledge this is, in a sense, to see parity in place of derivation.

Of course, the division here, between that which is universal and that which is historical, belongs to a much broader cultural shift—the shift from modernity to postmodernity. And while it was Jean-François Lyotard who defined the postmodern attitude as scepticism toward metanarratives (1998, pp. 36-7), it is Lacan who provides an alternative to the grand Oedipal narrative residing at the centre of Freudian

psychoanalysis. In 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud', Lacan writes:

> it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious…the idea that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts may have to be reconsidered…The primary reason for this is that language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development (2006, p. 413).

For those interested in seeing what insights Lacanian psychoanalysis might open up for literature, the shift in thinking here is valuable indeed. It not only mandates the decentring of the authorial subject, suggesting, as is typical of both postmodern and poststructuralist theory, that the author alone does not ensure the propagation of meaning; it also suggests that textual meaning is produced across subjects, in a structural process that must, in my way of thinking, incorporate both reader *and* author.

On the surface, this notion might seem obvious to the point of being virtually redundant: textual meaning occurs, or *happens*, in the interstice between author and reader. The two *rely on each other*. After all, is this not the most basic description of communication: one person passing a message on to another person, and in the process creating meaning? But as linguists have shown, even the briefest communicative exchange is not nearly as simple as it appears. Depending on the school of thought one subscribes to, there is a range of other factors to be considered here. For example, in addition to the roles of addresser and addressee, Roman Jakobson identifies four other elements essential to communicative exchange: message, code, contact and context (Eagleton 2008, p. 87), while the French linguist, Émile Benveniste, introduces a second addressee by differentiating between the linguistic and discursive 'you', and so on and so forth. What I am reaching toward in this thesis is not a theory of communication so much as a theory of development that relies on the internalisation of

literary structures. It is my view that when Lacan says that it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalysis discovers in the unconscious, he is necessarily implicating the figures of addresser and addressee—or, in our case, author and reader—in that structure.

What do I mean, though, by 'the internalisation of literary structures', and just how does this implicate the figures of author and reader? Regardless of the approach, it is safe to say that linguistic structures contain more than just signifiers, signifieds and/or signs. They also contain subjects. Granted, "subject" does not necessarily imply a flesh-and-blood human being; depending on the context, "subject" may be employed to denote the position occupied by a computer, or animal, or simple organism, or any number of non-human things. In literature, though, subject positions belong to the figures known to us as author and reader. But again, I acknowledge that these terms need not refer to literal people. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault, theorises an author as a function, for example, an 'ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning' (2010, p. 119); while the reader is often viewed as nothing more than an ideal or construct, an empty auditorium toward which the author makes their address. Undoubtedly, there is merit in such conceptualisations, but they do not comply with the first and most elementary answer one is inclined to give to the questions of what is an author and what is a reader: namely, that they are actual beings, people who write and who read works of literature. The internalisation of linguistic structures thus involves the internalisation of these two figures. Unconsciously, the subject is both a reader and an author, and the production of the text evidence of the communication between these two internalised functions.

Subjectivity, then, implies both a condition and a process, inasmuch as one *becomes* a subject, or *is* subjectified. Becoming a literary subject, an author, for

example, is something that happens to somebody who is not an author to begin with. The process of becoming an author is simultaneously the process of subjectification. Another way of viewing this is to say that becoming an author involves developing an authorial ego. In this sense, it is fair to say that there is an underlying humanist tenor to this thesis, which perhaps conflicts with the degree of poststructuralist theory used throughout. I treat the author as a subject—a subject brought into existence through their interaction with literature—but always as an historical subject, a subject whose existence has ex-sistential origins. Rather than a problem, I see this particular approach to poststructuralism as a point of interest. One of the most valuable insights that can be taken from Lacan's body of work is his triadic view of the world, which ties the imaginary, symbolic and real orders together in a Borromean knot 'where no element is privileged and each has a contingent status [and where] [e]ach order impacts on the other two' (Brown 2008, p. 238). The real may be an ineffable, impossible space, but this does not mean that it ceases to exact an influence on the subject.

I begin the thesis with a chapter entitled, 'Barthes's Return to the Author Paradox'. To a large extent, it is the problem addressed in this chapter that gives rise to the entire thesis. My concern with Barthes's treatment of the author is sparked by just a few lines that appear five years after the publication of his highly influential essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1968). The passage, which comes from a small book called *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), could well pass unnoticed if not for the direct link it bears to Barthes's better-known essay. In the passage, Barthes returns to the argument he seemed, more or less, to have finalised five years earlier, writing this time round that 'lost in the midst of a text…there is always the other, the author' (p. 27). As if to ensure the reader he has not forgotten past claims, he begins the next immediate paragraph with

the words, ‘As institution, the author is dead’ before finishing with, ‘I need his [the author’s] figure…as he needs mine’ (p. 27). It is a strange reversal, a paradox that beckons explanation: the author is dead, but is not dead; I call for the author’s death, but I need the author.

The lines, and, in fact the title of the book in which they appear, actually follow on from a passage printed in the introduction of a work published in 1971, *Sade Fourier Loyola*. It is in this lesser-known text that Barthes first suggests that the author may not be as dead as once proclaimed, not ‘but just someone on the critical list’ (Bradbury in Burke 2008, p. 21). ‘The Pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author’ (1977, p. 8), writes Barthes in 1971, and while the sentiment expressed in 1973 is no more or less puzzling, there is at least one further clue provided to the conditions of this return to the author. The passage in *The Pleasure of the Text*, which in total amounts to just two paragraphs, is kept apart from the sections either side and given its own chapter title: ‘Fetish’. Considering the serious attention both Freud and Lacan invest in explicating the role of fetish objects, a psychoanalytic approach to Barthes’s change of heart seems entirely appropriate here. In this chapter, I come to terms with the notion of the Death of the Author, before closing the chapter by comparing the figure ‘lost in the midst of the text’ with the Lacanian object *a*—an appropriation of Freud’s “lost object”.

In chapter two, I demonstrate the value of applying Lacan’s three-part system of thought to the realm of literature. The imaginary, symbolic and real have been likened by Slavoj Žižek to a game of chess, wherein the imaginary accounts for the names and appearances of the different pieces on the board, the symbolic for the rules one must abide by in order to play the game, and the real ‘as the entire complex set of contingent circumstance that affect the course of the game’ (2006, pp. 8-9). I use the triadic

structure in an equally analogous way, determining the fictitious matter of each text to represent the imaginary, the intertextual parameters of each text to correspond with the symbolic, and the fabric of language itself to bear something in common with the real. As is apparent even at first mention, there is an obvious conundrum with this use of Lacan's theory. For Lacan, language is the precise opposite of the real; the real, to recall Bowie's definition, is the ineffable. Recognising this incongruity, I attempt to establish a difference between literary, or textual, language and non-literary, non-textual language that mirrors the division between the symbolic and real in Lacan's thinking. I take the intertext as a model upon which to build this idea.

Chapter three introduces what is perhaps Lacan's most well known theory: the mirror stage.[2] It is because the mirror stage belongs to the problem of identification that Lacan, as Edith Kurzweil puts it, 'locates the individual's anticipation of the *self* in this moment, and invests it with all the complex emotions and intellections that go into one's future relations between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*' (1981, p. 425). In the context of the study being undertaken here, the mirror stage marks the moment at which the subject—who at this point in time is still a reader—reifies their communicative role in the production of the text by locating an image of themselves as a literary subject. What I mean by this is that for every author, there must come a time—prior to their becoming an author—when they begin to think of themselves as more than just a reader. The mirror stage, then, is a sort of intermediary point between readerliness and writerliness, a point at which this author-in-the-making first envisions themselves as an

[2] There is some contention about Lacan claiming credit for the mirror stage theory. In *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen says that 'Lacan's description of the mirror is far from being truly original' (1991, p. 47), and that '[o]ne cannot help being struck by Lacan's stubborn silence concerning this important debt' (1991, p. 249). The credit, Borch-Jacobsen points out, belongs to Henri Wallon, who as early as 1932 'had already drawn much the same conclusions as Lacan' (1991, p. 46).

author. The image produced is, like the Lacanian imago, invested with all the intellections necessary in the development of a fully-fledged authorial ego.

Moving on from the mirror stage, I use chapter four to finalise the subject's transition from reader to author. In doing so, I arrive at the question, Why write? It is one thing to demonstrate the transition from reader to author, but quite another to explain the compulsion to keep producing literary texts after the fact. Thus, the question divides itself into two: Why Write? and, Why keep on writing? No doubt, there is something Butlerian in this: the subject is an author only insofar as they keep on writing, performing the part of author again and again and again. Not surprisingly—given the quite clear links between the two theorists—there is also something innately Lacanian about this drive to repeat. If we take writing as an act not entirely dissimilar to any other act, then we need only determine what this particular act sets out to achieve. Writing has a goal; what is it? In an effort to answer this question, I return to the notion of object *a*, as Lacan himself did many times throughout his career. In the earlier periods, Lacan saw object *a* as a piece of the real that *insists* after symbolisation, which corresponds to the way I approach it in the first chapter of this thesis. By chapter four, though, I follow Lacan in his thinking and move from thinking of object *a* as an object of desire to the object cause of desire. On the understanding that desire 'does not seek satisfaction, but rather its own continuation and furtherance: more desire, greater desire!' (Fink 1997, p. 90), I suggest that the act of writing is fuelled by a desire to find a way out of writing: an unrealisable goal.

Philip Roth's self-reflexive fiction provides a starting point for the fifth chapter. More than any other author I can think of, Roth uses his writing to come to terms with his function as an author. His writerly alter-egos grow at compound rates: alter-egos with their own alter-egos with their own alter-egos. And almost all of these characters

bear something in common: a certain discontent with their status as author. While I acknowledge that there is a cognisant satire involved with this type of art, I also see it as very telling. If the aim of chapter four is to pinpoint desire as the prime driving force behind writing—desire as a wish for what cannot be achieved: namely, to close the loop and escape subjectivity—then, it is the goal of this chapter to highlight the way this wish affects the kinds of texts the desire-driven author produces. I argue that literary texts bear the signs of their makers' discontent, and that writers' block—the unconscious's attempt to thwart this dissatisfaction—may be taken as a form of hysteria particular to the author as subject.

As suggested by its title, 'Reading, Writing and Teaching: Lacan in the Creative Writing Classroom', the final chapter of this thesis marks a shift from the conceptual to the pedagogical. I start the chapter by addressing two criticisms often directed toward creative writing programs: (1) that creative writing lacks the academic integrity and serious pedagogical theory of other disciplines, and (2) that creative writing courses, with their generic and safe approach to writing instruction, fail in their efforts to produce anything more than cookie-cutter, middlebrow literature. Surveying six common approaches to creative writing instruction practised in universities today, I use the ideas fleshed out from chapters one through to five to respond to each of these criticisms. In the first instance, I show creative writing pedagogy to be backed by a recognised body of psychoanalytic ideas; while, in the second instance, I argue a stronger focus on subject development negates the problem of judging creative writing courses according to the quality of the work produced therein. Effectively, this divides current pedagogical approaches into two groups: those that emphasise the importance of reading, and those that emphasise the importance of writing. Likening the progression of students to the maturation of the Lacanian subject, I suggest that the task of the

teacher is foremost that of ensuring early readerly skills be put to use in the construction of strong authorial egos. I propose the teacher achieves this by introducing what Lacan calls the 'paternal function/metaphor' (2006, p. 464) into the creative writing classroom.

As a final word to this introduction, I draw attention to what has become one of Lacan's most enduring insights. Opening the sixteenth address of his breakthrough 1964 seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (the seminar which, above all others, is to provide structure and insight to the issues taken up throughout this thesis), Lacan addressed his audience by telling them that '[i]f psycho-analysis is to be constituted as the science of the unconscious, one must set out from the notion that the unconscious is structured like a language' (1998, p. 203). This notion of language taking root in the unconscious and, from there, ordering our existence has become one of the chief characteristics of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is for this reason, if no other, that we should be careful not to overlook the addition Lacan made some eight years later, in his 1972-73 seminar series. Speaking once more of that great literary figure of the twentieth century, James Joyce, Lacan informed his audience that 'language is perfected when it knows how to play with writing' (1999, p. 36). If the fate of the unconscious and thus existence as we perceive it lies with those whose chief concern is the proliferation of literature and perfectibility of language—that is, with those figures we call authors—then a thesis-length investigation into the psychodynamic parameters of authorial subjectivity seems entirely worthwhile. And so it is on this note that I begin with an explanation of the paradox that sees one of Lacan's contemporaries, Roland Barthes, declaring the author both dead and 'lost in the midst of the text' (1975, p. 27)

at the same instant, that is, both disappeared and right there in front of us, waiting to be found.

1

Barthes's Return to the Author Paradox

Traditional attempts to integrate psychoanalysis with literary criticism have focused on performing textual readings that strive to interpret the 'character as analysand, the narrative as case history, and the author as the agency which determines meaning' (1988, p. 618) in order to prove, what Frederick Hoffman unequivocally dubs, 'the neurosis of the writer' (1950, p. 148). More recently, with a decreased emphasis on the role of the author in the textual production, this focus has shifted toward providing cathartic experiences for the reader, by 'allowing the gratification of engaging in primal fantasies from the [reader's] ego and superego (1985, p. 342). For psychoanalytic theorists such as Brooks, this somewhat analogous manoeuvre, from author to reader, has failed to lift the general malaise afflicting the often mismatched union between the two theoretical practices. As Brooks states, the shift only exemplifies the problem of applying psychoanalytic theory to the literary arena in the first instance, this being that over and again theorists confuse the object of analysis for 'some person, some other psycho-dynamic structure…[when, in fact, the practice] can and should be textual and rhetorical' (1994, p. 22).

But while Brooks's approach no doubt signals a refreshing change of direction for literary theorists tired of coming up against "human" problems while trying to make textual or narratological inroads, it proves somewhat less encouraging for those critics and theorists still unwilling, or unable, to conceive of a purely textual paradigm. Walter Slatoff introduces his book, *With Respect to Readers*, by writing:

> One feels a little foolish having to begin by insisting that works of literature exist, in part, at least, in order to be read, that we do in fact read them, and that it is worth thinking about what happens when we do…[E]ven those who most insisted on the

> autonomy of literary works and the irrelevance of the readers' responses, themselves do read books and respond to them (1970, p. 3).

Harold Bloom makes a similar point when he insists that '[p]oems are written by men, and not by Splendors' (1997, p. 43). Even Barthes, whose Death of the Author manifesto has been transformed into a slogan for both poststructuralism's anti-humanist sentiments and the anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s, proves unable to sustain the premise without further qualification. Consider the apparent volte-face Barthes performs some six years later, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, when he declares that 'lost in the midst of a text…there is always the other, the author' (1975, p. 27). For Barthes, it is as though by passing through death the author comes not only to resume but to improve upon their status, elevated to the object of desire par excellence. It is this curious amendment that I wish to make the subject of this chapter.

Given how well received and widely used the erotic discourse accompanying Barthes's desirous return to the author has been, it is surprising how few commentaries have taken exception with, or attempted to explain, the paradox that sees the author brought back from the dead without annulling the death itself. This is to say that as big an impact as *The Pleasure of the Text* has had on the way we read texts, introducing a vocabulary of pleasure previously unknown to literary theorists, it has not damaged the reputation of Barthes's earlier essay in the least. The author remains dead, even though he has returned—or, as Barthes puts it, 'the author is dead *but*…' Seán Burke compares the Barthesian author to figures like Dionysus and Christ, suggesting death 'does not so much destroy the "Author-God", but participates in its construction' (2008, p. 20) by creating a king worthy of killing, a king who 'must not only be dead before he can return, but who must continue to be dead even though he has returned' (2008, p. 29).

While Burke is one critic who can hardly be accused of ignoring the discrepancy in Barthes's treatment of the author—he makes an entire thesis out of the anomaly in his

book, *The Death and Return of the Author*—he might, inversely, be criticized for disregarding the erotic tones Barthes uses to shade the author's return. As Jane Gallop notes in the introduction her subsequent work, *The Deaths of the Author*, Burke is far more focused on the theoretical concept of authorship, which he distances from the personal, anecdotal and erotic, all of which are so intrinsic to Barthes's writing. Taking up the task of filling this oversight, part of Gallop's response involves framing the paradoxical reappearance of the author inside a fetish structure borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis, where 'fetish represents a solution to the split between what we know intellectually and what we desire' (2011, p. 31); 'Intellectually, I know the author is dead,' Barthes's seems to say, 'yet, I desire him anyway. I cannot help myself.'

Barthes's familiarity with psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Lacanian, is no secret. When he equates the author with *La Père*, for instance, or refers to the writer as 'someone who plays with his mother's body' (1975, p. 37), he does so in full awareness of the discourses he invokes. In fact, the link between textual pleasure and the corporeal pleasure psychoanalysis deals with is explicitly stated when, attempting to explain the pleasure of the text, he writes:

> One envisions a vast, collective harvest: bring together all the texts *which have given pleasure to someone* (wherever these texts come from) and display this textual body (*corpus*: the right word), in something like the way in which psychoanalysis has exhibited man's erotic body (1975, p. 34).

Gallop, whose thesis is informed by the body of queer theory that did not exist in Barthes's lifetime, wonders whether Barthes's desire for the author might not indicate 'a shade of gay particularity' (2011, p. 37). In making her suggestion, Gallop not only uses certain psychoanalytic structures to come to terms with the perplexity of Barthes's return to the author (fetishism, perversion, disavowal), she also psychoanalyses Barthes

himself, reading his text in light of what she knows of his personal life—namely, that he too was a "gay author".

While Gallop's theoretical framework is more queer than psychoanalytic, her remarks on the nature of fetishism, together with the reference she makes to the Freudian "part-object" in a later chapter, intrigue me and I use them as a starting point for the Lacanian study to be undertaken here. My intention is to begin with the death of the author, which Barthes labels the necessary 'cost of the birth of the reader' (1978, pp. 142-9). Of course, for Barthes, the death of the author is not just any kind of death. It is a patricide, the removal of a father, who, not unlike the oppressive Freudian father, prohibits the child reader from gaining access to the magic of the signifier (which is to say, prohibits the child from 'playing with the body of his mother'). Barthes maintains this view of the author right through to resurrection, at which point he asks the question: 'If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus?' (1975, p. 47).

I wish to offer a different interpretation, aligning Barthes's author with the psychoanalytic mother. In Lacan's reworking of the Oedipal drama, the mother takes on a somewhat more complex role than with Freud. She maintains her status as the prohibited object of desire, but she also becomes, for the child, the chief representative of the discourse that determines this prohibition: the discourse of the Other. Lacan defines the Other as 'the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject' (1998, p. 203). By taking the literary text as this repository of signifiers, it is easy to see how the analogy fits. The text is the storehouse for all the signifiers that will determine the reader's subjectivity, which can be taken to mean that the reader's potential is always somewhat limited by the limits inscribed in the text itself. (Of course, the reader may introduce signifiers not present in

the text they are reading, but are instead drawn from the vast intertext. This does not undo the argument, and it is for the sake of simplicity alone that I focus on the individual text at this stage, rather than the much larger intertext. In the strictest sense, however, the Other of text is more closely aligned to the interconnected network of texts than the individual work, a point I will return to in later chapters.)

The text may be vast (inconceivably so where the intertext is concerned), but it is not interminable. The finite nature of text means that in reading, the reader can never exercise their full potential as a real readerly being; they can only ever be the kind of reader the text allows them to be, which is always but a fraction of the kind of reader they *could have been*. Even if it were possible for a single reader to read every literary text ever written, to exhaust the entire intertext, this would still be the case. I say so because, hypothetically, this superhuman reader could always manage to read at least one more text—the *as yet written* text—and thus could still be another kind of reader if only given the chance. The reader's subjectivity must be determined in relation to the texts they *have read/are reading*, rather than the ones they *could have read/could be reading* or the ones that *are being written/might one day be written*. This is the nature of readerly subjectivity.

As the creator of the text, it is easy to see how the author comes to be viewed by the reader as the primary representative of the Other. Like the Lacanian mother, it is the author who delivers the reader to the Other of the text by being the first speaker of its language. Lacan's translator, Bruce Fink, provides a suitable neologism in *mOther*, where the capital O of Other 'generally refers to a person or institution serving a symbolic function (legislating, prohibiting, putting forward ideals, and so on), though it often designates the mother in a real or imaginary capacity' (1999, p. 232). I suggest a similar portmanteau in *Autère*, a combination of *auteur*, *Autre* and *mère* (author, Other

and mother). In putting forward this suggestion, it is important to note, as does Fink, that mOther/Autère need not correspond with the biological mother or even a woman. Rather, it is a function determined by primordial relations: the mOther/Autère is the one who cares for the child/reader in the earliest stages of its life, the primary caregiver, and could just as easily be the biological father. Thus, the child/reader's desire for the mother/author is not a sexual desire, in the explicit Oedipal sense, but a wish to rediscover the blissful state of nature first characterized in the primordial child-mother/reader-author unity, the desire to fill the lack that followed on from the breakdown of this unity. We can think of this real state as a sort of jouissance before the letter, that is, the state of bliss that existed before the introduction of the signifier, which, carried through by the mOther/Autère, destroys that unity at the same time as it truncates the child/reader's potential for real (boundless) existence.

It is by equating the Barthesian author with the Lacanian mother that I reach the first of this chapter's theses: the death of the author is really only the *loss* of the author—or, to put it another way, the lack that the disbandment of the reader-author unity exposes in both the reader and the Other. If the letter kills (2006, p. 16), as Lacan insists it does, then it must be the reader who dies in the Death of the Author and not the author. If "death" can be read as the sacrifice of "being" for "subjectivity", then the author is already a "dead" subject. In the last line of his manifesto, Barthes labels the death of the author the necessary cost of the birth of the reader. However, because the birth of the reader always means the birth of *a certain kind of reader*, that is, the kind the Autère allows, I would suggest that the necessary cost of the birth of this certain kind of reader is actually the miscarriage of every other kind of reader. For a particular kind of reader to emerge in the Other of text, an infinite number of other kinds of readers must stay submerged. I shall use Lacan's concepts of *alienation* and *separation*,

which account for both the lack in the subject—that is, the 'lack of being, whereby being exists' (1993, p. 223)—and the lack encountered by the subject in the Other, to support this first argument.

Following this, I shall move on from the Death of the Author thesis to *The Pleasure of the Text*, where Barthes professes his ongoing desire for the author and sets up the paradox referred to in the title of this chapter. Accepting Lacan's dictum that '[d]esire is a relation of being to lack' (1993, p. 223), I build on Gallop's views and explain this paradoxical return as an instance of the real after the letter, arguing that the author remerges as a rem(a)inder (Fink 1999, p. 66) of the original reader-author unity, or what Freud has returned to as a "lost object" (2000, p. 47). As I will show, this unity is characterized by a sort of inertness on the reader's part—as though it were possible for a reader to resist the Autère's limitations, thereby avoiding the reader-author split. In my view, this is an impossible scenario. No matter the text, it will always succeed in driving a wedge between the reader and author. This leads me to conclude that the author whom Barthes desires, whom he discovers 'lost in the midst of the text' in 1973, is but a remaining shred of the unity broken apart in 1968.

Alienation and the Reader

For Lacan, alienation is the unavoidable fate of every speaking subject, knowing neither class, nor religion, nor habitat. In the seminar entitled, 'From Love to Libido', Lacan tells us that '[t]he subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being—solidifies into a signifier' (1998, p. 199). To use a common analogy, it is as though, at birth, each child was handed the dictionary of its mother's native language and told to live its life itself accordingly: 'Become any combination of

this set of words you like—but nothing beyond these pages; this is your reality now!' Anything that cannot be located in the dictionary's pages must be left behind in the real, which, for this reason, Malcolm Bowie says comes close to meaning 'the ineffable or the impossible' (1979, pp. 133-4). By definition, the real is that which resists symbolization and is characterized by loss.

As already mentioned, the foremost sacrifice, or loss, is the breakdown of child-mother unity, which fails to conform to the self-other dichotomy upon which language operates. This loss owes its origins to Freud's system, where the child's desire for its mother clashes with the reality principle's law of exogamy, and so is thus pushed into the unconscious (the storehouse of forbidden desires). To understand how alienation works in a literary paradigm, however—and, more specifically, to determine its relation to the Death of the Author—it is necessary to develop an appropriate picture of the literary real. If the Death of the Author, as a concept, stands for the breakdown of the reader-author unity, as I suggest it does, then Lacan's framework insists that it must not be taken as a moment of liberation for the reader—the spirit in which Barthes promotes it—but rather, as the moment of the great primal loss. The Death of the Author is not the overthrowing of the father, who will return more vengeful than ever, but the loss of the mother, who will only ever return in parts.

In the opening pages of *S/Z*, Barthes talks of the type of reader who 'plunged into a kind of idleness…is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text' (1974, p. 4). Barthes not only assures us of the existence of these readers who fail 'to gain access to the magic of the signifier' and therefore fail to function, he also infers that their numbers far outweigh the other kind (the kind he proves himself to be in making his very thorough analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*). But if we are to differentiate between functioning and non-functioning reader types by insisting that the

former help "produce" the text while the latter merely "consume" it, then we need to convince ourselves that such a thing as "non-productive" reading is even possible in the first place.

In my view, this is a difficult premise to entertain. After all, don't even the most non-responsive readers necessarily contribute to the shaping of the text's meaning, tying together of its loose ends, and shutting down of its ambiguities? Is there really any such thing as a real readerly text, or a real readerly experience? The idea that the reader could absorb the text without adding to it in any way is deeply flawed. Wolfgang Iser has said that 'the overdetermination of a text [of *every* text] produces indeterminacy, and this sets in motion a whole process of comprehension whereby the reader tries to [re]assemble the world of the text' (1978, p. 49); and later on in the same text: 'the reader's task is not simply to accept, but to assemble for himself that which has been accepted' (1978, p. 97). This is not just the task of a special kind of reader; it is captured in the very definition of reading. For Iser, the reader inevitably finds themselves caught up in the task of reconstituting the text, imagining it anew with each and every reading: a process that always calls upon some degree of activity. Or, put another way, which always concretizes a certain position: the position of the subject.

Try to envisage a reader who has absolutely no understanding of their unique place in the production of the text, a reader to whom the text could simply *happen*. A little like the figure Barthes speaks of in the opening pages of *S/Z*, this reader would exemplify the most passive textual existence imaginable, their only freedom being the freedom to accept or reject the text flatly (literally, to open their eyes and stare at the page or to look away). For all intents and purposes, this reader would appear to occupy an identical position to the one occupied by the author. This does not mean that the reader would fool themselves into thinking that they were the one who really wrote the

text, or come to view the author as their passive equal. Instead, what it means is that the reader would not recognize any gap between their reading of the text and the author's writing of the text; they would be like the structuralist reader who has 'at his or her disposal all of the codes which would render it [the text] exhaustively intelligible' (Eagleton 2008, p. 105) thereby making 'the experiences of author and reader indistinguishable' (Booth 1983, p. 39). As impossible as this scenario is, its hypothetical existence provides us with a picture of the real as being represented by a reader-author unity that relies on the reader's own blissful ignorance of the fact that it is 'the reader himself [who] must actually produce [the text's] system' (Iser 1978, p. 86). Borrowing a term from Heidegger, Lacan refers to this as *ex-sistence*. (Fink 1997, p. 122).

Whether the reader is aware of the gaping hole distancing their interpretation of the text from the infinite number of alternative interpretations or not—just one of which is the author's—the fact remains that complete consumptiveness is impossible. There is no such thing as a completely impartial, or passive reading, or a reading that accounts for all perspectives. The reader necessarily misinterprets the author, however minor a misinterpretation, and in doing so establishes a unique position within the symbolic order of the text. Psychoanalyst and literary critic Pierre Bayard discusses this certainty in his book, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (2007), going so far as to argue that for this reason reading is of limited or no value because misreading is equivalent to non-reading and all reading *is* necessarily misreading (for an excellent review of Bayard's book, see Abecassis 2010). Bearing something in common with this view, Bloom bases his theory of the anxiety of influence on the central principle that '*[p]oetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation* [original italics]' (1997, p. 30). Obviously, where

Bloom's ideas differ most notably from Bayard's is in their exaltation of the value of misreading; for Bloom the reader takes up the task of trying to "correct" the flaws that exist in their misreading, which, in turn, leads to the creation of new works and new authors, and is thus a productive activity; for Bayard, it is problematic, to say the least. With both critics, however, is an insistence that real reading (my term, not theirs), where the reader merely plays the yin to the author's yang, does not exist. Thus, we can confirm that the reader and author stand in relation not to each other but to the Other of text.

In place of the real, then, we find only a kind of staged ignorance or naivety: the reader who does not see that they are already involved in the text's production, perhaps, or who genuinely believes (or rather, fails not to believe) that their reading of the text is entirely in keeping with the author's writing of the text. While it is perhaps possible to theorise the existence of this real reader and real readerly experience, the reality (for Lacan reality and the real are two very different things) is that the reader's unique position in the symbolic order of the text is determined even before their arrival on the scene. What I mean by this is that the author, like the mother in the Lacanian model, submits the reader to symbolisation ahead of the reader's "birth". Consider the views of the following theorists. In *What is Literature*, Jean-Paul Sartre declares that 'all works of the mind contain within themselves the image of the reader for whom they are intended' (2001, p. 53); in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth says that '[t]he author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader' (1983, p. 89); Umberto Eco, in *The Role of the Reader*, declares that the 'author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader' (1984, p. 7); Mikhail Bakhtin closes his essay, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', by claiming that 'every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus

anticipates possible reactions to itself' (2008, p. 257); following Ford Madox Ford's advice to authors—'You must have eyes forever on your Reader'—Iser speaks of the author's role in 'manipulating the reader's attitude' which in turn 'gives the reader the impression [and only the impression] that he and the author are partners in discovering the reality of human experience' (1978, pp. 102-3); while Gérard Genette assures us that 'narrative, like every discourse, is necessarily addressed to someone and always contains below the surface an appeal to the receiver' (1983, p. 260).

As I see it, pre-emption on the part of the author serves as the literary equivalent of the mother who, say, chooses a name for her child, or talks about what kind of a person she thinks it will grow up to be even before the child is born—in other words, who starts *determining* what kind of a child it will grow up to be even before it is born (perhaps even before it is conceived—just as Oedipus's fate was enunciated and thus determined for him by the oracle who spoke his curse and set the wheels of tragedy in motion). In the final pages of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan speaks of 'the function known as identification', saying that it is not a specular identification (the subject identifying itself in a mirror, for example, which will come later), but its support, taken from the field of the Other. 'The point of the ego ideal,' he announces, 'is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as others see him*—which will enable him to support himself from a dual situation that is satisfactory for him from the point of view of love' (1998, p. 268). In our case, we are talking, then, about the reader who will come to see themselves as the reader sees them, thereby further negating any opportunity to represent themselves as they *real*ly are.

Once again, the point being made is that a real, unblemished readerly experience cannot exist. It is an impossible scenario, since the reader's presence is anticipated and accounted for even before their arrival. By marking out a position for the reader in the

text's symbolic order, the author effectively says to the reader: 'You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it' (Eco 1984, p. 9), which amounts to an assurance concerning the reader's very existence as a reader: 'You cannot be the kind of reader you want, but only the kind of reader the text will let you be. I have my role to play and you yours, and the text is proof of our disunion.' The reader must come to see themselves as the author sees them: as an other. Their division is more than just a pragmatic necessity; it is a semiotic certainty. One need only pay attention to how closely the views of the above literary theorists resemble the views of Lacan when elsewhere he says:

> It is the world of words that creates the world of things—things which at first run together in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of becoming—by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been (2006, p. 229).

Or, as he puts it a little later on:

> the child thus begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of those around him by reproducing more or less approximately…the terms he receives from them…Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the [real] thing (2006, p. 262).

Separation and the Autère

Alienation is unavoidable; or, as Éric Laurent puts it: 'the subject can only be known in the place or locus of the Other' (1995, p. 22).To become a reader, even the most non-functioning kind of reader, is to submit oneself to the chain of signifiers belonging in the Other of text. There is no other way around it. To whatever degree the reader "creates the text", they can do so only by reordering an already-existing collection of signifiers. The reader may borrow signifiers from one literary text to add meaning to another literary text, but the signifiers they bring in come from the larger intertext,

which is another way of saying that it comes from the Other of text and, thus, still only amounts to a reordering. Separation, on the other hand, *is* avoidable. As Colette Soler explains, separation relies on 'a want to get out, a want to know what one is beyond what the Other can say [about the self], beyond what is inscribed in the Other' (1995, p. 49). And, as Soler goes on to show, there 'is a condition in the Other which makes separation possible, and that is the dimension of desire' (1995, p. 49).

In alienation the reader is separated from real being by the signifiers housed in the Other of text. One way of putting it is to say that there are never enough signifiers in that house for the reader. As a real being, the reader is too big for the house. To come inside—which is to become a reader, as we know it—the being must leave a part of themselves at the door and enter as a castrated subject. This is alienation: leaving behind the real pieces to take a position in the symbolic order. Separation, on the other hand, suggests that there are never enough signifiers there for the Other of text either: a problem with the house itself. This has nothing to do with a single text's shortcomings, a gap which could, conceivably, be made up for elsewhere in the intertext, but rather is related to the very nature of text. And how can we be sure that there is something missing from the Other of text? Because there is always room for expansion. The intertext continues to grow and this is proof enough of its lack. By even the crudest definition, something is full or complete only when it cannot be added to any further. As long as there is room for more texts, we can be fairly certain that there is something missing from the Other of text. As 'lack and desire are coextensive for Lacan' (Fink 1997, p. 54), the place where the reader's lack and intertext's lack overlap is also the intersection where one finds desire.

When Lacan speaks of *le désir de la mère*, he is being deliberately ambiguous. The phrase can be understood as "desire *for* the mother", that is, the subject's desiring

of the mother; or it can be taken as "desire *of* the mother", that is, the desire which belongs to the mother, the mother's desiring of something. The syntactic ambiguity complements the schematic ambiguity. As 'separation is an intersection defined by what is lacking in both sets [the subject and the mOther]' (Soler 1995, p. 47), it makes sense that the subject's desire and the mOther's desire should also overlap. But even more than this, that the subject's desire should be the same as the mOther's desire, since it is from the mOther that the subject learns how to desire. Lacan emphasizes the point in Seminar XI, when he affirms that 'man's desire is the desire of the Other' (Lacan 1998, p. 38).

In separation, the reader looks beyond their own lack and asks what it is that the Autère wants, or, in Lacan's words: '*He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*' (1998, p. 214). Now, of course, this question has deeper implications for the reader. They must attempt to determine not only what the Autère wants, but, more relevant to their own role, what the author wants *from them*. From here, it is the reader's task to make the Autère's lack and their own coincide, which goes some way toward explaining the nature of Barthes's avowal: 'I *desire* the author: I need his figure…as he needs mine' (1975, p. 27); or, '[t]he text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing' (1975, p. 6). What does Barthes desire? He desires the Autère's desire, to be the one who can fill their lack and respond to their desire, which conforms to the subject's attempt to fill the mOther's lack with their own lack of being, latching onto what is indecipherable in an attempt to occupy that between-the-lines space (Fink 1997, p. 54). I shall return to Barthes shortly.

First, what is this lack? And how does the reader locate it? At least one way this may occur is that the reader detects a hole in the text. This is inevitable, since, for the reader, some part of the text will always appear to fall short of its mark. It may be a

passage that does not quite make sense to the reader, or an idea that does not seem developed enough, even a single word or phrase that falls beyond the reader's comprehension; whatever form it takes, it stands for a void, and it is for the reader to try and fill this void. To do this, the reader must ask themselves: 'What was the Autère aiming at here? What was the Autère *trying* to communicate but could not?' Insofar as '[l]ack and desire are coextensive for Lacan' (Fink 1997, p. 54), the reader interprets this lack in the text as the cause of the Autère's desire. The bit perceived to be missing is taken for the bit the Autère desires, the thing they wanted (to say) but could not. By being the one to locate this hole and fill it in, the reader endeavours to transform themselves into the Autère's desire: What does the author/text desire? The author/text desires me; I am the one who can cover over their lack.

Iser speaks of "gaps in the text", divisions between that which is "familiar" (in this sense, real) and that which is mere "repertoire" (that is, symbolic). After establishing this familiar-repertoire dichotomy, he writes:

> We have our first insight into the nature of the reader's active participation…The familiar is reproduced in the text, but in its reproduction it seems different, for its component parts have been altered…But if the starting-point of the novel is a set of negations, then the reader is impelled to counterbalance these negations by seeking their positive potential, the alternate fulfillment of which we shall henceforth call the realization of the text (1978b, 34-35).

The problem, of course, is that each hole the reader discovers and attempts to fill in is a hole they themselves have created, and never the actual hole or lack. Every reader finds and mends different holes in the text because every reader creates different holes in the text by simple merit of being a different reader. One reader sees a hole where another reader does not; all the while, what is actually lacking remains hidden from them both. The real lack has nothing to do with the reader; the real lack is inherent in the very

structure of the Other, as supported by the fact that there is always room for at least one more signifier, one more text.

Barthes has other names for these gaps in the text: he refers to 'tears' and 'edges' and 'seams' and 'faults' and 'flaws', eroticizing 'intermittence like it were a piece of 'skin flashing between two articles of clothing' (1975, p. 10). Again, he is taking his cue from psychoanalysis here. The pleasure of the text, he says, is not its gradual unveiling, but its abrasions; this makes us think once more of the Lacanian subject who desires what is missing in the mOther, that is, the mOther's lack. According to Barthes, these abrasions create a sort of pleasurable rhythm, a diluted tmesis. He refers to 'the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance' (1975, p. 10), which calls to mind the event that lead Freud to proclaim that each individual has as their goal the reinstatement of an earlier condition. This event, the *fort—da* game, is well known and hardly needs recounting here, except to say, as Lacan already has, that at its heart is the child's attempt to rediscover '*an object that has been fundamentally lost* [original italics]' (2006, p. 34). In casting the reel away time and again, the child not only establishes a rhythm that it finds pleasurable in and of itself, but compels itself '*towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition*, one which it had to abandon under the influence of external disturbing forces [original italics]' (2006, p. 33). Through Lacan, we can conflate the lost object and the earlier condition into a single object of desire, and give it the title of object *a*.

Object *a* and the Dimension of Desire

There is no getting around the element of desire in Barthes's return to the author. 'The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me,*' (1975, p. 27) he writes, echoing a comment made some twenty-one pages earlier, where he beseeches the author with the

following demand: 'The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*' (1975, p. 6). And he is just as forward with his own desire: 'in the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure…as he needs mine' (1975, p. 6), he says, italicising subject and verb as if to draw our attention to the ambitransitivity of the construction: I desire the author, yes, but even more fundamentally, *I desire*, full stop.

With the conception of object *a*, Lacan provides a suitable model for dealing with all of this desire. As Fink notes in *The Lacanian Subject* (1997), Lacan considered object *a* to be his most significant contribution to psychoanalysis, and developed the concept tirelessly from the 1950s right through to the 1970s. Throughout this extended period, object *a* takes many forms and names, including:

> the other, *agalma*, the golden number, the Freudian Thing, the real, the anomaly, the cause of desire, surplus jouissance, the materiality of language, the analyst's desire, logical consistency, the Other's desire, semblance/sham, the lost object, and so on and so forth (1997, p. 83).

While each of these appellations signals a slightly different aspect of object *a*, they may be brought together into two broad, interconnected categories: object *a* as object of desire and object *a* as cause of desire. In this section of the thesis, the focus is on the first group, *a* as object of desire, with particular emphasis on the notion of the lost object, which Lacan develops from Freud.

In her close reading of *The Pleasure of the Text*, Gallop draws attention to a particular condition of Barthes's rediscovery of the author. Where we typically think of the author as operating *behind* the text, pulling the strings as it were, Gallop is quick to point out that Barthes locates the author right in the midst of the text. And not only in the midst, but lost in there. Gallop suggest two ways the notion of lost might be interpreted here: 'the author might want to but cannot get out of the text…[or] he is in there but the reader cannot find him, cannot reach him (2011, p. 51). A third way of

reading this is to identify the figure of the author, whom Barthes assures us is still deprived of his civil status and biographical person, as the lost object *a*.

In a chapter from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, entitled 'The Finding of an Object', Freud writes:

> At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the child's own body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that the instinct loses that object, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule the sexual instinct then becomes auto-erotic, and not until the period of latency has been passed through is the original relation restored. There are thus good reasons why a child sucking his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. *The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it* [my italics] (2000, p. 88).

Certain similarities between the Freudian object of desire, Lacan's object *a* and the Barthesian author merit closer attention. The first being this idea of rediscovery. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan follows Freud by stating that:

> the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it—namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from the self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the *objet a* (1998, p. 83).

Following on from the discussion on separation put forward in the last section, it is clear that the author, or part thereof, who emerges here in *The Pleasure of the Text* is not a never-before encountered object, but some rem(a)inder of the primal reader-author unity. (I say "or part thereof" because Barthes is forceful in insisting it is not the whole author who returns: the author's civil status and biographical person remain hidden.) In

other words, Barthes does not just find the author—or what he takes for the author—he *refinds* them.

This distinction is integral to our reading of the passage as it provides us with a clue to the way we are to interpret the word "lost". The author is lost in as much as they are divided into two; this is to say, the author appears as one piece lost from another piece. It is like the breast, which Freud uses to exemplify the concept. The breast is a lost object on two accounts: firstly, lost because it was taken away from the child in infancy; and secondly, because when it is rediscovered after latency, it is rediscovered detached, or lost, from the mother. The same thing appears to be happening with Barthes's author. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes rediscovers the author he lost in 'The Death of the Author', but only as a partial object—sans their biography and civil status. It is, to push the paradox further, an object lost from itself. But as Slavoj Žižek explains in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the paradox of object *a* is its function as the cause of desire as well as its retroactive status as the object of desire (2008b, p. 69).

Žižek builds on this elsewhere, writing, '*the only way to possess an object [or a perfection] which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost* [original italics]' (2001, p. 146). Thinking back to some of the earlier claims made in this essay, most notably that the reader-author unity was shattered from the outset, Barthes's late discovery of the author's figure might well be viewed as an ideal manifestation of Žižek's formula. By possessing or discovering an object lost in the midst of the text, Barthes convinces himself of some real relation with the author, which, falling under the laws of the symbolic order, was snuffed out before the birth of the reader ever even took place. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes is able to grasp hold of a "lost object" in what he calls

"the figure" of the author, and in doing so re-establish an aspect of the reader-author unity that never *real*ly existed in the first place.

'The text is a fetish object and *this fetish desires me*'

As much as it is a book about pleasure and the supreme bliss of jouissance, *The Pleasure of the Text* is also a book about pleasure's opposite: desire. Towards the end of the book, Barthes refers to desire as pleasure's victorious rival and laments its unshakable ubiquity: 'we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure…Odd, this philosophical permanence of Desire' (1975, pp. 57-8). According to Barthes, the text desires its reader and the reader desires the author. But who or what does the author desire? We are informed that the author "needs" the reader's figure, but need and desire are two very different things—especially where psychoanalysis is concerned. As representative of the Other, the mystery of the author's desire should come as no surprise. The Lacanian subject has no idea what it is that its mother desires either. I will have more to say on this in the final chapter of this thesis. First let us unpack the meaning behind this strange supposition: 'The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me.*'

Typically, one expects the opposite: the fetish object to coincide with the grammatical object: the object of desire, rather than the object that desires. The peculiarity of the reversal, by which subject becomes object and vice-versa, cannot be passed over lightly. So, what does it mean? How can a fetish object desire? And what does this have to do with the lost author? What is the relationship between the fetish object and object *a*? Are they synonymous?

Turning once more to *Three Essays*, Freud defines the fetish object as a substitute, a part of the body or else some inanimate object not necessary for

reproduction but 'which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality (e.g. a piece of clothing or underlinen)' (2000, p. 19). He cites Alfred Binet (1888), whom he says 'was the first to maintain…that the choice of a fetish is an after-effect of some sexual impression, received as a rule in early childhood' (2000, p. 20). This brief definition provides two valuable tenets: the fetish object is borrowed from the subject's childhood, and the fetish object bears a connection to the original object cathexis.

In an essay entitled, 'The Relation between the Voice and the Gaze', Ellie Ragland says: 'In between the primordial lost object and the organ mistaken for the thing itself—the object *a* cause-of-desire—there are myriad lure objects we use in trying to concretize our desire by fetishizing things, people, or acts' (1995, p. 188). To contextualize: if we take the author lost in the midst of the text as object *a* and the author cut off at symbolic castration as the primordial lost object, then the text appears to slot neatly into the role of lure object. Analogous to the Lacanian subject, the reader's desire is the desire for the author, and it is by fetishizing the text—an object that clearly befits both criteria: (1) it bears an assignable relation to the author, and (2) it originates back to the reader's earliest impressions—Barthes attempts to concretize the hypothetical. Fetish objects are brought into play to recapture something that has been lost, the subject using the object in such a way as to compensate for that loss: the undergarment, for example, compensates for the lost breast. In this sense, the text's desire for the reader is what gives it its very function as a fetish object: saying, 'the text desires me' is the fetishist's way of saying, object *a* desires me, which is a way of saying that the author desires me. In 'The Démontage of the Drive', Maire Jaanus speaks of 'a fetishistic search for what was once ourselves but is now an extra-bodily, alienated otherness that can "appear" almost anywhere, and in anyone or anything'

(1995, p. 125). This is precisely what we appear to be witnessing when Barthes manages to make the author reappear in the text; it corresponds with the reader's fetishistic search for that pre-alienated part of themselves: the author (one half of the primal unity).

In 'Negation', Freud writes:

> The opposition between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It is only constituted by the fact that thought has the ability to make present a second time something that was once perceived, by reproducing it in a representation, the outside object no longer having to be present. Thus the first and most immediate aim of reality testing is to…refind such an object—to convince oneself that it is still out there. Another capacity of the power of thinking offers a further contribution to the differentiation between what is subjective and what is objective…But it is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction (1953-1974, pp. 237-8).

As Fink, who draws my attention to this passage, points out, there is 'no deliberate *finding* of an object, only a *refinding* of an object…that corresponds to one's memory of an experience of satisfaction' (1997, p. 93). Fink goes on to declare: 'There never was such an object in the first place: the "lost object" never *was*; it is only constituted as lost after the fact' (1997, p. 94). The importance of this cannot be overstated. This is what allows the author to appear in the text, to remain the object of Barthes's desire without negating or undoing the death of the author; this is what permits the paradox. Where subjectification signals the death of the real being, the author has been dead (subjectified) all along. When Barthes professes his desire for the author lost in the midst of the text, he is professing his desire for a situation that never was, a situation that is only made hypothetically possible by the discovery (that is, the putting in place) of object *a*.

2

From Language to Literature

Reading and writing are often described as acts of escapism, holding the power to deliver individuals from the banality of day-to-day existence into the far more exciting world of the text. Even those literary texts that shirk explicit fantasy in favour of dour realism do not fail to provide their readers and authors with some glimpse of the fantastical. In the case of reading it might, as Wolfgang Iser suggests, be the opportunity to transcend the limitations of one's own real-life experience by engaging a reality that was not one's own to begin with (1980, p. 79). While for authors it can be envisaged as 'a kind of collective utopian dreaming' in which the literary text becomes 'an expression of those fundamental human desires which have given rise to civilisation itself, but which are never fully satisfied there' (Eagleton 2008, p. 80). In such cases, the fictional world of the text appears to offer something the real world does not, be it a heightened understanding of our existence, or the chance to perceive things not merely as they are, but as they may come to be. The idea is not new, it dates back at least as far as Aristotle, who deemed poetry 'a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal' (1994-2009).

Of course, this somewhat idealistic way of thinking is not for everyone. In fact, one need look no further than Aristotle's own teacher to find a strong refutation of the viewpoint. Banishing poets from his republic under the insistence that they do less to improve our understanding of the world than to distort it, Plato assures his listeners that 'all the poets from Homer downwards have no grasp of truth…he [the poet] wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements in the mind to the detriment of reason…by creating images far removed from the truth' (1987, pp. 425-35). In a similar, albeit more recent social context, the Marxist critic Béla Köpeczi acknowledges

that while the content of art is reality, this reality is 'reflected by the artist in the light of a definite ideology and aesthetic-social ideas' (1972, p. 355). One could argue that this places literary texts well within the factitious superstructure, giving reading and writing an indoctrinatory, rather than escapist, function. Or rather, that fantasies of escape serve merely to ratify the persuasiveness of false consciousness, which once again implies a diluted, rather than heightened or elucidatory, engagement with the world.

Proponents of such beliefs hold something in common with poststructuralist critics who posit that literature, coterminous with language itself, only consolidates the alienating experience of the reality which has been constructed around us but which we are incapable of escaping. Discussing the work of the most prominent figure to have emerged in reaction to the structuralism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ben Agger writes: 'Derrida can be read as a gloomy relativist where he seems to despair the possibility of enlightenment. He believes that we are destined to remain locked up in the house of language' (1991, p. 114). It is this kind of claim which makes the literary world look more like a "despotic nightmare" than a "utopian dream".

In this chapter, my interests lie somewhere within this multiplicity of interpretations. I am concerned firstly with understanding what exactly the world of literature is and just how it relates to the so-called real world (and just what this real world is, for that matter), secondly with further discerning the relationship readers and writers bear to these worlds, and finally with explicating the function of the individual text in the production of these worlds. Bakhtin has said that:

> The world of literature and more broadly of culture (from which literature cannot be separated) constitutes the indispensible context of a literary work and of the author's position within it, outside of which it is impossible to understand either the work or the author's intentions reflected in it (2008, pp. 255-6).

The essay from which this passage is taken was first published in 1938 and as such precedes the timeframe one associates with the rise of poststructuralist theory (1960s through to 1970s) by some thirty-odd years. Even still, it is possible to detect in the passage the beginnings of what has become a quintessential tenet of poststructuralism, and more broadly postmodernism: that of intertextuality. While it was Julia Kristeva who first coined the term in 1966, describing the relationship of texts across history as one of 'absorption and transformation' (Cuddon 1998, p. 424), Bakhtin's insistence that the world of literature constitutes an indispensible context seems, in many ways, to pre-empt Kristeva's views.

Particularly valuable to the direction of this thesis are those efforts, such as Bakhtin's, that aim to incorporate the figure of the author into this contextualised worldview. The Neomarxist philosopher Karel Kosík (1967) has argued that works of art serve the purpose of simultaneously representing and forming reality (cited in Iser 1978a, p. 79). Based on this, it seems permissible to suggest that the reality which emerges from literature (that is to say, emerges *within* literature) should, if only in structure, maintain some aspect of the reality from which it appears to emerge (that is, the reality it is said to represent). This provides some insight into why it was possible, in the previous chapter, to study the individual text in place of the greater intertext. Each text reflects the intertext of which it is a part, but at the same time each text adds to and helps form that intertext/reality. While it served our purpose in the previous chapter to focus in on the individual text, in this chapter my goal is to develop a clearer understanding of the order that contains those individual works as well as the figures who read them and who write them. I have already referred to this as the Other of text; in this chapter I show the Other of text to be of similar ilk to the intertext. I go on to refer to it simply as the *Othertext*.

A third reality

The Polish theorist Andrzej Zgorzelski provides 'five possible decoding presuppositions' for categorising the relationship between literature and the non-literary real world. They are: (1) *mimetic literature*, which '*pretends* that the fictional universe is a *copy* of the empirical one'; (2) *paramimetic literature*, where 'the fictional universe is created as an allegorical or metaphorical *model* of some empirical relationship'; (3) *antimimetic literature*, which presents a 'different *model* of reality, which is presupposed to be a true vision of the universe'; (4) *fantastic literature*, which 'presupposes *the confrontation* of its order…with the known order of the empirical reality'; (5) *nonmimetic literature,* which presents its models 'without any direct textual confrontation between them and the empirical model of the universe' (1984, pp. 302-3). In all five cases, Zgorzelski relies on the notion of an empirical reality serving as a counterpoint to what might be dubbed the reality of the text. While doing a comprehensive job of elucidating the complexity of representation, the concern I have with Zgorzelski's arrangement is that it does not go far enough in recognising the second part of Kosík's claim: the idea that texts, in turn, affect, and even create, the reality from which they emerge. As a consequence, Zgorzelski treats the world immediately outside of the text as empirically real, when, in fact, it too can be shown to be textually constructed, that is, a part of the Other of text.

In pointing this out, I am going straight to the crucial difference in my discussion: the inclusion of a third world, one which exists between the so-called empirical world and the overtly fictitious world of the text. While it is from this newly emergent space that the text materialises, it is also, at the same time, the point towards which each text is aimed. In other words, the world responsible for the creation of the text is the world simultaneously waiting to receive the text. In the previous chapter, I

introduced this world under the name Other of text, showing the way in which both reader and author are recast as subjects within its order. It is only by differentiating between the Other of text and the individual literary text, however, that we can really come to terms with the extensiveness of this order. As a space, the intertextual Other is neither real nor fictitious (in the way that the world sketched out in a science fiction novel can be called fictitious, and the world that labels it fictitious called real, for instance). It is inhabited by real people, that is, actual human beings, but the subjective existence of these people is necessarily shaped by their connection to the text. They are real in the sense that they exist outside of a given work of literature (when one reads a J.R.R. Tolkien novel, one is not suddenly transported to Middle Earth—even psychologically, one resists the lure), but their identities as readers or writers depends upon their connection to those characters and narrators and author functions who are not, in any empirical sense of the word, real. They appear to be reaching for what is both real and imaginary, but it is somewhere in between these two places whence they reach.

In 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin argues that 'beginning with any text…we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being' (2008, p. 253). Conceding that there is often a sharp temporal and/or spatial division between the world created in any individual text and the world occupied by the person reading or writing that text, Bakhtin theorises that there must be some 'real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world' (2008, p. 253) which positions the author and reader, setting them aside from their fictitious counterparts. Bakhtin calls this 'the world that *creates* the text' (2008, p. 253), and its conception offers a valid method for differentiating not only between the fictitious world of the literary text and the world of the reader and writer, but between

these two worlds and the world entirely beyond literature as well: the one in which it is possible to have a real readerly experience, for example. A clear division between these three spheres, intratextual, real and what might now be dubbed Othertextual, is important to my argument, so I shall spend some time now discussing the interplay and particularities of each.

Intratextuality, as Alison Sharrock, puts it 'is about how bits need to be read in light of other bits, but it is also about the bittiness of literature' (2000, p. 7). This somewhat playful definition suggests two things: it suggests that texts—or 'intratextual supercodes', to employ Zgorzelski's term—are made up of a number of different parts and that the overarching structure of each text is dependent upon the way these parts relate to one another. In this sense, intratextuality holds something in common with intertextuality (a point relied upon in the previous chapter). In fact, Michael Riffaterre, whose work on the topic is well known, goes so far as to suggest that intratextuality be taken as one of three types of intertextuality: the one 'where the intertext is partly encoded within the text and conflicts with it because of stylistic or semantic incompatibilities' (1980, p. 627). Riffaterre's willingness to align the two terms shows that the "bits" Sharrock speaks of are drawn from a network of texts, rather than existing within a closed textual system, that is within a single literary work. Just as each work is made up of many parts or "bits", so is each work itself just a part or "bit" in the much larger intertext. For example, when we come across this in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*: 'O Muses! O high genius! Help me know!' (1984, p. 79), we understand that it relates less to what will follow immediately after, or what has just preceded, than it does to the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*: 'Sing to me of the man, Muse…' (1996, p. 77). Dante is framing the action in an intertextual space, rather than a real or imaginary one.

Recognising the interconnectedness of texts goes a long way towards demonstrating the two-way communication between the world that creates the text and the world of the text. It does so by drawing attention to the effects the world of the text has on the world that creates the text. John Berger has written that 'never again will a story be read as though it were the only one' (1972, p. 129). The contention can easily be broadened to include the claim that never again will a story be written as though it were the only one. But why stop there? A slightly bigger leap—although certainly not an illogical one, given the findings thus far—suggests that never again will a story be read/written by a reader/author who thinks they are the only one. Readers and authors, like texts, also form an interconnected network. When Riffaterre says that the 'very idea of textuality is inseparable from and founded upon intertextuality' (1980, p. 625), he is arguing that our ability to even recognise a text as a text depends upon our knowledge that such things as texts do exist, which, of course, depends upon our recognition that *other* texts do exist; we can only address a text by recognising, first of all, that it is but one of many. The same can be said for readers and authors. To understand our roles as readers and authors we must first of all accept that readers and authors do exist, and second of all accept that *other* readers and authors do exist. To conceive of oneself as an author, for instance, is predicated upon the recognition of there being readers, just as performing as a reader requires one to accept their existence in a system containing authors, who are subjects other to the self (a fact confirmed by the breakdown of the reader-author unity).

This can be compared to Roman Jakobson's claim that all communication depends upon six elements: the addresser, the addressee, the message, the shared code, the contact, and the context. We have ours in author, reader, story, textual language, physical book and intertext, respectively. However, while it is textual engagement that

draws each subject's attention to the community of readers and authors of which they are a part—in other words, the relationship between readers and writers relies upon a textual mode of communication—the intertext, as a network containing its own rules and limitations, must be broadened if it is to support and not discount this community of readers and authors. The central assumption of those theorists most strongly associated with intertextuality—Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, Hayden White, Bloom, Foucault and Riffaterre—has, in the words of Vincent Leitch (1983), been that:

> The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a series of relations with other texts. Its system of language, its grammar, its lexicon, drag along numerous bits and pieces—traces—of history so that the text resembles a Cultural Salvation Army Outlet with unaccountable collections of incompatible ideas, beliefs, and sources (cited in Porter 1986, p. 35).

In this way of thinking, the author is but a bricoleur, 'an archaeologist creating an order, building a framework, from remnants of the past' (Porter 1986, p. 34). But it is this impression I wish to move past. Jonathan Culler hits closer to the mark I am aiming for when he writes:

> [Intertextuality] emphasizes that to read is to place a work in a discursive space, relating it to other texts and to the codes of that space, and writing itself is a similar activity: a taking up of a position in a discursive space (1976, pp. 1382-3).

Recalling Barthes's warning against confusing intertextuality with the search for influence, that is with "source-hunting", Culler first of all encourages us to remember that the connection between texts is not necessarily linear or chronological. One text relates to another not because it succeeds it in the way that Virgil's *Aeneid* succeeds Homer's *The Iliad*, or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* succeeds Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, or Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* succeeds Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, and so on, but because every literary text marks its function as a literary text

within a particular discursive space. When one picks up a copy of *The Aeneid* and begins reading, for example, one understands almost immediately that it is a work of literature and not, say, a seafarers' guide to the Mediterranean. This is because whether one has read *The Iliad* or not—to which *The Aeneid* undoubtedly owes a large portion of its thematic and stylistic construction—one is aware of the broader codes (the "bits") which mark out a work of literature (or even more specifically, an epic poem) and is able to establish a likeness between the texts on the basis of this supposition. The relationship is understood even without understanding the direct lineage. As James E. Porter (1986) explains, we call this type of intertextuality "presupposition" and differentiate it from "iterability", which accounts for those more explicit references a reader might identify (knowing that Aeneus sets out in search of a new home after the fall of Troy, the climactic event that finishes *The Iliad*, for example). The intertext thus accounts not only for all of those things literature *has* done or been or said up to a certain point, for all the texts it *has* produced, but for all the things it *could* be and do and say, for all the texts it *could* produce. Kristeva makes a similar discovery in claiming, *'[c]'est dire que tout texte est d'emblée sous la jurisdiction des autres discours qui lui imposent un univers'* (1974, pp. 338-9).[3]

While this kind of intertextuality works to produce a universe in which every text is, in the words of Barthes, *'déjà lues'* (1971, p. 229), it is the second part of Culler's explanation that catches my attention. I am talking of the part where he implicates writing as an activity, thereby holding readers and writers in the same relational proximity to one another as the texts they read and write. Barthes's claim that every text is "already read" can, I argue, be modified to incorporate the notion of authors and readers being likewise unable to perform or exist outside of a relational

[3] 'It is to say that every text is, from the outset, under the influence of other discourses, all of which impose an entire universe on it [own translation].'

discourse with all other readers and authors. This is an extension of Culler's supposition. The author is not only aware of other texts, as they set about producing their own, they are aware also of other authors, other readers—and likewise with the reader, who, following from the breakdown of the primordial unity, is all too aware of *others*.

It is on account of this inclusion—which, I must stress, is not an attempt to reduce readers and authors to mere texts themselves (it is for this reason I resist Barthes's work/text distinction)—that I move away from this classic definition of intertext and towards one which more closely resembles Lacan's locus of the Other. Intertextuality goes some way towards accounting for the way readers and authors relate to texts; the Othertextual goes a step further and also accounts for way readers and writers relate to one another. It suggests that textual communication might not be as simple as Jakobson makes it appear. In accordance with his six elements, there need only be two parties present: addresser and addressee. But as we saw in the previous chapter, this is never the case. There is always another, a third, the Other whom the reader suspects the text to actually be directed toward. It is this unknowable Other who initiates the desire of both the reader and author, and, in turn, supports their line of communication. To put this in simpler terms, the communication that takes place between reader and author (the kind Jakobson observes) is never just interpersonal, that is, sent from addresser to addressee; it is always mediated by the presence of the Other. In the intertext, each text plays a part in shaping every other text, but in the Othertextual, texts shape the identities of those who read and write them. Moreover, in the Othertextual, the subject's identity is *retroactively predetermined* (a paradox that I will return to shortly).

Now then, the conception of these three overlapping fields—the closed fictitious world of the text, the closed-off real world, and world that creates the text—presents a triadic structure not dissimilar to the 'Borromean knot of mutual dependency' (Brown 2008, p. 238), consisting of real, imaginary and symbolic, put forward in Lacan's own three-tiered worldview. In his "return to Freud", Lacan turns his predecessor's well known familial triad, comprising mother, father and child, into a structure of interconnected orders, which together pay heed to his insistence that psychoanalyst's first responsibility *must be to language* (2006, p. 606). We saw evidence of this in the first chapter, where it was pointed out that castration has virtually nothing to do with the biological father's menacing presence, but is instead part of the constitution of language. The value of Lacan's interpretation to my own discussion is located in his acceptance of phenomenology's claim 'that to be a subject is to experience the world as a meaningful totality' (Sharpe 2005). Where the subject in question is a reader or an author, I suggest that the totalising view draws together the three interrelated worlds to which the subject appears to have access: the intratextual world of the text, which becomes an imaginary space; the world of readers and authors, which functions not unlike the symbolic order; and the real world, which provides a real yet inaccessible space for this interaction to take place. The demarcation can be outlined as follows: real world—Othertextual world—world of the text.

In breaking the text into five supergeneological categories, Zgorzelski deals with the two outer worlds, the world of the text and the so-called real world, but does not adequately account for the world between these two, the one which, in fact, separates the two (drives a wedge between mother and child). He does not ignore the possibility of an Othertextual so much as he conflates it with the real world, making no distinction between real non-textual beings and readers and authors, between that which is real and

that which is mere reality. For Zgorzelski, there is only the real world and the fictional world, and the two affect each other directly. The antimimetic text, for example, shows a truer version of the real world and in doing so affects our perception of the real world. It is by differentiating between the real and the Other, however, that Bakhtin's 'as yet incomplete historical world', responsible for creating the text, comes into existence. Rather than the real world and fictional world directly impacting upon each other, they both directly impact upon the Othertextual, which, as already stated, serves as a sort of filter between the two. The real world and fictional worlds may still affect each other, but not directly. Their direct influence is upon the Othertextual, which bears the brunt of that influence, then redirects it outward. This is what is meant by retroactive predetermination: it is a paradox—or in Lacan's terminology an *aporia*—that 'point[s] to the presence within or influence on the symbolic of the real' (Fink 1997, p. 30). Fink, who provides the preceding definition, refers to such aporia as '*kinks in the symbolic order*' (1997, p. 30), while Bakhtin speaks of the 'thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the *future* [being] here portrayed as something out of the *past*, a thing that is in no sense a part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation' (2008, p. 147). We saw a prime example in the previous chapter where the breast was constituted as an object only after its loss: something from the past that is not realised as such until it is reencountered in the future.

To look at all of this from another angle, it is akin to recognising that the relationship between living people and the fictional characters in texts is never a direct one. Living human beings can only engage with fictional characters by first of all becoming quasi-fictional themselves (that is, symbolically constructed). In other words, and to return to one of the major findings in the previous chapter, they have to accept subjectification by becoming readers and authors. Again, it appears that the Other has a

stake in both the intratextual and the real here (hence, Lacan's Borromean knot). At the same instant, the Othertextual subject attempts to occupy both the world of the text *and* the non-fictional real world: in a sense, they are both real and imaginary, psychologically connected to both realms, yet wholly neither. This is to say that readers and authors attempt to make themselves players in the text (they empathise with certain characters as though they were real, their pulse races when something suspenseful is happening, they feel relief when the hero comes out on top at the end of the story, etc.), as well as players in the world upon which the text appears to be based. An example of this notion is found in the well known story attached to the publication of *Madame Bovary*: consider the number of readers who came forward claiming to be the "real" Emma Bovary, then consider Flaubert's response: '*Madame Bovary—c'est moi!*'.

The irony for Flaubert and his readers, as this literary interpretation of Lacan's structure enables us to see, is that readers and writers exist neither inside the text nor completely outside the text. Caught up in Lacan's Borromean knot, they are neither wholly real nor wholly imaginary, neither Emma nor the individual upon whom she is based. Rather, they occupy a world that is both separate to the fictitious world of the text, while at the same time being completely dependent upon it. Leonard Orr, whose studies extend beyond literary texts to include the sphere of "cultural texts", provides an adequate summary of this 'chain of perception' by suggesting that it takes the following form: 'Real World—Cultural Episteme—Cultural Text' (1986, p. 813). The delineation is almost identical to the 'real world—Othertextual world—world of the text' passage proposed just a few paragraphs back. Quoting Itamar Even-Zohar, who claims that 'the more established the culture, the more codified its various repertoires and the more ready-made and detached from the real world its models' (1986, p. 813), Orr argues that the text need not show any direct relationship to the non-fictitious real world for it to

earn its place at the end of the production line. 'What is often taken by historians or students of literature,' he insists, '…is actually the representation of a conventional model that forms a society's projection of itself' (1986, p. 814). In the first place, every text is filtered through the Cultural Episteme—or, in Lacan's terms, locus of the Other—rather than flowing directly from the real world. There is no direct link between the world of the text and the real world; the apparent link relies on the Othertextual subject failing to recognise that they exist in neither space, failing to recognise their reality for what it is: a symbolic reality.

Language destroys the real, but…

This brings me to a somewhat contentious aspect of my realignment of Lacan's terms: the equation of the non-literary real world and the real. The conflation has the potential to grate because, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, the real and reality are not the same thing; in fact, '*reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*' (2006, p. 57). Similar points are made by Lorenzo Chiesa, who writes: 'The Real can be defined only negatively as that which the Symbolic [i.e. reality] is not' (cited in Wegner 2009, p. 108), and Fink, who says: 'The real…always resists symbolization' (2004, p. 26). To speak of the non-literary world as real is, on first glance, to forget its complete structural dependence upon language, when, in fact, it may be taken as the order of language *par excellence*. Conflating the two for the sake of my argument here thus depends upon a willingness to naturalise language, to make it seem real. Again, I recognise the glaring contradiction here—this being that language, quite simply, *is not natural*. It is the very antithesis of the real, the very thing that destroys the real. Nevertheless, I do see a situation in which it might be permissible to treat it as such. When the only language available to the subject is "literary" language, the notion of "pure speech" might at least

appear real, and this might be enough to produce an effect not dissimilar to the one Lacan subscribes to the actual real.

In a chapter entitled, 'The Real and Its Vicissitudes', Žižek insists that '[t]he crucial point…is that the real that serves as support of our symbolic reality must appear to be *found* and not *produced*' (1992, p. 32). I am drawn first of all to the phrase 'must appear', as it raises the questions, To whom? and, From where? It seems to me that if the answer to those questions is, To reader and author, from their position in the locus of the Other of text, then we need, at least for the time being, only concern ourselves with determining whether or not non-textual language appears found rather than produced from the perspectives of these two subjects. To illustrate my positive response to that concern, I recount a scene from Jeffrey Eugenides' most recent novel, *The Marriage Plot*. The scene involves a argument between two students in a university class entitled Semiotics 211. One of the students, Leonard, has just come to the rescue of the novel's protagonist, Madeleine. Madeleine, a romantic at heart, does not really belong in the class and has just proved as much with a comment that she immediately thinks must have made her sound stupid. Before anyone can confirm her self-doubt, Leonard jumps in:

> "I have a comment," he said. "If I was going to write about my mother's suicide, I don't think I'd be too concerned about being experimental." He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table. "I mean, wasn't anybody put off by Handke's so-called remorselessness? Didn't this book strike anyone as a tad cold?"
>
> "Better cold than sentimental," Thurston said.
>
> "Do you think? Why?"
>
> "Because we've read the sentimental, filial account of a cherished dead parent before. We've read it a million times. It doesn't have any power anymore."

> "I'm doing a little thought experiment here," Leonard said. "Say my mother killed herself. And say I wrote a book about it. Why would I want to do something like that?" He closed his eyes and leaned his head back." First, I'd do it to cope with my grief. Second, maybe to paint a portrait of my mother. To keep her alive in my memory."
>
> "And you think your reaction is universal," Thurston said. "That because you'd respond to the death of a parent in a certain way, that obligates Handke to do the same."
>
> "I'm saying that if your mother kills herself it's not a literary trope."
>
> Madeleine's heart had quieted now. She was listening to the discussion with interest.
>
> Thurston was nodding his head in a way that somehow didn't suggest agreement. "Yeah, O.K.," he said. "Handke's *real* mother killed herself. She died in a *real* world and Handke felt *real* grief or whatever. But that's not what this book's about. Books aren't about 'real life'. Books are about other books" (2011, pp. 27-8).

Thurston goes on for a little while longer before the class's teacher puts an end to the debate with a witty suggestion for an essay title: "'Popular literature'…Or, 'How to Beat a Dead Horse'" (2011, p. 28).

As the novel advances it becomes clear that the argument between Thurston and Leonard can be read as a metafictional defence of Eugenides' novel, which, as its title implies, is the kind of text that believes it *is* possible to write about real things without becoming entangled in a web of intertextual tropes. Madeleine, who is writing her Honors thesis on the nineteenth-century marriage plot novel, is positioned in direct opposition to Thurston, the uncompromising Derrida fan. Moving beyond the characters though, one suspects that the classroom argument serves to demonstrate that Eugenides is all too aware of the risks he himself is taking in writing a novel built upon a nineteenth-century template, that he is not blind to the theory of Derrida and Foucault and Deleuze, and all the other theorists who get an honorary mention in the preceding

pages, but that he is not entirely convinced by them either. It is difficult to believe that there is not at least a small part of Eugenides in the character of Madeleine, who, listening to Thurston, considers his point of view to be 'both insightful and horribly wrong' (2011, p. 28). Of course, there is a certain irony to this, in as much as the inclusion of the scene only validates Thurston's claim about books being about other books and not real life, and more broadly this chapter's claim that the text does not reflect non-fictional real life, but rather the incomplete historical world of the Other.

But how does this help naturalise language? Strictly speaking, it does not. Such a feat cannot be achieved. What it does do, however, is place language in an impossible relation to text, which at least serves the purpose of making it appear real. Riffaterre says that intertextuality depends upon a system 'of limitations in our freedom of choice, of exclusions, since it is by renouncing incompatible associations within the text that we come to identify in the intertext their compatible counterparts' (1994, p. 781); accepting that the limitations imposed on our freedom of choice is a restriction imposed on our human subjectivity, a restriction that doubly castrates us and makes readers and writers of us, then we can at least begin to see how non-textual language would appear a far less limiting alternative. To be able to "speak" non-textual language, to function as a linguistic subject and not a textual subject, would appear to be a move toward something "realer".

When Leonard imagines the kind of grief he would likely experience at the loss of his mother, Thurston insists that this grief could never be carried through into the world of the text. Another way of putting this is to say there is something too real about the grief, in as much as it resists textual symbolisation. But this does not mean that the grief and manifestation thereof is real (in the strictest Lacanian sense), only that, from a literary (that is, doubly castrated) perspective it seems real. The textualisation of the

event, that is, turning the grief into something textually palatable, represents a sharp break between two worlds. The son who loses his mother to suicide has a different set of linguistic tools for experiencing and dealing with the event than does the author. A typical psychoanalytic reading of the suicide might suggest that the mother killing herself has power because it reminds the son of the primordial loss of the mother, or something along those lines. In this instance, the loss of the mother to suicide is only the representation of a realer, primordial loss, it only reminds the son that he already lost her a long time ago. Thus, we are already dealing with a symbolic reality and not a real one. An author writes, 'So, my mother killed herself yesterday…' and it is, as Thurston said, an immediate trope—one which calls to mind all the other literary suicides: Ophelia's, Anna Karenina's, the Lisbon girls' (from Eugenides' earlier novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and so on. The literary trope may well be but a twice-removed trope, since the non-textual grief is already a symbolic expression, but this does not prevent it from conforming to Žižek's (1992) contention that the real must appear to be found and not produced; here it is the mimetic reproduction of the grief, the putting it into novelistic form, that appears produced and not the enactment of the loss of the mother.

In an article entitled, 'Another Look at Lacan and Literary Criticism', Elizabeth Wright notes the move away from "classic realist" texts into a textual contract which offers neither imaginary nor symbolic satisfaction, but rather an attempted restaging of the real through which the illusion that the subject precedes language or that meaning precedes speech is entirely shattered (1988, pp. 620-1). What this suggests is not only the possibility of a writing that need not be statically linked in any process of signification, but also the idea of a writing whose existence is not reliant on the involvement of active readers or authors. Like Lacan's real, the conception of such an

axis is always going to appear somewhat hypothetical to us, but this should not dissuade us from pursuing the idea further. After all, it might be argued that real language assumes this hypothetical status not because it never existed or could not exist, but only because from where the reader and author are positioned, in the Othertextual, it becomes something of an impossible ideal.

The words we encounter in individual texts are not, as Thurston explains, borrowed or appropriated from real life, but from other texts, all of which already exist inside of the locus of the Other. As Eagleton shows, this idea dates back at least as far as the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which the Canadian is said to argue that 'literary works are made out of other literary works, not out of any material external to the literary system itself' (Eagleton 2008, p. 80). And it is never only the word that is borrowed, but always the word together with its textual history, so that under these circumstances departure from the real can be seen not to mark an entry *into* language, as per Lacan's thesis, but to mark a withdrawal *from* language. What is lost at the level of the symbolic, where writing takes place, where human beings become authors and readers, is the ability to use language in a non-textual or non-literary way.

Towards a "real" language

To reduce all of this to a single, simple point: language, as "real" human beings know it and use it, is off limits to authors and readers. Real language (if the oxymoron may now be permitted to stand), which should now be recognised as the realm of pure, non-literary language unencumbered by literary intertextual meaning, is closed to both reader and author. The author cannot write without engaging and drawing from the web of texts that make up the Othertextual superstructure. In entering into the structure as a participating subject, one loses forever the ability to "speak" without simultaneously

denoting one's textual position. Even if circumstances did allow an author to speak "pure language", this language would no sooner be spoken than symbolised by the reader. In other words, the contextual reader would achieve what this unique writer could not: (re)symbolising Language. In many ways, it is a more fundamental approach to Derrida's famous insistence that there is no outside of text.

More than just a reshuffling of the familiar Lacanian terms, this also suggests a shift in the way we think about language. It changes language from a symbolic abstraction, as it is for Lacan, into an irreducible order. This no doubt takes some swallowing, and I present the idea in the faith that it be taken strictly in the context of the argument at hand. It is not an attempt at rewriting the Lacanian position, but an appropriation of that position directed toward a very specific end. Porter calls writing:

> an attempt to exercise the will, to identify the self within the constraints of some discourse community. We are free insofar as we do what we can to encounter and learn new codes, to intertwine codes in new ways, and to expand our semiotic potential—with our goal being to effect change and establish our identities within the discourse communities we choose to enter (1986, p. 41).

As active textual subjects, it may be that readers and authors are not looking for a way out of the prison house of language, but a way back to language, back to a time when the possibility of writing non-textually may still have existed, a time when the freedom to expand one's semiotic potential was not curtailed by one's textual identity.

An extended passage from Lacan's 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' illustrates the point further. Lacan writes:

> In order for the symbolic object freed from its usage to become the word freed from the *hic et nunc*, the difference resides not in the sonorous quality of its matter, but in its vanishing being in which the symbol finds permanence of the concept. Through the word—which is already a presence made of absence—absence itself comes to be named

> in an original moment whose perpetual recreation Freud's genius detected in a child's game. And from this articulated couple of presence and absence…a language's [*langue*] world of meaning is born, in which the world of things will situate itself. Through what becomes embodied only by being the trace of a nothingness and whose medium thus cannot be altered, concepts, in preserving the duration of what passes away, engender things. For it is still not enough to say that the concept is the thing itself…It is the world of words that creates the world of things—things which at first run together in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of becoming—by giving its concrete being to their essence, and its ubiquity to what has always been (2006, pp. 228-9).

Here, Lacan goes some way to reversing the order of representation passed down by Plato, who, in 'Book 10' of *The Republic*, announces that the poet 'is by nature at third remove from the throne of truth; and the same is true of all other representative artists' (1987, p. 425). He does so by offering up an order that looks something more like the biblical 'In the beginning was the Word…and the Word was God', or 'And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light' (Bible Hub 2011). Here, the world of things—light, firmament, etc.—is preceded by language, and what is created when God says 'let there be light' is, effectively, the symbolic order (not because this God names the thing, but because he gives the word meaning through creation of the thing). What the story highlights is not so much the creation as the tethering together of language and the things that represent language (notice the reversal of representation: things that represent language). Light (literal photons), in this instance, comes to represent the linguistic light, rather than the other way around; Zeus says 'bed', and 'one real bed-in-itself in nature' (1987, p. 424) appears.

We can extend this attitude to include the author and reader of the text, who function as subjects rather than real human beings. When Leonard imagines the kind of grief he would likely experience at the loss of his mother, Thurston insists that this grief

could never be carried through into the world of the text; there is something too real about it. In other words, it resists symbolisation. Likewise, there is no room for the mourning son in the Othertextual either; he is, instead, reduced to a subject—an author. Bloom (1976, 1975) manages to map out a common path for the text as well as the author and reader when he writes, on different occasions, 'Few notions are more difficult to dispel than the "commonsensical" one that a poetic text is self-contained, that it has an ascertainable meaning or meanings without reference to other poetic texts,' and, 'You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that persons writing or teaching or thinking or reading' (cited in Culler 1976, p. 1386). From this we might argue that authors and readers are too just nodal points for all the other authors and readers to precede, succeed and co-exist with them.

Of course, in the poststructuralist's universe, there is nothing particularly real about the grief itself; it is but a culturally constructed response to a particular event—in this case, the suicide of one's mother. Nevertheless, the textualisation of the event, that is, turning the grief into a literary trope, represents a sharp break between two worlds. Gregory and Walford explain it like this: 'our texts are not mirrors which we hold up to the [real] world…They are, instead, creatures of our own making, though their making is not entirely of our choosing' (cited in Bondi 1997, p. 249).

Part of the originality of Lacan's thinking is that it manages to avoid the notion of historical inversion by placing the symbolic alongside the real, rather than exclusively before it. As Fink puts it, there is both 'a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real…[and] a real after the letter that is characterised by impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself…[and] which is generated by the symbolic' (1997 p. 27). This is a far cry from

the strict hierarchical system originating from Plato, where the real is categorised, quite simply, as an original starting point or original thing: the real being the first. In this regard, it shares this feature in common with literary intertextuality, which, as Riffaterre stresses, replaces 'referentiality with ad hoc linkages from sign-system to sign-system' (1994, p. 781). A final word on the matter might be left to Bakhtin, who claims that when artists locate ideals such as justice or perfection in the past, or speak of Golden, heroic Ages, they exercise a form of historical inversion and serves only the philosophical structures which rely on crystal-clear beginnings, where values and modes of time effectively exist before time itself (2008, pp. 147-8).

3

Mirror Stage as Formative of the Author Function

Addressing an audience at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1949, Lacan delivered a paper that would form the foundations of one of his most widely recognised theories. The reworking of a paper delivered thirteen years earlier, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' was focused toward an improved understanding of ego development. Effectively, what this came to symbolise was the shift Lacan's set of ideas make from Freud's Enlightenment worldviews (Stockholder 1998, p. 361): the main departure point being the replacement of the "individual" for the "subject", a change that was to become the hallmark of the Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis (despite Lacan's claims that he, unlike his followers, remained a Freudian).

The concept of the mirror stage was to be Lacan's earliest major contribution to psychoanalysis, following his famous "return to Freud". That it has remained one of his most enduring, however, can be explained, at least to some degree, by its apparent logic. What I mean by this is that unlike many of Lacan's subsequent theories, which rely on difficult mathematic expressions, highly esoteric formulations and conceptual proofs, the mirror stage is relatively easy to follow and rooted in what appears to be an empirical logic. Anyone who has watched a child showing interest with its reflection in the mirror can conceive of a situation where the child, if only for a short time, fails to understand the complexity of its relation to the image. That it appeals to some underlying logic or common sense does nothing to verify the validity of Lacan's claims, of course, but it does at least assist its longevity. The core thesis underpinning the mirror stage has become truly interdisciplinary, making it just as important to cultural theorists and pedagogues as to clinical psychoanalysts—an argument evidenced by the

publication of the first edition of *Culture/Clinic: Applied Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (2013), a book of essays put together by academics from the humanities as well as practising psychoanalysts.

To provide a brief summary, the mirror stage is built on the observation that sometime between the age of six and eighteen months a child will encounter its own reflection in the mirror. Recognising that it bears some relation to this reflection, the child will internalise the image, using it as a foundation upon which to begin forming a concept of self. The problem with this attachment, as Lacan points out with his use of the French term *méconnaissance* (most often translated as 'misrecognition'), is that the image, quite literally, is not the child. Thus, what the child takes to be itself and what the child actually is are two different things. According to Lacan, this discrepancy leads to all kinds of problems, the foremost of which is that the child will henceforth be thinking of something else every time it tries to think of itself. The ego constructed around this image is thus a kind of false ego. Fink explains as follows:

> As the child in front of the mirror turns around and looks to the adult behind her for a nod, recognition, a word of approval or ratification…she comes to see herself from the adult's vantage point...as if she were the parental Other…as if she were another person (2004 p. 108).

The poet Arthur Rimbaud, whom Lacan quotes on numerous occasions, puts it in strikingly clear terms when he writes, ahead of Lacan: '*Car je est un autre*' (cited in Simion 1996, p. 51).

It is interesting to note, as Kay Stockholder does, that '[n]either Lacan nor his commentators cite specific surveys of infant behavior in front of mirrors' (1998, p. 364) in formulating these ideas. The lack of empirical evidence (Lacan makes vague reference to observations, but there is no real evidence of particular observation) perhaps supports the view that the mirror stage appeals to some internal logic—which

again would explain why it has persevered in spite of criticisms from more fact-based research, which has the tendency to be outmoded as research methods evolve. The psychoanalyst Norman Holland, who has been instrumental in building the rapport between literature and psychoanalysis, insists that 'there is no evidence whatsoever for Lacan's notion of a mirror stage' (1998): an emphatic rebuttal if ever there was one. Yet, researchers—both cultural and psychological—continue to mine the site in an effort to extract some gem of truth.

To a large extent, the division has been one of semantics, with those who have remained supporters of Lacan's ideas being equally emphatic in pointing out that the mirror stage must not be taken too literally. Contrary to what its title suggests, the mirror stage need involve no mirrors at all. As Lorraine Markotic explains, '[w]hether the infant perceives itself reflected in the gaze of the (m)other or in a mirror, it recognizes itself as a whole being. According to Lacan, this recognition is a joyful one' (2001, p. 815). Similarly, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan writes that 'the mirror serves as a metaphor and a structural concept at the same time that it points to a crucial experience in psychic development' (1987, p. 29). Accepting that the mirror stage might be taken metaphorically enables Lacan's proponents to counter certain arguments—the question of how blind children are able to form egos without ever being able to look at themselves in the mirror, for example. However, there are costs associated with this shift from the empirical, or common-sensical, to the more conceptual. For one thing, the theory becomes more and more esoteric the more metaphorically we take it. This no doubt suits those hardline Lacanians who would probably prefer it this way anyhow, just as it probably confirms the suspicions of the naysayers, who posit that the mirror stage conforms only to the closed logic of Lacan's somewhat skewed view of reality.

If nothing else, we can probably agree that the flexibility of the mirror stage has enabled it to persist through even the harshest criticism, constantly finding new ways of inventing itself, both culturally and clinically, for better or for worse. In this chapter, my intention is not to determine whether the mirror stage still has relevance in a clinical setting, nor to hold it up against more recent neurological theories of ego development. Rather, I am interested in seeing whether, within a literary application of Lacan's key ideas, it can be used to support my own claim that the authorial ego is a function inscribed on the barred—that is, castrated—readerly subject. I will be arguing that it can.

Naturally, I will be dealing with the mirror stage metaphorically. And I feel justified in doing so. The mirror has, for a long time, served as an apt metaphor for the literary text. Discussing the theoretical essay accompanying *Joseph Andrews*, for example, Iser interprets Henry Fielding as wanting 'to feel that the novel is a kind of mirror, in which the reader can see himself, as it were, through the characters he has been laughing at in apparent superiority' (1978b, p. 36). From here, Iser goes on to suggest that this draws the reader's attention to sides of themselves previously unknown. Another way of interpreting this would be to say that the text shapes the reader's sense of self in roughly the same way that the mirror does in Lacan's theory. As I shall show throughout the remainder of this chapter, this is a very powerful and important notion when it comes to the development of an authorial ego in the textual subject. The aim of this chapter will therefore be to demonstrate how a metaphorical reading of Lacan's mirror stage theory applied to the arena of literary theory can be used to better our understanding of the shift from reader to author so crucial to the perpetuation of literature as we know it. As I have already stated on more than one occasion, every author starts out as a reader, and it is my contention that the shift from

reader to author may be precipitated by a mirror-stage-like phase encountered prior to subjectification.

Readerly imagoes

The term "mirror stage" did not originate with Lacan, but with Henri Wallon, whose 1931 paper, 'Comment se développe chez l'enfant la notion de corps propre' was the first to describe the child's engagement with its mirror reflection as a particular and important developmental phase. Describing the way that a child will often, 'in a flutter of jubilant activity' (Lacan 2006. p. 76), lunge toward its image in the mirror, Lacan takes the event as the key moment at which the primordial body is recognised by the child as a whole and complete body. This follows on from the earlier, fragmentary stage, during which the child only ever encountered itself in disjointed flashes, an arm sweeping across its face, a leg coming into view in its periphery, and so on and so forth. For this reason, the mirror stage proves incredibly important in the later concretisation of the child's ego, which, according to Lacan, is a symbolic function fixed to an imaginary one, a linguistic function conjoined to a specular one. While Lacan's use of the word "imaginary" implies a specular view of the world, the image the child takes of itself in the mirror might just as easily be replaced with the mental image it forms of itself, according to the way it perceives its mother to view it.

By whatever means the child comes to take stock of its own image, there are certain detrimental consequences to this process of identification that cannot be avoided. First and foremost, the image that the child recognises as itself is nothing more than that, an image. In this sense, the recognition is, in fact, a misrecognition, an erroneous apperception instrumental to the development of an ego that, following suit, is to be based upon the internalisation of a self-other dichotomy. In the words of

Lorraine Markotic: 'The jubilation accompanying the recognition of oneself as an intact being is, however, tainted by the fact that this sense of self is a false one, the recognition of a misrecognition' (2001, p. 814). The consequence of this is substantial, as Markotic goes on to explain, since basing the ego on an image that is actually other than the self threatens to dissolve the construction forever after. The ego is a precarious construct, which is evidenced by the very need for a psychoanalytic discipline in the first place.

I posit that a comparable misrecognition takes place in literature where the reader is forced to reconcile their real self (that unlimited and impossible being I spoke of in the first chapter) with the readerly image the text appears to project—the image the reader is forced into accepting as their own. Literary theory has produced countless names for this image, from Booth's "postulated reader", to Prince's "*lecteur ideal*", to Schmid's "fictive addressee", to Iser's "implied reader" (a term he borrows from Booth), to Genette's "extradiagetic narrator" to Link's "intended reader", and so on and so forth (for a discussion on each, see Schmid 2013.) While there is no shortage of nomenclatures to pick from, each with its own characteristics and peculiarities, none of them account for the image of the reader as precisely as Lacan's mirror stage suggests it might appear. For this reason, I see benefit in suggesting an inclusion to this list in the term *readerly imago*.

The readerly imago is unique from these other interpretations in that it ultimately resides in the mind of the reader. This differs from, say, the ideal reader, who is a functionary of the author, and ideal only inasmuch as the author envisions the perfect reader for their text. The reader imago, by contrast, is not a projection of the author's idealised recipient, but a construct invented by the reader: an image the reader superimposes onto the ideal reader, or fictive addressee, or any of those other nomenclatures. In saying this, however, the reader cannot produce the image alone. It is

formulated in the mind of the reader, but it is done so only after the reader adopts a vicarious view of themselves through the eyes of the author. In other words, the reader must come to see themselves as they suspect the author sees them. This is what I mean by 'superimposes on the ideal reader': the reader cannot possibly know what the author's ideal reader looks like; they can only guess what such a figure must look like and then reconstruct that image in their own mind.

One of the key features of Lacan's theory is the role the mother plays in encouraging the false identification with the mirror imago (again, it need not be the literal mother). It is her duty to stand behind the child, or even to prop the child up so that it may take a more complete view of itself, and enforce the connection, saying things like: 'Look, it's you! It's baby!' The mother here speaks less on her own behalf than on the behalf of the Other, convincing the child to internalise this compensatory image. This is not only preferable, but necessary, as Fink points out: 'in human beings, the mirror image may, as in chimpanzees, be of some interest at a certain age, but it does not become formative of the ego, of a sense of self, unless it is *ratified* by a person of importance to the child' (1999, p. 88). In order to become a speaking, participating user of language—which amounts to becoming a conscious, social being—the child needs an image that will serve as an anchor in the swirling sea of language. More than this, the child needs to be able to *imagine* the self and this what the mirror stage provides: an image that will, at some point in the future, give 'a sense of shape and wholeness to what was before a chaotic jumble of sensations and needs' (Welch 1999, p. 52). A similar condition might be found in literature.

The author's involvement can be recognised in a number of ways. The most explicit example could come in the form of the direct address, typically seen in much older works of fiction, such as *Don Quixote*, where the reader is addressed from the

outset by the apparent author, 'Idle reader: I don't have to swear any oaths to persuade you that I should like this book, since it is the son of my brain…' (Cervantes 2003, p. 11), but which occasionally appears in more recent novels too, such as Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* [sic], which begins with the line: 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*' (1981, p. 9). These direct addresses have become less popular as the narrative paradigm has aligned itself with the realist mode of discourse (of course, it is precisely this paradigm that Calvino sets out to shatter with his constant interruptions serving to remind the reader of their real disjointed relation to the text).

One could argue, however, that this realist mode of writing, which aims to disguise the presence of the author as thoroughly as possible, either by focalising the narrative through one of the characters or by affecting an unreliable narrative voice (there are many more examples), also works to make the reader conscious of their self, assuring them of their compatibility with the imago laid out in the text. There may be a division between the kind of reader the author envisions and the kind of reader the reader envisions the author envisioning. At this stage, however, what is important is that the reader feels some degree of encouragement from the author, whether such encouragement exists or not. The traditional narrative type, where the reader left all the dirty work of "figuring out" the narrative to the author, has been replaced by one which often goes out of its way to insist the reader realise their responsibilities and act accordingly. And while this has the effect of destroying the reader-author unity, as was shown in the first chapter, it has also promoted the rise of the reader as their own subject. Subjectivity signifies loss, but loss is inevitable anyway. That the reader cannot stay attached to the author is beyond the control of both reader and author; that the

reader should go on to become a subject is certainly preferable to the alternative—drifting endlessly in a sea of signifiers.

A passage from Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* would seem to corroborate the point I am trying to make. In his chapter entitled 'Tessera"' (a term he borrows directly from Lacan), Bloom writes that 'separation from the mother, analogous to later castration anxiety, brings on 'an increase of tension arising from nongratification of needs," the "needs" here being vital to the economy of self-preservation' (1997, p. 58). I suggest that this separation from the mother which Bloom categorises as a necessary step toward the child's self-preservation, or toward the child's becoming, may be used to allegorise the reader's need to likewise separate from the author, while at the same time feeling supported by the author, in order to ensure their own preservation or becoming. It is the author whom the reader not merely encounters early on through the 'parent-poem' (Bloom 1997, p. 14), but whom the reader feels attached to in the earliest stages of their life, at a time when 'the child and mother do not yet constitute 'two"' (Kristeva 1987, p. 40).

As Lacan's infant at the imaginary stage 'begins to perceive the mother as a discrete being and thereby also to emerge as a separate self' (Markotic 2001, p. 816), so does the reader in Bloom's discussion heed the advice of the author who paradoxically demands the reader '[b]e me but not me' (1997, p. 70). Markotic goes even further than this, adding that 'The child must learn to give up the "mother"—that is, the original mother-child dyad—and move toward the object of the mother's desire' (2001, p. 822). For the reader who must become a subject too if they are to take their place in the symbolic realm, the imaginary phase begins the quest to beget 'one's own self, to become one's own Great Original…, [and] to abstract [one's own self] by fabrication' (Bloom 1997, p. 64). The American poet Wallace Stevens articulates the perpetuity of

this analogy when he says, ‘My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others’ (cited in Ragg 2010, p. 84).

The imaginary

In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre writes: ‘In reflection in fact if I do not succeed in apprehending myself as an object but only a quasi-object, this is because I am the object that I wish to grasp’ (cited in Simion 1996, p. 78). It is in making such distinctions, as Romanian academic Eugen Simion explains, that Sartre ‘places the individual not only in relation to *écriture*, the *imaginary universe*…but also in relation to a whole universe, to which the individual willfully belongs and strives to understand’ (Simion 1996, p. 78). In making this point, Simion identifies an almost identical premise to the one found in Lacan’s mirror stage seminar, where, as Shoshana Felman points out:

> Self-reflection is always a *mirror* self-reflection: that is, the illusory functioning of *symmetrical* reflexivity, of reasoning by the illusory principle of symmetry between self and self as well as between self and other, a symmetry which subsumes all difference within a delusion of a totalizable, unified and homogenous identity (1980-81, p. 51).

This ‘illusory functioning’ is not as complicated as it sounds. Ultimately, what it comes down to is the internalisation of the Other’s perspective. When the mother, standing in for the Other, points to the mirror image and says, ‘Look it’s you!’ the child is thrown into a situation where it sees itself, quite literally, *as the Other sees it*. To emphasise: it not only sees itself *as* an other—an image distinct from its real self, which it most certainly is, apropos ‘*Car je est un autre*’—it sees itself from the perspective of an other. This results in the production of an alienated self-consciousness, an ego at odds with the Cartesian cogito, which centres the subject. In a quite famous inversion, Lacan changes Descartes’s, ‘I think therefore I am,’ into, ‘I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not.’ Even more dramatically, it produces an ego that is taken for an object: a point

Lacan articulates in seminar XI, where he says that '[t]he subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being—solidifies into a signifier' (1998, p. 199). It is thus by anchoring themselves in the image in the mirror that the subject brings into focus, not his ego ideal, but his ideal ego: 'that point at which he desires to gratify himself in himself' (1998, p. 257). This point will prove vital in the next chapter when we look more closely at the kinds of text the author produces following subjectification.

For now though, we might ask what, precisely, is the difference between Sartre's 'imaginary universe' and 'whole universe'? Is the imaginary universe made from the same kind of symmetrical reflexivity mentioned by Felman? Mary Klages offers a very accessible summation of the imaginary and its relationship to the mirror stage when she writes: 'The Imaginary is the psychic place, or phase, where the child projects its ideas of 'self' onto the mirror image it sees. The mirror stage cements a self/other dichotomy, where previously the child had known "other" but not "self"' (2007, p. 81). The child experiences two phases of identity prior to the mirror stage. In the first instance, the child identifies itself as its mother—or more correctly, fails to acknowledge the distinction between itself and its mother. This corresponds with the most *readerly* textual relationships—ones where the reader contributes very little to the formation of the text. It is a phase which borders, though is already outside of, the real. The next phase coincides with the beginning of the imaginary period, which plays host to the mirror stage.

In this earliest period of the imaginary, the reader has not yet formed an image of themselves as an autonomous individual within the textual paradigm, though they are at least aware of their sovereignty from the authorial body and are able to imagine, for the first time, that they are a subject probably not so different to the other subjects they have

encountered within the textual space. In the very least, the reader equips themselves with an image of the self of which they were not previously in possession. For Lacan, the concept of other precedes the concept of self, and is imperative to the development of self: a claim reinforced by his observation that '[t]here can be no *fort* without *da*' (Lacan 1998, p. 239), which is to say, no rediscovery of the self without a loss of the self. The self—in this case, the authorial ego—cannot be formed without the reader first forming a notion of otherness. The reader needs to know they are not some other author before they can, at a later stage, put the image to work in becoming their own author.

The next part of the imaginary involves the consolidation of this knowledge through participation in the mirror stage, where the 'construction of the subject…needs the image of [a] body as its intermediary' (Kurzweil 1981, p. 423). The reader, now thinking for and of themselves, locates themselves in the text by taking a third-person view of the figure left to negotiate those trickier passages. They make a kind of mental note to themselves, as if to say, 'This is not the author unravelling this passage; the author knew what they meant from the beginning and has long since moved onto something else; it must, then, be me.' The author appears to confirm this suspicion, of course, by choosing to remain hidden. The author's encouragement may be, however paradoxical it seems, their very lack of encouragement, their refusal to encroach. By *not* intervening, the author seems to affirm the reader's own suspicions, and promote an alignment with the imago constructed in the mind of the reader. So,

> [O]n the one hand, the mirror stage represent a *méconnaissance*, because the subject identifies with what he or she is not [in literature's case, the readerly imago]. On the other hand, what he or she sees when looking into the mirror is literally his or her own image (Salamon 2004, p. 103).

The reader is yet to enter into the symbolic by becoming a creator of texts (at this stage they are just a rudimentary "untangler" of texts), but at least they have a sense of self

now, have the foundational image which will enable the construction of an authorial ego. The development of the authorial ego in full will depend on the reader's absolute commitment to this imago, which is anything but guaranteed.

The author and the imago

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud suggests 'that much of the blame for our misery lies in what we call our civilization, and that we should be far happier if we were to abandon it and revert to primitive conditions' (2004, p. 30). The civilisation Freud refers to is one built largely upon renunciation, upon the substitution of the pleasure principle for the more modest reality principle. The pleasure principle being that which tells us to do whatever feels good, and the reality principle that which insists we subordinate our lust for pleasure with the a more pragmatic emphasis on doing what needs to be done in order to survive. Both principles are aimed at pleasure, but only the conservative reality principle recognises the need to defer gratification in order to ensure its continuation. An early and lasting example of this precedence at work occurs at the totemic phase, where the prohibition of incest—a prohibition which involves giving up of the mother as the object of desire—is first administered. For Freud, the enforcement proves 'perhaps the most drastic mutilation that man's erotic life has experienced throughout the ages' (2004, p. 52), but is, nevertheless, a basic price to pay for the progress of civilisation. Every civilisation, even a textual civilisation like the one we are discussing here, depends upon individuals forfeiting their primordial desires in favour of helping "build" society—one of civilisation's principal aims being to bring people together in large units (2004, p. 50). In literature, the building of society equates to writing/producing more texts, bringing more and more readers and authors into existence.

The author, as representative of the Other of text, is both a citizen and enforcer of the reality principle. One wonders, however, what becomes of the imago that served in the ascendency of this subject? At this stage of the thesis, the focus has been predominantly fixed on the reader; in this chapter, for example, it is the reader's connection to the imago that has taken precedence over the role played by the author. In fact, the author has thus far been dealt with as a fully formed subject: as the maternal subject whose desire and encouragement precipitates the reader's alienation and subsequent imago attachment. In the next chapter, I begin to deal more completely with the author in their role, not as a representative of the Other of text but as a barred subject themselves. I come to show that the author's activity and identity is also shaped by the order that subjugates them. For now though, I wish to skip ahead just slightly in order to expose the fragility, or volatility, of this identity. It is important to remember that no author is "born" an author. Authors come into being through a process of identity formation, such as the one being fleshed out in this thesis. Psychoanalysis constantly concerns itself with the subject's earliest memories, emphasising the importance of the subject's formative, childhood years. Psychoanalytic-literary analysis should, I believe, do the same, focusing on the author's "childhood" (the period before they became "an author", when they were still just "a reader") rather than looking for clues from outside of the symbolic order. Doing so suggests that the imago may continue to affect the subject even after serving its primary function of ego development.

In many ways, the imago can be thought of as a kind of stepping stone which, already passed by, serves no real purpose to the subject anymore. Once internalised, the human subject, for example, has no reason to ever look for their imago in the mirror again. It is the internalised image that will become the palimpsest upon which the symbolic order writes itself out, rather than the material image in the glass. This remains

true unless, of course, the subject should wish a return to origins. In such case, the imago's danger to civilization is what it appears to offer this volatile individual: namely a pathway back to pre-linguistic passivity. (I say "appears" because even though the progression from reader to author is one-way—the reader can never "forget" how to be an author—the subject does not necessarily know this. I should also point out that this is not a claim Lacan himself makes, but rather a suggestion I put forward in an effort to explain the fragility of the authorial ego.) It is an enticement that the civilized author, under the sway of the reality principle—a principle which insists on forward momentum and not maternal homecomings—recognises and must counteract if they are to avoid such catastrophic outcomes as the breakdown of civilisation: that is to say, to the cessation or stagnation of all text-producing practices.

The perceived role of the imago is thus entirely relative. For the reader, the imago is a way forward into the "civilized" symbolic order, a stepping stone, or perhaps a doorway, sanctioned by the reality principle. For the author though, who is already a citizen of the symbolic, the imago is a regressive temptation, which can only possibly lead back into disadvantageous pleasure. This idea of the author never letting go of the imago which they internalised at the mirror stage is incredibly important to my overarching thesis. What it does is give form to all those abstract nouns like "ideal reader", "implied reader", and so on. From the author's perspective, the ideal reader is none other than the reader to whom they imagined their own maternal author to be writing. But, if the author's text is aimed at some kind of 'ideal reader', then it must be said that this reader is only the imaginary reader they brought into existence when they themselves were a reader. Even as an author, the author continues trying to repair the disabled reader-author unity of which they were once a part (as a reader). This is what

enables literature to go on repeating itself, constantly developing new authors. I shall pause here to explain more clearly what I mean.

A text is written and finds its way into the hands of a reader. The reader understands that this text was created by an author. The reader begins reading. Before long, something unexpected happens: a jolt that awakens the reader to their autonomy from the author. I have discussed this already; it means simply, that the illusion of a real, unfettered communication between author and reader is no longer sustainable. The reader no longer subscribes to the possibility of receiving the text exactly as it was written. In a sense, they have become distanced from the author—although, it is more their newfound awareness of the distance that was always there. The reader comes to accept that this text is not for them, but for some other reader who *can* read it exactly as it was written. The jolt, then, does not destroy the illusion of possibility altogether, only the illusion of their specific possibility. It awakens them to the fact that they are already implicated in the symbolic order. In opposition to this other, ideal reader, the reader constructs an image of themselves as a reader, imposing this image onto the text. In other words, unable to be the object of the author's desire, the reader constructs an image of themselves as something *other* to this object of desire. The reader now has a sense of who they are: an other. While they must come to terms with the fact that they are not the reader the author had in mind when writing the text, they at least have an image of a whole and complete "being" to which they will later apply symbolic notions of self: a kind of compensation for the loss.

What we have witnessed so far, over the course of the past few chapters, is the shift from a somewhat passive reader, the naïve reader who felt themselves to be one with the author, to a reader who has weathered the breakdown of the primordial unity by compensating for the lost author with a self-made image. As the reader's sense of

autonomy grows, they become more dependant upon this self-made image, this imago. They begin to play around with text, imposing their ideas on it, and not only where they were previously forced to act (the spaces where something did not make sense, for example), but wherever they see fit. The text is their plaything (think of the reel in Freud's *fort-da* example: the child's plaything (2006, p. 13). They become a more experimental reader, grounded always by the somewhat stable figure of the imago, and begin to look more and more like the modern scripter Barthes discusses. In fact, reading itself begins to look more and more like writing, as Barthes also suggests; until, at the peak of this activity, a completed change is effected. The subject is no longer just a reader playing around with the text of some other author, they actually begin to make their own texts. In the most literal sense, they become an author.

Of course, as an author, the subject does not become a completely new "person". In just the same way that the child carries pre-linguistic traits through into subjectivity, so does the literary subject carry readerly traits through into authorial subjectivity. For instance, for all their subjective maturation, they still desire a return to origins: a reunion with the author whom they lost right back at the start. Given the opportunity, the author would give up subjectivity in a heartbeat and return to the real. Any argument to the contrary must, within this schema, be treated as pure ideology. Think of Freud's discontented individuals: they may tell themselves that they are happy going to work each day in order to pay the bills, but this is only the ideology that accompanies the reality principle; in actual fact, all any of them want is a return to the inorganic—a way out of life. Like the Freudian discontent, the author sets about writing texts and, as such, sustains the symbolic reality that subsumes them. They become another of civilisation's discontents. Over the next couple of chapters, I build on this idea by suggesting that the kinds of texts the author produces are derivative of their reading experience (what we

typically think of as “influence”) and are shaped this way in the hope of forging some alliance with the lost primordial object.

4

Object a *and the Desire of the Autère*

Much of the aim of the first chapter was to provide a Lacanian explanation to what I dubbed Barthes's return to the author paradox. All told, this paradox amounts to only half a dozen paragraphs in a body of work made up of three-dozen book publications and countless essays and articles. Barthes was a prolific writer, and undoubtedly one of his great strengths was the malleability of his thinking. The return to the author paradox, or contradiction, or amendment, or 'recognition of a gross exaggeration that refuses to confess itself' (Burke 2008, p. 28), or whatever one might be inclined to call it, could well have been left alone, taken for one of the many charming contrarieties that give Barthes's oeuvre its appeal. By working it through though, rather than taking it at face value, a certain consistency emerged, that is, the paradox seemed to speak of a much wider predicament involving readers, authors and literary texts.

What I saw in Barthes was an opportunity to make use of the innovative discourses structuralism, poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis offer literary theory without discarding the notion of authorship and readership, or, conversely, falling back on stale traditional approaches to psychoanalytic-literary theory. Barthes's contrariety opened the door to analysis that might otherwise have been sidelined by some of its own contradictions and mystifications. By focusing on the disruption of the primordial reader-author relationship, as well as the reader's subsequent encounter with the fetishized object of desire, I attempted to lay the groundwork for a more intensive analysis of the triadic reader-author-text relationship, and thereby overcome some of those stumbling blocks. In this chapter, and in the next, I intend to expand upon these earlier formulations with a more thorough analysis of the figure of the author, as befitting the Lacanian worldview I have taken as my schema. Effectively, what this

marks out is the analytical shift from reader to author. Not that the author has ever been too far from our sights anyway. As I have gone to some length to point out, we are in fact always dealing with the one subject in reader and author anyway—just at different periods or stages of their psycho-literary development. Where previous chapters paid the most attention to the subject in their readerly state, the next two chapters deal with the subject after the formation of an authorial ego.

An obvious starting place for this project is to return to object *a*, this time concentrating on its role as cause of desire. This approach suits the subjective focal shift, as the cause of desire corresponds with one of the other nomenclatures Lacan applies to object *a*: the Other's desire. As cause of desire, object *a* is taken by the child, or, in our case, reader, as being the object of mOther's/Autère's desire. It is the unknown point toward which the Autère focuses their attention—the thing that takes their attention away from the child/reader. One of the key points introduced under the topic of object *a* as rem(a)inder was this idea of there being some piece of the original unity that manages to ex-sist alongside the symbolic, a piece of the real that shows up after symbolisation—like the breast that we discussed in the opening chapter (Fink 1997, p. 59). By cleaving to this rem(a)inder, the reader hoped to sustain the illusion of wholeness, of *real*ness.

Yet this fantasy really only deals with alienation: the reader seeks to compensate for their own lack by clinging to some piece of the author as lost object, thereby doing their best to patch up the broken-down unity. As Fink points out, however, it is '[i]n separation we start from a barred Other, that is, a parent who is him or herself divided' (1997, p. 54). Separation disrupts the fantasy in a very fundamental way: even if the reader could realign themselves with the author, a lack would remain, since the author (a former reader) brings their own lack to bear. Originating from one of Freud's more

contentious postulations, the very existence of the child can, under these circumstances, be read as an attempt on the parent's part to fill their own lack. For Freud, the child functions as a sort of "penis substitute" for the mother; while for Lacan, '[t]he cause of the subject's physical presence in the world was a desire for something (pleasure, revenge, fulfillment, power, immortality, and so on) on the part of the child's parents. One or both of them wanted something, and the child results from that wanting' (Fink 1997, p. 50). By choosing to interpret the reader's presence in such a way—as a consequence of the author's wanting—we teach ourselves more about the desire of the author. Not to mention, more about the drive toward authorial subjectivity, which conforms to the Lacanian notion of the drive's ultimate aim being 'to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal [full satisfaction]' (Žižek 1992, p. 5).

Why write?

In his short but well known essay, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming', Freud proposes—albeit, with the caveat that it may prove 'too exiguous a pattern'—a link between the kind of fantasising that takes place in dreams (wish fulfilment) and writing. He says:

> In the light of the insight we have gained from fantasies, we ought to expect the following state of affairs. A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory (1974, p. 27).

Freud is clearly talking about non-textual, real-life memories here, memories that have nothing to do with literature or literary relationships. However, this need not diminish

the value his words hold to this study so focused on the Other of text. His recognition of the place of fantasy in the production of the literary text is an important one. As is his suggestion that we view the text as an attempt on the author's part to revisit or rediscover some earlier memory.

Pragmatically, Freud's suggestion seems plausible enough: people indulge in writing as a means of working their way through a whole range of repressed childhood memories. The cathartic arena of literature, like that of daydreams (or the analyst's lounge), is distanced far enough from reality that visiting these memories anew poses no real threat. In literature, the subject is given the opportunity to explore real-life memory traces without fear of undoing the protective realities they have built up around themselves in their day-to-day lives: Oedipus kills his father and beds his mother so that Sophocles does not have to, for example. This view has served as the underlying principle for the vast majority of psychoanalytic-literary criticism to date: the critic reads the text like an analyst listening to the dream story of one their patients. It has even shown itself to be a suitable model for more recent reader-response approaches to literary theory—the big difference being that it is the reader's real-life problems being worked through: Freud reads *Oedipus Rex* so that he does not have to kill his father, or something to that effect. In both cases, the text is shaped in accordance to the subject's unconscious efforts to satisfy their wishes.

The question that this approach fails to take into consideration, however, is, Why literature in the first place? Why writing? Dreaming is a wholly unconscious activity: the subject has no control over what they dream about, nor any decision in whether or not they will dream when they turn the light off and go to bed each night. Writing, however, is a different matter altogether. While argument can be made that the author does not really "choose" what they write about, inasmuch as the unconscious

plays its part in giving shape to the text's themes and structure and so on, it must at least be acknowledged that the author has some choice in whether the unconscious will even get the opportunity to have its turn. The author must put pen to paper before the unconscious can dictate the movement of the pen, so to speak. Freud opens with the declaration that '[w]e laymen have always been intensely curious to know…from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material' (1974, p. 24), but he does not stop to contemplate the very conception of the author. The author is not just some everlasting structure that we laymen find helpful in resolving our psychic problems; the author is a subject produced again and again within a very structured discourse, as we have already begun to determine.

Why should a human subject choose literature as a medium for reaching back into their past? Reading Barthes in a purely historical context might suggest that he is more interested in the death of authority than the death of the author, but it is such thinking that reduces his essay to a mere slogan, that robs it of its importance to literature. True, it is difficult to separate the notion of the Death of the Author from the other anti-authorial slogans being shouted in the streets of Paris at more or less the same time—*Ni Dieu ni maître!* (Neither God nor master!) and, *Le patron a besoin de toi, tu n'as pas besoin de lui!* (The boss needs you, you don't need him!), and so on and so forth. But is this all we are to make of the essay? Was Barthes merely doing his share to revolt against the authority in his particular sphere? In reading the essay, one finds no evidence whatsoever of any collusion with broader social issues (a point which makes it a very different essay to, say, Michel Foucault's 'What Is an Author?' (2010). The only historical collusion Barthes is willing to make is the one that ties him to a distinguished list of likeminded, and exclusively French, critics and authors: 'In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute

language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner' (1978, p. 143), Barthes begins, before going on to include Valéry, Proust and the surrealists, who 'contributed to the desacrilization of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist 'jolt')' (1978, p. 144). What is striking is the fact that at no point does he attempt to extend the lineage to include those fellow countrymen who stormed the Bastille 179 years earlier, for example; his revolution is very much a literary revolution.

The alternative to Freud's enquiring, then, is not to ask, What happened in the author's life that made them write this text or that text? But rather, What happened in the this person's life that made them write in the first place? The author may feel compelled to write—and certainly many authors would describe the compulsion to write as an unconscious one—but still, Why? Why the urge to write, and not one of the myriad other activities civilization's discontents employ to counter their unconscious urges?

The conclusion I reach is that there must be something inherently important about the activity itself. Writing must not be seen as just another tactic for dealing with "real" trauma, or fulfilling forbidden wishes, or expending sexual energy, or exercising liberal proclivities, and so on. If literature is to hold value in and of itself, that is, to be worthy of concentrated analysis and not merely taken as supplementary evidence of some deeper psychic state, which has nothing to do with reading or writing, then we need to systematize it in relation to itself. Hence, a psychoanalytic reading of any given text should be undertaken not so much with the aim of revealing some secret from the author's *outertextual* childhood, but with a focus on what might be dubbed their textual childhood. The question asked in the paragraph above—What happened in this person's life that made them write in the first place?—is thus answered quite simply: They read.

Why write? Because reading calls for such a response. How else to deal with the alienating experience of reading but by becoming an author? Writing is the author's attempt to come to grips with their own primal alienation.

The intersection of desire

Toward the end of end of Seminar XIV, after addressing the 'truth of desire', Lacan arrives at the following: '*Desire is lack in its very essence*. And this has a sense. The fact is that there is no object that desire is satisfied with, even if there are objects that are the *cause* of desire' (1966-67, pp. 268-9). In other words, desire has as its aim only more desire, its own perpetuation, and never complete satisfaction. Taking this into consideration, object *a* cannot to be conceived of as the object that would close the loop of desirousness, that is, as the known thing that would return the subject to the real. To put this in perspective, while the reader may discern the focus of the author's desire to be some other, ideal reader (as was suggested in the previous chapter), this ideal reader is not, strictly speaking, the cause of the reader's desire—nor, consequently, the cause of the author's (who was previously a reader) desire. While the ideal reader might appear to be the object that capture's the author's attention, it is the attention itself that the subject chases. As Fink puts it in his discussion of lost objects: '*Object (a) is the leftover of that process of constituting an object, the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization*. It is a reminder that there is something else, something perhaps lost, perhaps yet to be found' (1997, p. 94).[4] Thus, what causes the reader's desire is the author's desire. The object of the reader's desire (though it cannot really be called an object, if we are to be literal about it) is the desire of the author: *le désir de la mère*.

[4] Fink differentiates between object *a* as 'object of desire' and 'object cause of desire' by placing it in parentheses.

It is in the intersection between these two desires, the reader's and the author's, that the subject attempts to position themselves as author—effecting the shift from reader to author. This is the space in which the new author, the second-generation author, emerges. Marie-Hélène Brousse says that '[t]here is quite a fusion in neurosis between the object of desire, the object which causes desire, and the object the subject thinks the Other is demanding of him or her' (1995, p. 110): an observation that complements Barthes's insistence that every writer's motto must read: '*mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am*' (1975, p. 6). The common diagram used to represent neurosis looks like this:

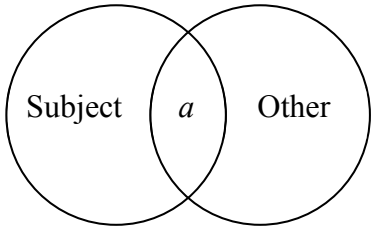

Figure 1

The illustration, as Antonio Quinet has explained in his essay 'The Gaze as an Object', points quite clearly to the fact that object *a* belongs to neither the subject nor the Other; it 'is a part of the Other, but not an element of the Other' (1995, p. 143), Quinet writes. It is easy to see how, for the subject, the object comes to be associated so intrinsically with the Other, since, by positioning itself between the two, it appears attached to the Other. Where the object is associated with the gaze of the mother, it may be lumped together with the eye as organ. What this means is that the object of desire, which is actually not an object at all, but a certain look the mother gives, is parcelled together with the mother via the eye. Ellie Ragland says that '[a]t the most primordial level, *a* denotes anchoring buttons of the real, or those parts of the body that seem to be attached to an organ or produced by an organ. But, in fact, they are perceptually detachable from the organ and from the body' (1995, p. 188). Figure 2 shows the way that, when

pressed, object *a* falls away leaving only desire at the point of contact for subject and Other:

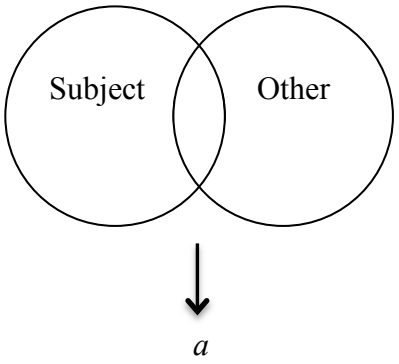

Figure 2

What causes this desirous look, then? Is there not some actual tangible object that can be used to fill this space that opens up in the Other? In perversion, it is the subject themselves who tries to fill the space. In neurosis, however, which, as Barthes points out, is the diagnostic category par excellence for authors, the subject adopts the Other's desire. It is in this way that the second-generation author comes to desire as if they were the author. Rather than trying to be the object of the author's desire, then—that is, trying to be the ideal reader, the recipient of the gaze—the subject satisfies themselves with identifying with the author, desiring as if they were the author (see Fink 1999, p. 124-25). This second generation author's desire is identical to the desire of the maternal author who preceded them, so that every author desires the same thing. Or, put differently, the object *a* cause of desire is identical for every author. Giving some credence to those poststructuralist theorists who follow after Derrida in arguing that there is no outside of the text, one could say that literature is effectively stuck on one big desiring loop. In order to stand a chance, the subject must attempt to fill the void of desire; this is where fantasy comes into play, where fantasy desire and object *a* converge.

$<>*a*: the role of fantasy

In a paper entitled, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet'* (1982), Lacan presents his matheme for fantasy: $<>*a*. The expression can be read as the split subject ($) in relation to (<>) to the object *a*, where object *a* is not the object *of* desire but the object cause of desire, or the object *in* desire. Against the usual definition of fantasy—that is, 'an imagined scenario representing the realization of desire' (Žižek 2008b, p. 132)—this formulation position the subject in relation to the Other's desire. The difference here is crucial. For Lacan, fantasy is not defined as the subject's imaginary involvement with some object of desire, but the subject's imaginary involvement with that which is essentially unknowable to the subject: the Other's desire. Lacan says that '[s]omething becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject…This is profoundly enigmatic, for it is ultimately a relationship to something secret and hidden' (1982, p. 28). In this sense, fantasy does not provide the subject with a sense of fulfilment, but rather teaches the subject how to desire—which, of course, is the very opposite of fulfilment (Žižek 2008b).

There is something paradoxical in this relation. While desire itself constitutes a lack, it is in fantasy that the subject 'achieves a phantasmatic sense of wholeness, completeness, fulfillment, and well-being' (Fink 1997, p. 60). In other words, it is by positioning the self in relation to the desire of the Other (that which is lacking in the Other) that the split subject is able to win back for themselves some sense of being—even if it is only an imaginary one. Another way of approaching this is to say that it is in fantasy that the subject rediscovers some trace of the original child-mother union and uses this to stage a return to the real, to produce a second-order jouissance. We touched

on jouissance quite briefly in the first chapter and will return to it again more fully shortly. First, let us try to understand the role of fantasy as it pertains to the author.

What is the cause of the Autère's desire? This is the question each reader must ask themselves if they are to overcome symbolic castration and rebuild themselves in the image (*imaginary*) of a whole, complete being, that is, in the image of an author. There is more at stake here than first appears too. Positioning the self in relation to the Autère's desire is effectively the same as taking on the Autère's desire, while, at the same time, it is a defence against the Autère's desire, which threatens to subsume the subject. To explain what I mean, think of the mother who mollycoddles her child, never allowing them to "stand on their own two feet". This is a more detrimental prospect than the mother who completely ignores her child, since at least this second, overlooked child will not be deprived the space to develop into their own person. Lacan puts it like this:

> The mother's role is her desire. That is of capital importance. Her desire is not something you can bear easily…It always leads to big problems. The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth…That is the mother's desire (1969-70, p. 129).

Well, no doubt, a similar situation threatens the alienated reader. Should the reader find themselves in the mouth of the author, there is no telling when those jaws might clamp down. The unknowable desire of the author is more than any one reader can bear. In writing a text, it is clear that the author wants something—and no small thing either, the text is testament to this. But what is it that they want? What causes their desire? It is only by symbolising the author's unknowable desire that the reader avoids being completely destroyed by it. In a sense, the reader has two options ("forced" options, that is): to attempt to respond fully to the author's desire, or to position themselves in relation to this desire in such a way as to put it to use in producing their own sense of

self: in other words, to make good of this desire. We have already discussed the impossibility of the reader filling the author's desire; the reader who attempts to "complete" the author, is the reader who fails and winds up being completely washed over by the text, swallowed up by the Autère. The reader who truncates the author's desire by reducing it to a finite, nameable thing is the reader who may then set about reconstructing themselves in the image of the author. In this regard, the reader manages to return to the author by becoming an author.

The Lacanian subject manages to deal with the desire of the mother by heeding, what Lacan calls, the 'paternal function', or *le nom/non du père*. The paternal function protects the child from the desire *of* the mother by forcing the child to symbolise its desire *for* the mother, that is, by dealing with this desire through language. This works to reign in the desire, to make it a less formidable force, as language always weakens the real thing. Simply by enunciating the desire, the subject finds a way of overcoming it. This is the role of the phallus in Lacan's system. The phallus is the name given to the mother's desire, the way of speaking her desire, of making it a knowable, and therefore containable thing.

But how does the reader deal with the author's desire? I suspect likewise: by naming it, by speaking it, by signifying it. The process of signifying the author's desire is, I argue, the very process of writing itself. An argument I see ratified in Bloom's claim that 'every good reader properly *desires* to drown, but if a poet drowns, he will become *only a reader*' (1997, p. 57). The reader, as an author-in-the-making, can avoid being swallowed by the Autère's text by adopting the position of speaking subject and annunciating the object cause of desire. So, rather than attempting to fill in the hole of the mother's desire—an impossible prospect, which can only end in failure—the subject brings the desire under control by writing it. The perpetuity of literature is tied up in this

process of each and every author attempting to name the desire of their own maternal author. This brings me back to a point I made several paragraphs back, where I said that there is more at stake than first appears. Writing, that is, becoming an author, is beneficial for two reasons: (1) it enables the subject to achieve a phantasmatic sense of self in the wake of the breakdown of the original reader-author unity, and (2) it necessarily involves the naming of the Autère's desire, which actually pulls the subject from the jaws of the Autère before they snap shut completely. One becomes an author to avoid being completely subsumed by the Autère. Which brings us back to the argument I presented after visiting Freud's ideas on creative writing: Why write? Because reading calls for such a defence.

To some extent, this is but an elaborate way of saying that writing is a sort of fantasy. Not in the typical sense—where the literary space allows the human author to do things they could not normally do, like travel through time or play the part of a suave MI6 agent or fight off dragons, and so on—but in the sense that in writing, the split subject reveals the way they would like to be related to object *a*, the cause of the Autère's desire. The fantasy being staged is the return to origins. And as Žižek explains in the same text, '[t]here is nothing behind fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this "nothing" – that is, the lack in the Other' (2008b, p. 148).

In the next chapter, I will revisit this idea in greater detail, arguing that the kinds of texts the author produces demonstrate their relation to the Autère and reveal something of their readerly origins. First, I should like to finish this chapter by attending to the concept of jouissance.

Jouissance after the letter

In the introductory note to Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Howard contemplates the usual English translation for jouissance—that being, 'bliss'—and says that 'a hard look at the horizon of our literary culture suggests that it will not be long before we come to a new word for orgasm proper [that is, for jouissance]—we shall call it "being"' (cited in Barthes 1975, p. *vi*). The prospect is of interest to us inasmuch as we have already spoken of the shift from reader to author as presenting the subject with a sort of "second chance" at being. This is not to say that the subject can undo symbolic castration and return to the real, but that certain moments arise when, by cleaving to object *a*, the subject may cause the symbolic order to rupture, or momentarily tear apart.

There are two ways we may choose to interpret this. In the first instance, we can follow after Laurent's (1995) discussion of the alienated subject—quite literally, the subject who identifies with a signifier (in our case, it might be the signifier "reader" or the signifier "author", and so on). In doing so, we take fantasy as that which enables the subject to transcend, or momentarily break free, of this signifier which appears to petrify them. What I like about this approach is it accommodates for jouissance in both reading and in writing. Taking what has been put forward in this chapter thus far, we can already begin to imagine the circumstances by which the reader might salvage for themselves some piece of the real by taking up the role of author. This moment of being both reader and author—a moment of "becoming", which Barthes might refer to as the 'seam of two edges' (1975, p. 13)—typifies the sort of thing I am talking about. The reader achieves a return to the author by becoming the author. It is the instant at which the binary loses collateral and the subject is both reader and author that the interstice opens up.

Not so dissimilar are those moments when the author manages the feat of simultaneously becoming their own reader. It is not a case of "seeking out" some unknown external reader that creates the site of bliss, "cruising him" as per Barthes's (1975) suggestion, but rather the moment at which the author manages the feat of unburdening themselves of the author-signifier that results in jouissance. The author quits being the all-knowing source of their own text and assumes the role of baffled reader. Lacan's claim that '[j]ouissance is what serves no purpose' (1999, p. 3) may well account for this phenomenon. The author discovers a kind of surplus value in their own work, some modicum they cannot explain without temporarily dismissing their status as author and reverting to the tactics they learned in infancy. No doubt, the left over piece is quickly brought under control, made sense of, and the author just as quickly returned to the position of author of the text (in their own mind); nevertheless, the moment, however fleeting existed, the appearance of something real.

This notion of a surplus value brings us to the second interpretation we might make. Surplus jouissance, as Fink explains, bears something in common with the surplus value found in Marxist discourse (there are obvious parallels to be drawn between the two theorists' notions of alienation too). Only, in this instance, we are dealing not with a greedy capitalist, but the greedy Autère. It is the Autère that deprives the reader of their jouissance in the first place. Another way of putting this is to say that in submitting the self to the Autère, the literary subject submits themselves to a life of producing jouissance for an other, the Autère. The cost of the reader's alienation is counterbalanced by the value their participation adds to the Other of the text.

By becoming an author, the subject is able to garner some of this surplus value back for themselves. They no longer just contribute to the stockpile, but draw on it. So, for example, when a reader performs a reading of a certain text, we say they add

something to the value of that text. More than that, though, they add something to value of literary texts in general—the intertext is richer for their involvement. As reader, the subject is forced into giving more than they take; they must produce meaning where there is none to be taken (an argument that was developed quite fully in the first chapter). In becoming an author, however, the subject has their chance to take some of this back. It is no exaggeration to say that writing is a process of borrowing and reinvesting. To take something back from the Other of text is to recapture what once belonged to the self. In the next chapter, we will see how the rediscovery of jouissance affects the writing practices of the author.

5

The Overdetermined Author

In an article published on *the Paris Review* website in March, 2011, Jennie Yabroff observes the way Hollywood films tend to portray writers (particularly struggling novelists) as being deeply unhappy people with no end of personal and/or social problems. Taking the movie *Limitless* (2011) as her starting point, Yabroff notes that:

> According to Hollywood, writers are either parasites (*Deconstructing Harry, Capote, Barton Fink, Misery*); perverts (*The Squid and the Whale, Adaptation, Wonder Boys, American Splendor*); addicts (*Permanent Midnight, Barfly, Leaving Las Vegas, Sideways*), or sociopaths (*La Piscine, Deathtrap, The Shining*)…What makes all of this especially odd,' she points out toward the end of the article, 'is that movies come from scripts, and scripts come from writers…you'd think writers might have a vested interest in portraying their own kind sympathetically (2011).

Yabroff closes the article with two short explanations for the unflattering filmic representations: either, (1) screenwriters maintain almost no control over their scripts once production starts, and thus have no say in the way characters are brought to life by producers and directors and costume artists and all the other less sympathetic personnel who add their particular interpretations; or, (2) screenwriters see themselves as a higher order of writer than the novelists, poets, and other literary types—a superiority reflected in the unkind portrayals.

I find Yabroff's observation fairly astute, though I am not so convinced by her attempt to explain the phenomenon, given that this attitude towards writers is hardly confined to Hollywood films. In fact, of the sixteen examples she mentions, five of them are adapted from at least *semi*-biographical prose (*Leaving Las Vegas, Barfly, Permanent Midnight, The Squid and the Whale, Capote*), one from an autobiographical

comic books series (*American Splendor*), five from previous works of fiction (*The Shining, Misery, Wonderboys, Sideways, Limitless*), and one from the novel-to-film adaptation process itself, where the film's protagonist is a fictionalised version of the screenwriter hired to adapt the novel to screen (*Adaptation*). We could go on to add many more examples to this list of literary misfits too, Chip Lambert from Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections,* Richard Tull from Martin Amis's *The Information,* Briony Tallis from Ian McEwan's *Atonement,* Raoul Duke from Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* any one of the seventeen protagonists from Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted,* Bret from Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*, and Nathan Zuckerman from Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man*, to name but a few recent entries. Considering, then, that most of the "parasites", "perverts", "addicts" and "sociopaths" whom Yabroff cites originate from works of literature, or from "real life" (autobiography) by way of literature, rather than from Hollywood-manufactured screenplays, it would seem misdirected to blame the film industry for the stigma associated with writers. If anyone is to take the blame for perpetuating the image of discontentment, then it must be authors (both screen *and* prose writers) themselves. In which case, the view is undoubtedly a self-reflexive one, and Hollywood does nothing but provide another medium for the perpetuation of this deep-seated embitterment.

Such introspection is often employed to comic effect, as a kind of "in joke" wherein the author, with tongue in cheek, paints themselves as the most wretched human being imaginable to the amusement of the audience. *Limitless*, as Yabroff observes, opens with a shot of the dishevelled lead character and accompanying voiceover, which asks the question: 'What kind of guy without a drug or alcohol problem looks this way?' to which the punch line is: 'Only a writer.' Nevertheless, the deeper implications behind such self-effacing humour should not be passed off too

lightly. It is my argument that such "jokes" can be read as symptoms of the deep-seated discontentment that arises from symbolic castration. In this chapter, I explore this notion further, beginning with what has become one of literature's most enduring and bizarre relationships, Philip Roth's relationship with the alter-ego of his alter-ego: Nathan Zuckerman[5].

Unbinding Roth

In an article entitled 'Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction' (1998), S. Lillian Kremer makes an analysis of Roth's quasi-biographical novels in an effort to close the space between the portrait of the artist and the artist himself. Citing Hermione Lee, Kremer discusses the way in which Roth, through a range of metanarrative techniques, uses the character of Zuckerman—a Jewish writer who shares much of Roth's professional and personal biography—to present a portrait of the author as 'victim and analyst, confessor and interpreter of his own sufferings' (cited in Kremer 1998, p. 57). Key to these Zuckerman texts, Kremer expounds, is Roth's fascination with trying to understand the relationship he bears to his own works and his responsibilities as an author.

Kremer draws particular attention to the Zuckerman novel, *My Life as a Man*, where Roth uses a secondary character (the protagonist's brother) to reveal the connections and similarities between the protagonist's works of fiction and a number of outside works, including Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* and Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*. As Kremer explains, mention of these outside works allows Roth not only to explore the influence of other authors/texts on his own body of work, but also allows him to engage and respond to the judgement of his critics (1998,

[5] Nathan Zuckerman originally appears as an alter-ego of Roth's alter-ego, Peter Tarnapol, in the novel *My Life as a Man*. In later novels—the *Zuckerman Bound* novels—Tarnapol disappears and Zuckerman becomes the direct alter-ego of Roth.

p. 58) in order to better understand himself and his position in relation to the literal text itself. A similar exploration is performed in *The Ghost Writer*, where Zuckerman recalls his literary influences through a 'series of post-modern intertextual references and allusions to works of others [which] shape the *Bildungsroman*/quest convention in the form of an artistic pilgrimage by an emerging author to a literary master from whom he learns something of the writer's craft' (Kremer 1998, p. 59). Here, the protagonist is fostered by the maternal author whom he has taken as his role model as well as the bar against which he measures himself as an author. The similarity between Zuckerman's coming of age as an author and the Lacanian subject's entry into the symbolic after splitting from the mother and negotiating the "fragmented body" (Lacan 2006, p. 78) encountered at the imaginary stage is articulated quite well by Zuckerman's role model, the fictitious E. I. Lenoff, who, in his embodiment of the 'high-minded ideals of respected literature' (Kremer 1998, p. 61), 'welcomes Zuckerman not as a carbon copy of himself, but as "a New World cousin in the Babel clan"' (Roth 2007, p. 32). It is through Zuckerman's relationship with this fictitious maternal author that one forms the picture of Roth taking encouragement from his own Othertextual predecessors, high-minded practitioners such as Bellow, Mailer and Miller, and thereby seeking to establish himself not as a carbon copy of these authors but as a member of the symbolic order to which they belong.

Perhaps the clearest example comes in the third book of the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy where Zuckerman, suffering from a bout of writers' block, contemplates the source of his mental anguish. At one moment he wonders whether it isn't the unconscious 'suppressing his talent for fear of what it'd do [i.e. write] next' before deciding:

> No, if the pain intended to accomplish something truly worthwhile, it would not be to strengthen his adamancy but to *undo* the stranglehold…*Let the others write the books* [my italics]. Leave the fate of literature in their good hands and relinquish life alone in your room (Roth 2007, pp. 285-6).

The message here seems clear enough: the source of the character's disgruntlement is the pressure to keep producing more writing when doing so seems impossible; it is the expectation to do more than relinquish life alone in one's room by becoming an active participant in the Othertextual order that gives rise to the discomfort of subjectivity. The question of Zuckerman's unconscious guilt, the fear of what he might write next, is an overt allusion to Roth's earlier bestselling novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* (fictitiously entitled *Carovsky* in *Zuckerman Bound*), which caused a stir for its mockery of Jewishness and had many leading Jews (including Roth's own father) decrying its themes and representations. Zuckerman's misery inside of the text can therefore be taken as a very blatant manifestation of Roth's discomfort outside of the text (though, far from outside of the Othertextual order), just as Jack Torrance's (*The Shining)* misery stands in Stephen King's misery, just as Grady Tripp's (*Wonder Boys*) misery is Michael Chabon's misery, and so on.

It should come as no surprise that working within the symbolic order, under the domineering influence of the reality principle, traces of the subject's dissatisfaction should permeate their texts in this way and, in doing so, provide evidence of Freud's assertion that 'much of the blame for our misery lies with what we call civilization [what I have called the symbolic order of text], and that we should be far happier if we were to abandon it and revert to primitive conditions' (2004, p. 30). In Zuckerman's case, it may well be that his initial suspicions were correct, that the source of the writers' block *is* a trespassing unconscious; though, not the moralistic unconscious he suspects, which would be better aligned with the super-ego than the id anyway, but an

unconscious intent on disrupting the mental activities of the ego and re-establishing the state that existed prior to castration, prior to the formation of the authorial subject. Writers' block thus becomes a neurotic symptom of the repressed desire for the mother (among other primordial desires which I will deal with shortly). The barricade put in place by the ego, under the instruction of the super-ego, is corrupted by the prevailing forces of unconscious desire, resulting in a subject unable to fulfil its role as a subject: an author unable to write: a neurotic, as it were. Writers' block may well be the author's form of hysteria.

What I am endeavouring to flesh out here is the image of a subject upon whose mental life the repressed desires of the unconscious continue to exact a very strong influence. Though, this is hardly a novel idea: the very existence of psychoanalysis depends on such figures and such suppositions. Obviously, where my aim differs from the traditional psychoanalyst's is in its conception of the subject; I treat the subject foremost as an author, rather than a mere user of language. This is to say, I am looking at a specific kind of language, of literary discourse. The frustration of the author as subject is not so much the frustration of not being able to find the words that describe them in their entirety—a Lacanian premise which Žižek articulates nicely when he writes 'the subject is nothing but the failure point of the process of his symbolic representation' (2008b, p. 195)—but is instead the frustration of being unable to produce a text that satisfactorily demonstrates, or stands in for, the complexity of the subject's textual desires: the basest of which is the paradoxical desire to escape the symbolic and re-establish the reader-author unity. The symbolic subject is a subject who has, under the weight of the reality principle, been forced to commit themselves to the discontentment that the symbolic order—or in Freud's terms, *civilisation*—brings with it: namely, the subordination of primordial happiness for symbolic identity. Freud

recognises this trade-off well before the conceptualisation of a symbolic when he insists 'it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation, how much it presupposes the non-satisfaction of powerful drives – by suppression, repression and other means' (2004, p. 44).

Where the subject is to be identified as an author, and the symbolic order as the order of textual production, the effacing representation of the self through unflattering fictive caricaturisation—the kind witnessed in films and novels alike—perhaps offers a deeper glimpse of the mental state of the subject. Put simply, the tradition of portraying writers as "parasites", "perverts", "addicts" and "sociopaths" is, it seems fair to suggest, one born out of unconscious self-evaluation. These fictional characters, with their scruffy hair, alcohol problems and unkempt apartments, merely give form to the dishevelled state of the author's psychic apparatus, which is in constant turmoil with itself and with what it has to do: write.

Case study as text

Peter Brooks makes a compatible discovery in his discussion of Freud's Wolf Man case. Brooks points out the appearance of the patient within the patient's own text (the text, in this case being a dream) 'as a linguistic deformation, suggesting the interconnections of anxiety, desire, and language in the problematic identity of the self' (1992, p. 278). The deformation of Wolf Man's symbolic identity inside his own text—his initials, S.P., being misshapen into the image of a wingless *Wespe* (a wasp), which, on account of its mutilation, he calls an *Espe* (i.e. *S.P.*)—is achieved through the usual means of condensation and displacement (metaphor and metonymy), and, as Brooks says, 'covers a wish for revenge against the threat of castration, [by implying] a gap between identity and desire, [and] the uneasy relation of the forward-moving narrative of life to the other

story told by *indestructible unconscious desire* [my italics]' (1992, p. 278). What the Wolf Man's case represents here is the tenacity of the unconscious and its lasting power over the symbolic ego, its indestructibility. Suppressed, repressed, deformed (to the point where (*S)ergei (P)ankejeff* is reduced to a wingless insect, an *Espe*), the unconscious maintains its desires and continues to propel the subject toward realising them at all cost.

In the scope of this argument, the value of Brooks's reading is the way in which he identifies not only this continued, albeit unachievable, movement toward primordial restitution in the dreams of the Wolf Man, but also the unconscious desire for revenge against the retributive super-ego. While, on the one hand, the self-effacing representation of the artist inside of their own text points toward the fact that 'unconscious desire has its own history, its version of an unsatisfactory past and what would give it satisfaction, a history unavailable to the conscious subject but persistently repeating its thrust and drive in present symbolic formations' (Brooks 1992, p. 278), at least some portion of the author's propensity toward artistic self-effacement must also be seen as an act of revenge on the part of the unconscious. That the author should use their own text to spite themselves through thinly veiled attacks on the character of themselves bears witness to ongoing and battle between the pleasure principle and reality principle (which, incidentally, both has pleasure as their goal), or their psychic custodians, the id and the super-ego.

Brooks does not end his discussion at Freud. Before leaving off, he goes on to explain the phenomenon in Lacanian terms, taking a quote from Lacan's 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud' in which Lacan says: 'It is the truth of what this desire has been in history that the subject cries out through his symptom' (Lacan 2006, p. 431). As Brooks reminds us, such 'desire is unappeasable

because it is directed toward fictional scenarios of fulfilment from deep in the past' (1992, pp. 278-9). In other words, what the unconscious desires is relief from the symbolic order and a return to the real; more succinctly, it desires the impossible. In fact, adding to Brooks's assertion, it may be stated that each scenario is 'fictional' *only in as much* as it is impossible; or, as Sharpe asserts: 'When the subject accedes to the symbolic…the Real of aspired-to incestuous union…is necessarily debarred' (2005). For the authorial subject, this desire, propelled by the pleasure principle, is geared toward a reunion with the mother object at the same time as it 'takes on a still newer meaning by helping force open its traditional barrier related to jouissance…and even open onto [the question of] the death drive [*sic*] (Lacan 2006, p. 53): that is, to an ancient starting point outside of and beyond the Othertextual altogether. In the previous chapter, I touched on the notion of an "outertextual" realm comparable to the Lacanian real. If, as Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 'the goal of all life is death' (2006, p. 35)—that is, a return to this real place—then the desire to "speak" non-textually, or to write without simultaneously announcing one's position within the vast interconnected order of texts and literary subjects, must exact its own devastating effects upon the fragile authorial ego.

It is important to note that these dual motives, the desire for the mother and the desire for the real self, realised through the figures of Eros and Thanatos, or, for Lacanians, through the conception of the imaginary and real, do not in this instance cancel each other out, but rather lead to a state of overdetermination. After all, either one of these influences could, without the assistance of the other, produce the type of discontented subject we are familiar with (the kind Hollywood makes an exaggeration of). It is through a closer analysis of the two forces captured in the figures of Thanatos and Eros, however—the well known death drive and its opposite, the so-called "life

instincts"—that we can begin to explain the propensities of the author as subject, as well as make some strong assertions about the kind of work this subject is prone to producing in their quest for relief from the symbolic order and the regulations it imposes.

The remainder of this chapter is therefore aimed at performing this task, going beyond citations of influence, which passing on from the author's repressed desire for the maternal author may come in the form of mimicry, pastiche, homage, influence and other nodes of similarity in the text, etc., in order to uncover evidence of the drives themselves. I have, throughout the course of this thesis, already discussed the dissatisfaction that writing brings, and noted the author's frustration at being trapped inside of the textual order, but I have not yet explained this in terms of the author's conscious engagement in the act of writing, nor given a thorough explication of just how/why it is that this quest for symbolic relief should amount to further writings. If writing brings displeasure to the subject, and the textual order is a dissatisfying order to be a part of, then why continue to write? Why subject oneself to this kind of unease by consciously remaining a part of the order? Are the reality principle and its primary enforcer, the super-ego, so formidable that the ego has no option but to toe the line and keep on producing new work? Or is there, as Freud suggests with the later introduction of the death drive, an even stronger force at play?

Repetition and trauma

We can now attempt to understand why the subject begins writing in the first instance: in the briefest terms, a division occurs between the maternal author and the reader that gives impetus to the sense of autonomy that can only and finally be consolidated through the development of an authorial ego in the reader themselves. But what is it that

compels the subject to go on writing after the acquisition of this ego though? In a play on Freud's famous '*Wo Es War, Sol Ich Werden*', I have attempted to make the argument that one could no sooner give up the authorial ego and become a reader again as give up the ego and become pure id again (so, in this sense, the decision is perhaps out of the hands of the subject): *where the reader was, there must I, the author, be*. But still, this does not really explain the ongoing compulsion toward the activity itself. It is the urge itself, and the pacification of the urge through the action, that remain unanswered for up to now. What compels the author to go on producing text after text when all they really desire, unconsciously, is to opt out of the order altogether? In the very least, wouldn't apathy seem a more natural response than the continuous restaging of the traumatic moment of castration? Or is it that, however paradoxical it may seem, the author finds some relief in the restaging of the traumatic event itself?

Over the course of his career, Freud links the compulsion toward repetition to both the death drive and the life (sexual) instincts. Of the death drive, he says

> The conservative organic instincts have absorbed everyone of these enforced alterations in the course of life and have stored them for repetition; they thus present the delusive appearance of forces striving after change and progress, while they are merely endeavouring to reach an old goal by ways both old and new…At one time or another, by some operation of force which still completely baffles conjecture, the properties of life were awakened in lifeless matter. Perhaps the process was a prototype resembling that other one which later in a certain stratum of living matter gave rise to consciousness…So through a long period of time the living substance may have been constantly created anew, and easily extinguished, until decisive external influences altered in such a way as to compel the still surviving substance to ever greater deviations from the original path of life, and to ever more complicated and circuitous routes to the attainment of the goal of death…Hence the paradox comes about that the living organism resists with all its energy

> influences (dangers) which could help it to reach its life-goal by a short way (a short-circuit; so to speak) (2006, p. 35-6)

The well known feminist and psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell repeats this paradox in her introduction to *The Selected Melanie Klein*, writing that, '[c]linically, [the death drive] is seen in masochism, in an unconscious sense of guilt, in the quality of driven-ness within the compulsion to repeat certain experiences and in the wish not to recover' (1986, p. 14). It is interesting that Mitchell should cite both masochism and the compulsion toward repetition as manifestations of the death drive, especially when, looked at pragmatically, each might be interpreted as standing in opposition to Freud's insistence that the goal of all life is to come to end by means of one's own devices: that is, to resist the external forces which threaten to put an end to this life before the self has a chance to do so organically. Repetition appears to challenge this by raising the question of *how* and *when* does one break the loop, while masochism invites a sadistic intrusion upon the self which is at odds with the second principle of the death drive, the principle of self-realisation. We can deal with these partial incongruities as Freud does by insisting that the subject indulges in repetition with the renewed (and perhaps deluded) vision of shrugging off the influences and "doing it right" each time round, rather than with the desire to merely "keep doing it" for activity's sake. Masochism, on the other hand, can be taken not so much as the call for a sadistic other as an inverted form of sadism: sadism turned on the self, as it were (Freud 2000, p. 24).

Another way of approaching this is to follow after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion in their landmark text, *Anti-Oedipus.* Responding to Wilhelm Reich's question of how the masses might be taught to desire their own repression, Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

> Oedipus is like a labyrinth, you only get out by re-entering it—or by making someone else enter it. Oedipus as either problem *or* solution is the two ends of a ligature that cuts off all

> desiring-production…The unconscious has been crushed, triangulated and confronted with a choice that is not its own (2009, p. 79).

This passage, taken from the pair's attempt to explain the way in which the Oedipus complex acts to insert *and* prohibit desire in the one fell movement, asks us to reimagine the role of the other within the death drive framework. Rather than seeing the other as an external stimuli who hinders the subject's quest toward self-realised termination, forcing them to deviate in ever more expansive ways so that they may get there by themselves, it may be that the subject initiates contact with an other in order to transfer the burden of their original contact with the mirror-stage other, the image upon which their identity is formulated. Put differently, the author may write as a means of passing their own anxieties of otherness off onto another other, another reader. Writing would thus be interpreted as an attempt to rid oneself of one's own symbolic identity, to cast the imago that served in to the development of the authorial ego, and has since acted as a barrier between the symbolic and pre-symbolic jouissance, back into the world of the text so that it may be picked up by some other reader.

To write would be to attempt to create a scene into which the other of the self may disappear, or be (re-)lost, or be passed off onto someone else (in the case of Roth and Zuckerman, passed off onto a fictional replacement). To turn this back onto Lacan's mirror stage framework (that is, to *appropriate* Lacan's mirror stage framework through the lens of this literary framework), it would be analogous to the mother introducing the child to the mirror in the hope that the child might look past its own imago, the one flailing about directly in front of it, and settle on the imago of its mother, thereby freeing the mother of the symbolic identity she feels herself to be burdened with; the imago would no longer be hers to suffer, but would be taken up by the child. Lacan makes no such suggestion, but it is at least worth considering.

Bloom makes the impossible transition, from writer back to reader, seem like a genuine prospect with his claim that the poet who drowns may once again find themselves a reader (1997, p. 57). This avowal, which Bloom puts in place almost as a warning to the poet, addresses itself as such—*as a warning*—to the subject's ego alone. To the subject's unconscious, that storehouse of primordial desires, I suggest that it takes on the structure of an enticement, compelling the author, by way of the unconscious desires which do their best to move them toward acting in contradiction to the reality principle that governs them, to throw themselves headfirst into the text in the very hope of drowning and becoming a reader again. For Bloom, the possibility that the poet may take in too much water (show themselves to be too influenced by the parent poet and drown in their own text) is what leads to the anxiety of influence: 'The ephebe who fears his precursors as he might fear a flood is taking a vital part for a whole, the whole being everything that constitutes his creative anxiety, the spectral blocking agent in every poet' (1997, p. 57). For us though, the anxiety Bloom identifies at the scene is more like a symptom of the author's displaced unconscious desires. The desire to drown never makes it to the conscious—not in its original form, anyway; instead, it is replaced and represented as one of these 'blocking agents' (again, writers' block serves as an excellent example: the hysteric behaviour of a subject whose unconscious keeps ramming at the walls of their outer ego). Meanwhile, the Oedipal wish, which transforms into the desire to go beyond mere influence and *become/join* the maternal author again, is kept at bay by an ego that borrows its strength directly from the symbolic order (i.e. the father). Freud writes:

> Clearly the repression of the Oedipus complex was no easy task. The parents, and especially the father, were perceived as the obstacle to realization of the Oedipus wishes; so the child's ego brought in a reinforcement to help in carrying out the repression by

> erecting this same obstacle within itself. The strength to do this was, so to speak, borrowed from the father (2010, p. 40).

As much as the writer may wish, unconsciously, to drown and give up their symbolic identity—in effect, answering to both Thanatos and Eros—there is always the underlying law which states they must avoid any route which offers this outcome by way of shortcut. Ironically, the instinct to keep kicking and stay afloat is very much in accordance with the principles of the death drive.

Now, in opposition to this masochistic attitude Mitchell associates with repetition by way of the death drive, there is also 'the impulse to obtain mastery of a situation' (Freud 2006, p. 12), as brought to bear by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In sexual terms, this instinct can be linked to masochism's opposite: sadism, and has as its founding origin the *fort-da* example discussed in a previous chapter. Freud's account, in which the child symbolically re-enacts the loss of his mother by throwing his wooden reel out of his cot and drawing it back over and again, suggests here that the restaging of a traumatic event, such as the loss of the mother, may allow the subject to gratify its impulse for revenge against the super-ego through an empowering reversal of roles. By throwing the reel out of the cot on his own accord, the young child takes control over a situation of which he previously had no control. Rather than having his mother taken from him by the father-cum-super-ego, the game permits the child to cast her out himself, as if saying, 'Yes, you can go, I don't want you, I am sending you away myself' (Freud 2006, p. 12). Where readers and authors are concerned, we can borrow from Freud the suggestion that the continuous restaging of the traumatic event not only allows the authorial subject to take control over its discontentment, as if saying to the maternal author: 'Go, I am sending you away myself…' but also to turn the discontentment onto somebody else (another reader) and in doing so accede to the position of authority. In this case, the author uses the reader as the child uses the wooden reel.

Freud supplements the *fort-da* study with the example of a different child undergoing a minor medical procedure, assuring us that the traumatic experience—which may be something as routine as the child having his throat checked by the doctor—will often later be turned into a game in which the child takes on the role of doctor and plays at performing the procedure on a playfellow, or to use Freud's language, 'avenges himself on the person of this proxy' (2006, p. 13). I suggest that the author performs similarly when they turn the spectre of castration away from themselves and onto another: that is, another reader, their playfellow. Writing, in this sense, becomes the re-enactment of each subject's own moment of trauma: precisely, their symbolic castration. By taking on the role of the mother though, by becoming both castrato and castrator, the author performs the feat of transferring at least some portion of the loss onto the successive figure of the reader. Paradoxically, the subject finds here a perverse kind of pleasure in what is effectively the cause of their displeasure; they now take pleasure in causing displeasure in others.

For those who have been schooled under the avowal that '[a] sadist is always at the same time a masochist' (Freud 2000, p. 25) this contradiction is not as difficult to grasp as it might first appear, for it is supported from the outset by the identification of the subject's self in relation to an other. In a subject such as the author, whose ego is built upon an erroneous identification with the other in the text (i.e. the imago), this shifting dynamic, from masochist to sadist and back, is an entirely logical outcome. The author replaces the figure of their maternal author with themselves (like the child in the *fort-da* game) in order to fill the very gap that seems to prevent them from becoming a reader again.

Remember, in the most primordial stages of their existence, the reader does not differentiate themselves from the figure of the author. They feel their relationship to the

text to be in perfect accord with the author's relationship to the text. In fact, the reader does not even consider the possibility that they might read the text any differently from the way it was written. They assume a communion between themselves and the author. But remember also that this state cannot last. At some point a division occurs and the reader is expelled from the body of the mother and forced to identify with the figure of the imago in their move toward autonomous symbolic identification. But, if this subject's symbolic identity is constantly under assault from the unconscious, which demands a return to primordial readerliness, to the body of the mother, then seems by actively taking on the persona of author—not merely being an author, but actively doing as authors do in writing—the subject provides for themselves a space where their unconscious desires can be realised anew. They rediscover the mother by becoming the mother. In other words, the ego writes so that the unconscious may read. The ego plays the role of the mother so that the primordial desires of the infant, housed deep within the id, may stage their return. And it is from here that we can begin to make some predictions on the kinds of texts the author is likely to produce in response to the call from the unconscious.

Writing for the real self

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom advises his readers to 'stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego, however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be. Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets' (1997, p. 91). Insisting that poets, in order to become strong, must step out of the shadow of their predecessors, Bloom's theory has been criticised from a number of angles. Paul Schwaber questions the emphasis Bloom places on aggressiveness—that is, the emphasis he places on the poet's need to *defeat* or

outdo their predecessors. In doing so, he asks whether the poet might not be equally moved to produce great works through *love* of their predecessors. Another critic the premise of Bloom's argument is Geoffrey H. Hartman, who points out the vulnerability that comes with Bloom's failure to distinguish between '*priority* (a concept from the natural order) and *authority* (from the spiritual order)' (1973, p. 29) in his negotiation of the source of the poet's anxiety.

Perhaps the most pertinent revelation in Bloom's theory, as far as supporting my own argument, is the reduction of a given poem (i.e. text) to what the critic calls 'a *mistranslation* of its precursors' (1997, p. 71). Bloom makes the argument that the poet's development as a poet depends upon the deliberate misreading of those poets they have taken as their main source of influence. The misreading becomes a kind of 'wilful revision' (Hartman 1973, p. 26) allowing the poet to stamp their place in the literary canon by correcting and improving upon the poems of their forebears. At the same time, this is what enables them to overcome their anxiety. This bears obvious relations to the interactions that I credit with opening up the initial division between reader and author. The primary difference is that Bloom's poet-to-be looks for these breaks, in effect *creates* them, as a means of surpassing the anxiety of influence; whereas, in this discussion, the author-to-be is cast down into these fissures against their will. The divisions create the anxiety, rather than offer relief from it, as they do for the Bloomean subject.

In Bloom's theory, the writer's anxiety comes from the fear of being unable to rival the precursor poet, from showing oneself to be a weaker derivative of the precursor poet, from being unable to shake off the presence of the precursor poet. This precursor poet Bloom speaks of is a daunting and almighty presence, a punitive father (rather than a nurturing mother) whose strength and legacy threaten to overshadow the lives of his

children. The precursor poet, who may be a culmination of poets or a singular figure, challenges the subject's plight toward symbolic identification by insisting the subject show themselves to be unique in 'his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being…or he will perish, as a poet, if ever even he has managed his re-birth into poetic incarnation' (Bloom 1997, p. 71). Any trace of the precursor poet is enough to compromise the formation of the subject's symbolic identity (though, Bloom never puts it in so many words).

Unlike Bloom, I make no distinction between "strong" authors and "lesser" authors. I do suggest that different texts hold different values, but this value is measured in relation to the role the text plays in fostering new authorial egos, rather than in relation to any sort of aesthetic principles or innovative techniques, etc. So, in this sense, and to pick up on an example I used earlier, Bellow, Mailer and Miller do not loom over Roth (nor Lenoff over Zuckerman) frightening him into an anxious state of self-doubt, which may or may not (in most cases the latter, according to Bloom) propel him toward greatness; rather, they stand behind him as he stares into their texts, just like the mother who stands behind the child who notices for the first time the imago in the mirror. From this position, they support him and remain with him until, 'in a flutter of jubilant activity' (Lacan 2006, p. 76), he at last overcomes the need for their support and is able to pass through the mirror stage. (Lacan provides us with the image of a *trotte-bébé*—a kind of walker (2006, p. 76).

It is perhaps necessary to emphasise that when I say here that the maternal author remains with the subject, I mean that even as the subject begins to understand their distinction from the maternal author, noticing little anomalies between their own readings and the apparent direction of the text, for example, the maternal author continues to provide relief by interspersing these moments with clear "readerly"

moments. This balance is important, and explains why texts which might be categorised as entirely "writerly" are no more helpful in the development of writerly egos than texts which might be categorised wholly "readerly". Consider Barthes's claim, for example, of it being the 'rhythm of the what is read and what is not read that creates pleasure' (1975, p. 11). The subject needs to be introduced to the imago carefully if they are to move beyond the mirror stage and take their place in the symbolic order. The most difficult texts to read, those unreadable works of avant-gardism, which insist the reader do absolutely all the work, fail in their duty to support the subject at the times when the excitement of interacting with the imago threatens to destabilise or overwhelm them. In fact, I doubt very much whether, for the average subject, a near impossible text like, say, *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) would prove any more helpful in the development of an authorial ego than a text from the other end of the "literary" spectrum, one of those embossed paperbacks that fits into a twelve-hour flight as compactly as it fits into a person's carry-on allowance, the kind that resist the reader's involvement at all cost.

The anxiety the subject feels is never the anxiety to escape the brace of the maternal author and, in Bloom's terminology, become as "strong" as the mother, but the anxiety of losing the mother altogether, the anxiety of having to become strong themselves, so to speak. So, while Bloom may be correct in avowing that there is an expectation the subject move beyond the influence of their precursors and become an author unto themselves, I feel the need to affirm that this expectation always comes from outside of the subject. It is the pressure of the reality principle, which serves foremost in the propagation of the textual order, not in the propagation of subjects (remember Lacan's assertion: it is language that speaks us), and is contested by the unconscious, which refuses to accept such restrictions and demands. In their primordial readerly state,

which is a state of pure need, the subject is completely oblivious to all the anxieties that accompany the initial conception of the *other*.

Aligning the precursor with the figure of the mother in the Oedipal drama, as opposed to the figure of the father, as Bloom does, encourages an entirely different approach to textual analysis. For Bloom, discovering the influence of the precursor poet in the work of the maturing poet is a sign of the maturing poet's ongoing anxiety, examples of their shortcomings as an author, their inability to shake off the unwanted influence, and indicates that in all likelihood they will not "make it" as a poet. For me, evidence of the attempted return to the mother, found inside the text of the maturing author, can be taken as moments of jouissance, moments at which the unconscious discovers its symbolic voice and announces itself to the order of text, manages, in fact, to overcome the strength of the father. To return to the Bloomean metaphor of the author or poet drowning in their own text (a symbolic impossibility, as we now know), we can take these little slips as moments when, kicking to stay afloat in spite of their own wish for death (the kicking serving an inversion of that wish), the author takes on a big gulp of water and sees their life flash before their eyes. What do they see? Only the happiest memories: scenes from their primordial readerly existence: or rather, ex-sistence. In this sense, near-death offers something that actual death could not, a momentary return to the real through the mother.

Let us not forget that the subject's citizenship inside the symbolic is preordained. Another way of expressing this is to say that the subject is born into the symbolic order. Though, this is not to imply that the subject is born with a symbolic ego, which would, of course, trivialise the significance of the mirror stage altogether (not to mention nullify the entire Oedipal drama). Instead, what it means is that the subject is already, in a manner of speaking, attached to the symbolic at birth by connection to a symbolic

mother (remember, the oracle maps out Oedipus's fate before he is even a twinkle in his parents' eyes) (Althusser, p. 26-7). Fink puts this quite succinctly when he writes: 'Long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe' (1997, p. 5). What the mirror stage does is permits the subject to enter into the symbolic as a self-recognisable subject; it allows the subject to fulfil the oracle's prophesy. Not because the subject did not exist in the order already—certainly, the child's parents acknowledged it, through speech and writing, well in advance of its own linguistic self-recognition—but because *they* did not recognise their belonging, did not recognise their own self as a self. The child-mother fantasy, in which the child "thinks" of itself *as* its mother, is valid only in the eyes and mind of the child. From before the moment of the child's conception, it is very clear that nobody else thinks of the child as its mother. Or, at least, nobody talks of it as such. For these symbolic beings the child is already a member of their order and thus was placed outside of the real by proxy of its relationship to its mother from the moment of its linguistic conception.

It is worth bringing all of this up again (the notion has been touched on in previous chapters) because the demarcation between the real and the symbolic is important in understanding not only the desires of the unconscious but the discourse by which it announces itself. The unconscious desire for the mother, for example, does not fall outside of the subject's broader symbolic history and is thus open to symbolisation. Stemming from the subject's earliest experiences, the desire to return to the mother is the desire to return to primary jouissance, that is, jouissance before the letter. Because this predates the subject's own linguistic history, it must be deduced that the language of the unconscious is always the language of the Other. Repressed Oedipal desires that surface in the language of the subject, through parapraxes, for example, necessarily take on the cadence of the Other.

To return to, and expand upon, an earlier assertion, the subject's unconscious desire for this mOther is articulated through the borrowed language of the mOther: '*the unconscious is full of other people's talk, other people's conversations, other people's goals, aspirations, and fantasies* (in so far as they are expressed in words)' (Fink 1997, pp. 9-10). It is helpful to keep this in mind when tending to the text of the authorial subject, and leads us to ask, how else would the subject express their unconscious desire for the maternal author but through the language of the Autère? Accepting this tenet leads to the conclusion that every text must contain at least two discourses: the discourse of the authorial ego (conscious) and the discourse of the Autère (unconscious). Moments in a text when the voice of the Autère penetrates the voice of the authorial ego—moments, for example, when Roth sounds more like Mailer or Miller or Bellow than Roth—date back to the earliest symbolic formations, the primordial reader-author unity. They come from period of the author's existence when the only discourse available to them was the discourse of the Autère, when they were nothing more than a quasi-passive reader. As, Lacan reminds us: the unconscious cannot forget (2006, p. 25).

Because the subject, from the outset, was included in the textual order by way of their attachment to the symbolic maternal author—even though they had not yet indoctrinated their egotistical self into the order by articulating/acknowledging their own arrival—their earliest experience of the world was always a sort of "borrowed" experience. They saw the world through their mother's eyes and contemplated it through the language of the Autère. And it is this borrowed experience, long since pushed into the unconscious to make way for the egotistical authorial function which attempts to rewrite the subject's view of the world, that threatens to deconstruct each text, or at least reveal the opposing forces which challenge each other inside of the text: conscious action and unconscious action. But all of this merely supports the idea that the work of

the authorial ego in ensuring each new text respond to the high-minded demands of the reality principle is always being undone by the intrusive unconscious. The unconscious undoes the work of the ego by making the author speak, intermittently, in the voice of their mother: the textual equivalent of a parapraxis.

Overdetermination or predetermination?

While it is the literal act of reading that makes the reader a reader (a needless truism), it is apparent that the form this reader takes upon their becoming a reader has already been determined for them. The reader of a Philip Roth novel, for example, does not decide for themselves what kind of a reader they will be, does not invent their own readerliness; when they pick up a Philip Roth novel and begin reading, they can only be a Philip Roth kind of reader. This may be slightly—or even radically—different for every reader, but this difference is incommensurable at the level of the reader-text or reader-author relationship. One child will have a different relationship with its mother than another, but this does not challenge the basis of the other child's relationship with its mother: each relationship is exactly as it must be. To borrow an example from Lacan, by way of Barbara Johnson (1982): a letter always arrives at its destination by simple fact that wherever it arrives *is* its destination.

Yet, Roth does more than anticipate this reader, he creates this reader when he creates the text. And an important part of this constitutive act is the passing on of desire. Roth outlines the reader's desires in accord with his own desires and prepares the symbolic order for their arrival. In effect, he knows who and what this reader will be, knows their desires and needs and dislikes, a long time before the reader can ever know them—in fact, a long time before the reader even exists. So, while the development of the authorial ego at the mirror stage allows the reader, on their way to becoming an

author, to contest the identity bequeathed to them by the maternal author, it is virtually impossible to believe that the initial desires of the maternal author do not continue to exact their influence over the subject well beyond successful negotiation of the mirror stage. The readerly identity, complete with the desires of the Autère, is not discarded to make way for the authorial identity, but is repressed. To a large degree, the discovery the subject makes at the mirror stage—discovering their symbolic self—is only the discovery of what the maternal author and all other symbolic subjects have known all along anyway.

To appropriate another of Fink's examples (1997, p. 9), consider the life goals a person might set for himself or herself. Perhaps they hope to do well at school, obtain a university degree, secure a good job, and then marry the person of their dreams and live happily ever after. But weren't these the wishes their parents held for them, before they were even born, wishes for success and happiness? Which would indicate that they are not the subject's wishes at all, but rather were handed to them at birth. Of course, the person may, and often does, follow a different life path—they drop out of school, go on government assistance and renounce the institution of marriage altogether, before finally throwing themselves off a bridge (to make an extreme contrast)—but even this must be seen as a direct consequence of the mOther's desire. There is no escaping the language of the mOther, just as for the literary subject there is no escaping the language of the Autère. The Autère lends their voice to the unconscious and so that every time it interrupts it does so in the Autère's name. Consider the following observation made by Fink:

> The very expression we use to talk about it—"mother tongue"—is indicative of the fact that it is some Other's tongue first, the mOther's tongue, that is, the mOther's language, and in speaking of childhood experience, Lacan often virtually equates the Other with the mother (1997, p. 7).

What does this tell us about the kinds of texts the author is prone to producing in their "adult" life? Firstly, that they contain two types of discourse: the ego/self discourse, which Fink says is conscious, intentional and alienated due to language; and the discourse of the Autère, which is unconscious and unintentional. The authorial subject is, after all, two things: they are a conscious egotistical author at the same time as they are an unconscious reader. To go even further, I would suggest that these two halves dynamically interact with each other throughout the writing process, each vying for authority over the body. The unconscious which desires a return to the language of the maternal author, to the body of the mother, pre-emptively reads the text before the ego has written it even. In effect, the author is always, albeit unconsciously, asking themselves as they write: 'If I were reading this text, where would I expect it to go next?' They are an author with the inner sensibility of a reader. Of course, at the same time as the unconscious is attempting this return to origins, the ego defences are doing their best to counter the assault. The ego no doubt expends a great deal of energy scanning the text right throughout the writing process in an effort to weed out any of these parapraxes that manage to find their way through. Consciously, the subject is always wary of sounding too much like their influences, of plagiarising from their unconscious, of forfeiting what they perceive to be their own symbolic desires for the desires of the Other.

Finally, I call this a dynamic process, because it leads to the production of the text; there is a certain energy bound up in this conflict. Each text is a product of that energy, of the subject's conscious desire to enunciate their authorial identity by contributing to the textual order, and the subject's unconscious desire to renounce their authorial identity and forget what it is to be a textual subject. I suspect that a close enough analysis of any given text would reveal, in varying proportions, this ongoing

friction, and the degree both the unconscious and conscious has played in the production of that text. While the balance may alter from text to text—rather, *does* alter from text to text—it seems fair to assert that the text could not exist without each force contributing its share. I would suggest that the most dynamic texts, as far as aiding in the development of future authorial egos are those in which the forces are strongest on both sides. Imagine the kind of text where the author's deepest urges and desires are brought forward into the symbolic order so that they may confront them head on. Such a text would, for the psychoanalytic literary theorist, signal termination.

6

Reading, Writing and Teaching: Lacan in the Creative Writing Classroom

In an article written for the *The Age* newspaper, entitled 'A novel idea turns creative writing into an academic racket' (2010), columnist and author, Lisa Pryor, admonishes the university creative writing program as well as the kinds of writers it attracts and produces. Pryor labels such programs 'pyramid selling scheme[s] whereby teachers pass on their knowledge to students so they can one day become creative writing teachers themselves', and calls the writers drawn to such schemes 'compliant, institution bound and approval seeking', in short, 'everything a good writer is not'. The attack is not particularly original. Nor is its kind restricted to critics positioned outside of the academy. Former head of writing programs at RMIT University, Malcolm King (2009), points out that completing a PhD in creative writing does not guarantee the student has reached, or will ever reach, 'the pinnacle of creativity, whatever that [is]', only that the 'successful doctoral candidate will be able to teach at a university and further indoctrinate students in the commodification of creativity'. While Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, David Radavich, offers an even less optimistic outlook for graduates who might hope to put their skills to use in the job market, insisting that unlike other degrees in the creative arts, 'the creative writing equivalent does not prepare students for a likely position following graduation…There is no position for which an MFA or PhD in creative writing provides direct training' (1999, p. 109 & p. 112).

Of course, disparagements such as these probably say more about the transformation of the university—from 'a truly public enterprise…that fosters engagement and exchange across categories of identity…[to] one where corporate,

capitalist moves serve privatized ends rather than those of public good' (Cain 2009, pp. 230-1—than it says about the legitimacy of the discipline itself. In fact, it might be argued that such reproaches serve only to reinforce what Shane Strange, following after Dawson (2008) and Kälvemark (2010), recognises as the harsh bureaucratic categorisation and political necessity that exists within 'an academic system that has increasingly come under the disciplining forces of capital and the market' (2012). As King identifies, this force is particularly concerning where creativity is concerned; but surely it also begs the question: Is market success the best yardstick by which to measure the effectiveness of a creative writing degree in the first place? Mary Ann Cain actually celebrates creative writing's ambivalence towards the market when she proclaims that it helps create and reclaim public space in the name of democracy by distorting the market's otherwise ubiquitous stranglehold over the university (2009, p. 231). Whether one accepts Cain's push for democracy or not, it is difficult to convince oneself that the compliant, institution-bound and approval-seeking student could possibly be any worse off in the long run than the student moulded by vocational and market-driven pressures.

But defending creative writing against charges of irrelevance in the marketplace is only half the chore. Proponents must also respond to claims of creative writing being useless—or worse, downright harmful. Alongside claims of it being an unteachable discipline, questions of whether or not the university is the right place to be teaching it pale into insignificance. Castigations range from those directed toward the student—'if you can't work out what good writing is by reading widely, if you need it spelled out slowly with the benefit of a circle of plastic chairs and a whiteboard, you lack the mettle to be a great novelist' (Pryor 2010)—to those directed towards the teacher: 'If any sonofabitch could write he wouldn't have to teach writing in college' (Hemingway cited

in Bennet 2010, p. 544). And as easy as it is to be dismissive of these wilder denunciations, sardonically applying their logic to any given discipline—'Hey, if you can't work out what good architecture is by wandering around the city, if you need to be taught where to place load-bearing walls, then you lack the mettle to be a great architect'—it is much harder to argue that great novelists and great poets depend upon formalised instruction in the same way that great architects do, or great doctors do, or great concert pianists, and so on and so forth. Of all the writers to have contributed to the great stockpile of literature, there can be no denying that the numbers are stacked heavily in favour of those who have not needed to be *taught* how to write, or even *encouraged* how to write, in the institutional sense of the words.

But perhaps this only shifts the debate from the question of whether creative writing *can* be taught by universities to the question of whether it *needs* to be taught or even *should* be taught in such an environment. Once again, such views are not restricted to those positioned outside of the academy, either. The philosophy of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, arguably the foremost writing program in the world, is to 'continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, *in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged* [my italics]' (Writers' Workshop 2007). While Iowa's selectivity and reputation means that promoting its program in such a way does nothing to assuage its popularity or prestige, one wonders how many other universities would get away with recruiting students by admitting that they can do little in the way of actually teaching them how to write. And while it has been argued that efforts to override these apprehensions by turning creative writing into a failsafe, teachable discipline have led to the 'K-martization of contemporary writing' (Radavich 1999, p. 110), producing cookie-cutter, middle-ground fiction that serves nobody, one wonders what else could possibly come from a 'pedagogy too geared toward packaging

for the marketplace' (Radavich 1999, p. 112). In a market that favours steady profits over risky windfalls, mediocre writing no doubt prevails.

However one looks at it, it appears that determining the foremost goal of the university creative writing program—to teach, to nurture, or to facilitate?—is proving more and more vital to a field that often receives criticism for possessing 'no "discipline"' (Cain 1999, p. 74) and showing a 'relative lack of interest in pedagogy' (Moxley 1989, p. 27). I make this observation in the belief that a more emphatic understanding of the aims of the program carries with it the potential to help alleviate 'doubt[s] upon the political efficacy of creative writing…[which have] led to a prejudicial stance against it within the academy' (Harris 2001, p. 175) and charter in a renewed acceptance of the field which is so often forced to defend itself against allegations of uselessness.[6]

My aim, then, for the remainder of this chapter is to counter what I view to be two of the biggest criticisms facing creative writing today: (1) that the discipline lacks the academic weight of other, more serious disciplines and is thus a bad fit with the university, and (2) that because writing cannot be taught, creative writing courses are at best a waste of time and money, and at worst harmful to the development of would-be writers. I respond to these allegations by aligning current teaching methods with Lacanian approaches towards subject development as they occur in and outside of the clinical setting. My goal here is twofold. In the first instance, I apply Lacan's system of thought to creative writing to show its pedagogy to be backed by a recognised theoretical framework, thereby presenting it as being as deserving of its place inside the academy as any other arts- or humanities-based discipline. In the second instance, I suggest that doubts over creative writing's ability to achieve what it sets out to achieve

[6] I appropriate the term from Nancy Welch's 1999 paper: 'No Apology: Challenging the "Uselessness" of Creative Writing', *JAC*, vol.19, no.1, pp. 117-34.

are only a consequence of its pedagogical outlook being too concerned with producing some kind of market-ready product, anyway—either a piece of writing that is critically and/or commercially outstanding, or a competitive, market-ready jobseeker. There are problems with both of these objectives. In virtually no other field are new graduates expected to produce, create or contribute at an optimum level straight out of university (these are mid- to late-career goals); while the problem of producing jobseekers is, I suggest, subsidiary to what should be the main goal, that is, producing writers (more specifically, fostering authorial egos). Even Cain's impressive claim for restoring democracy feels a little hollow where the primary outcome—that of producing writers to occupy this new democracy—is not also being accomplished. More than just serving to *encourage* students, as per the Iowa philosophy, the Lacanian-style approach to pedagogy I have in mind is aimed at *developing* strong authorial identities where they did not previously exist: in other words, turning readers into writers.

In taking this approach, I do not mean to imply that every person who enrols in a creative writing course has or should be made to have the exact same aim, either: that of becoming an author. Stephen Minot (1976) lists a range of motivations that lead to students take classes in creative writing: (1) partially conscious therapy, (2) entirely unconscious therapy, (3) childish delight in language, and (4) [non-authorial] ego formation. My reason for ignoring these quite valid reasons is to ensure my response remains focused. The first charge I have taken up is that creative writing lacks the pedagogical weight of other, "more serious" academic disciplines: put bluntly, that it is a bad fit for the university. To respond to this by arguing that writing classes provide a cheap form of therapy, for example, runs the risk of confirming suggestions about it being more suited to community halls, writing centres and even counsellors' offices than university halls and lecture theatres. For better or worse, the university's market-

driven outlook has come to insist on a certain degree of uniformity across all faculties, which means that in order to validate its inclusion, creative writing must demonstrate its "academic" side and to prove it is as serious about theory and *about itself* as any other discipline.

I thus divide this chapter up into three parts. In the first section, I provide a brief survey of the pedagogical field as it currently stands, introducing six typical approaches to creative writing pedagogy, which can then be divided into two basic groups: those approaches aimed at developing writerly skills, and those aimed at developing writerly identities. As the focus of this thesis has been authoriality right from the start, I then move on to performing a closer analysis of those approaches concerning subject development, which, as I see it, is a two-phase process. Making use of the popular notion of *reading as a writer*, I discuss the importance of strengthening the student's primary relationship with their maternal author through close reading. But just as successful ego formation in psychoanalysis relies on a triangulated relationship, so too does the formation of the authorial ego, and it is in the third and final section that I introduce the notion of the paternal function as a means of turning the student away from their maternal author so they might, in turn, become an author themselves. It is the paternal function that triangulates the reader-author unity, thereby ensuring the student's maturation as an author.

As becomes clear, I use Lacan's ideas to support existing creative writing methods, rather than as a framework through which to develop an entire new set of pedagogies. My goal in this chapter is to strengthen the reputation of creative writing within the academy *as it currently stands*. While this has the effect of placing greater emphasis on certain classroom strategies—namely, those which are already geared toward the development of authorial identities in the students (as opposed to those that

set out to foster specific writing skills)—I do not see this as a problem or a compromise. I am in no way dismissive of pedagogies that seek to "unlock the secrets of good writing"—teaching students when best to use first-person point of view, or why it is important to show and not tell, for example—but adding to such strategies is not my goal in this chapter.

Current approaches to creative writing

In an article published in *Pedagogy*, entitled 'The New Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom' Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet (2008) identify six different practices routinely put to use in the creative writing classroom. These can be taken as a fair survey of the discipline as it currently stands. They are:

- **The Atelier Approach:** borrowing the master-apprentice model common in the trades, the teacher takes on promising students in a one-on-one teaching relationship. While the idea of one-on-one teaching is largely unfeasible at the undergraduate level, Blythe and Sweet suggest that this approach manifests in the form of teachers offering extra help or paying special attention to students who show considerable talent.
- **The Great Works Approach:** an extension of the atelier approach, this method requires the student to imitate the techniques, forms and content of accepted "classical" works. The relationship between the master and apprentice is thus metonymised through the apprentice's relationship with the master's work. Blythe and Sweet point toward common writing activities, such as getting students to imitate the rhythm of a particular poem, as being derived from the great works approach.

- **The Inspiration Approach:** exercises fostering creativity stem from the rationale that all individuals have the potential to create art, they need only find an appropriate stimulus. As Blythe and Sweet note, this approach seems to imply that the role of the teacher is to open channels to the brain, rather than teach writing, per se.
- **The Techniques Approach:** the veritable opposite of the inspiration approach, the techniques approach is grounded in rational thinking and appears to share commonalities with formalist/structuralist approaches to literary studies. The basic idea is that there are a limited number of techniques a writer may employ, and that by learning and mastering them all, the student significantly increases their chances of success.
- **The Workshop Approach:** Blythe and Sweet make the comment that the workshop approach—which is usually attributed to Iowa, but probably began at Harvard under the tutelage of George Baker—has dominated the creative writing pedagogy so comprehensively that today's students probably think it is the only way creative writing can be taught. Importantly, they note that the role of the teacher is to facilitate the workshop, by creating the ideal atmosphere where students feel comfortable to share and question each other's ideas, before receding into the background.
- **The Feminist Approach:** last but not least is the most recent addition to the arsenal of creative writing pedagogues. Opposing the atelier and great works approach, which, it can be argued, belong to a masculine social structure, the feminist approach is sceptical of all hierarchical structures in the creative writing classroom and proposes a more maternal environment where students and

> teachers encourage each other by promoting equality, self-confidence and individual growth.

Taking what they view as the best from each approach, Blythe and Sweet go on to offer their own hybrid pedagogy, called The Writing Community, where students are grouped into small interest communities of three to five, working under the logic that the sum of each group has the potential to be greater than its individual parts. For the purposes of my discussion, though, I shall leave Blythe and Sweet's contribution behind and stick to the methods they outline on way to making their contribution, as they not only account for the methods I have come across in my own studies and teaching, but *provide* an adequate structure for the suggestions I have in mind. Like Blythe and Sweet, it is not my intention to completely overhaul the creative writing classroom, doing away with time-tested strategies, but to suggest a way in which they might be handled anew, or reconceptualised, in order to demonstrate their effectiveness in developing strong authorial identities.

As I see it, the six principal approaches can be divided into two relatively neat categories from the outset. In the first group are those methodologies—the great works approach, the techniques approach and, to some degree, the workshop approach—that encourage students to look toward and take their cue from other, usually exemplary works of literature (the workshop approach being the obvious anomaly here, since the example being made is by no means always one to follow after). Here, the chief role of the pedagogue is, in the basest terms, to bring students into contact with more and more good writing. An action that is almost always complemented by ancillary operations like breaking the work down to show students its structural components or its social bearings and encouraging critical interaction that goes beyond mere consumptive reading, beyond reading for simple enjoyment, and toward the kind of engagement

Nancy Walker posits 'may, in turn, empower the student to move from being a reader to being a critic' (1993, p. 36). Fundamentally, though, all of these activities are underpinned by a very simple goal: broadening the students' reading experience so as to increase their chances of becoming good writers.

Compare this to the second group, which includes those methodologies that tend to place increased importance on interpersonal communion, or the would-be writer's awareness of their function as a writer: the atelier approach, the inspiration approach, the feminist approach and again, to some degree at least, the workshop approach. For theorists like Robert Brooke, who maintains that '[i]mitation as a learning/teaching strategy, thus, is more concerned with the *identity* of the writer than the form of the text' (1988, p. 23), pedagogies that look beyond the work itself to the writer who produced it, or the cultural sphere from which it manifests, serve as an invaluable alternative to those stemming from the longstanding adage that the best way to learn how to write is to read. In fact, Brooke goes so far as to insist that:

> Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to act like writers they respect. The forms, the processes, the texts are in themselves less important as models to be imitated than the personalities, or identities, of the writers who produce them (1988, p. 23).

Interrogating the degree of importance typically placed on reading in the teaching of writing, as Brooke does, highlights the division I have already pointed out in Blythe and Sweet's taxonomy. At the same time, it asks us to consider the possibility that reading-based pedagogies may not only be less effective in producing creative writers than other models, but, used incorrectly, may even be harmful to that vital maturation process. As Brooke's interest is fundamentally directed toward the development of the authorial or writerly identity, as opposed to the development of writerly skills, he is drawn to Norman Holland's claim that we read and use literary texts to 'symbolize and finally to

replicate ourselves' (cited in Brooke 1988, p. 26). This idea holds currency elsewhere, resembling Heather Palmer and Ruth McIntyre's claim that 'writing is a creative production of the self' (2007, p. 79), and Bloom's insistence that 'the family romance between poets' leads to the quest 'to beget one's own self, to become one's own Great Original…[as] We journey to abstract ourselves by fabrication' (1997, p. 64). In other words, reading is valuable for Brooke only in so far as it promotes the interpretive, interpersonal skills which are essentially '*a function of identity*' (Brooke 1988, p. 26.), and not because it enables the subject to add to what novelist Stephen King (2000), in his popular guide to writing, memorably dubbed the "writer's toolbox".

The idea that the astute reader (in this case, the attentive student) might be taught to uncover all of a text's tricks and techniques so as to put them to use in the production of their own piece, drawing from the toolbox at will, is thus less pertinent or helpful than the realisation that identities are shaped through interaction with other identities and that it is through constant negotiation with the self and with others that the writerly identity announces itself as the prime user of literature (or the one being *used* by the Othertextual, where it is not we who write literature but literature that writes us). The claim bears a strong resemblance to Lacan's 'notion of the subject produced through symbolic engagements over conceptions of individual cognitive entities' (Brown 2008, p. 231), which theorist Tony Brown has used to argue that 'teachers and students are primarily shaped by the social arrangements that prevail rather than by the specific conduct of teacher-student encounters' (2008, p. 231).

In the context of the creative writing classroom, we can take this to mean that a writer need not be reduced to a composite sum of a whole bunch of "writerly" skills (the carrier of the toolbox as it were), but also (and perhaps even pre-eminently) as an identity whose collateral is determined in negotiation with other identities. It is the

writing that supports the authorial identity in this case, and not the other way around. While this need not equate to anything so dramatic as a complete rejection of reading-based pedagogies; the important element is that reading be undertaken with a view to promoting the maturation of an authorial identity, or ego, and not merely making a stronger reader—in Walker's words, 'a critic' (1993)—out of the subject. The process must lead to a shift in character and not just a strengthening of character, as it were—the argument here being that making students better readers simply makes critics of them, whereas to make authors of them requires a much stronger focus on identity formation. Practically, I suggest this equates to expanding upon the range of already existing tactics, which come under the branch of *reading as a writer*, in order to exploit their associated transitionary powers.

Reading as a writer

Paul Dawson demonstrates the effectiveness of teaching students to read as writers in his essay, 'Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy'. Focusing primarily on the workshop approach, Dawson says:

> [W]hat enables the writing workshop to function is not so much a theory of writing, but a theory of reading. How a work is *composed* by the student is not as important as how it can be *read* in terms of the critical approach to Creative Writing (2003).

Tracing this notion back to Walter Besant's 1884 essay 'The Art of Fiction', in which Besant advises that aspiring writers 'should with the greatest care and attention analyse and examine the construction of certain works, which are acknowledged to be of the first rank in fiction' (cited in Dawson 2003), Dawson presents a valid and logical case for a move away from narrow formalist ideas of reading—reading for plot, structure, point of view, etc.—and toward a more sociological style of reading, wherein students

are instructed to be aware that texts are shaped by writers who are themselves shaped by ideological and political forces.

In Dawson's eyes, reading as a writer is a process of tying together the aesthetic and sociological components of the text, understanding that the writer's decision to style the text in such-and-such a way is ultimately affected by forces from outside of what has, in this thesis, been dubbed the symbolic order, and that the text should be read with a view of uncovering these connections and understanding their origins as completely as possible. Judith Harris takes a similar approach when she asks the question: 'How can a student write as a self without his or her first formulating a social context in which to express the personal?' (2001, p. 177). Like Dawson, Harris believes idiosyncratic differences in writing styles always speak of a much broader social discourse. In this way, her views bear some relationship to the well known feminist slogan 'the personal is political', and appear thereby to align themselves with the feminist approach to writing instruction, which itself can be taken as neat allegory for creative writing's resistance to the "masculine" market framework.[7]

One of the prime motivators for this style of argument appears to be the increased emphasis on interdisciplinary research within the broader academic community (which, comparatively, might be viewed as a non-linear, "feminine" approach to market demands). Introducing 'critical theory, identity politics and cultural studies' (Dawson 2003, p. 1) into the creative writing classroom would appear to provide the discipline with a new relevance in the contemporary environment which, through social media innovations, has begun to foster a renewed interest in the individual. The specific effect this has on creative writing pedagogy is a strengthened

[7] 'The colonial world saw the installation, on a very large scale, of institutions on the North Atlantic model: armies, states, bureaucracies, corporations, capital markets, labour markets, schools, law courts, transport systems. These are gendered institutions, and their functioning has directly reconstituted masculinities in the periphery' (Connell 2000, p. 45).

concentration on the power of the author. Teaching students to understand their value as communicative subjects, rather than leaving them to figure out what position they could possibly occupy in a field that for several decades now has championed, or at least found itself struggling against, the notion of the complete removal, even *death*, of the authorial subject, means providing them with a new set of *living* models to learn from. Hence, the reintroduction of the author. No longer satisfied that the inanimate text is somehow capable of forming a closed circuit with itself, Dawson's recommendation is a step in the right direction for pedagogues interested in assisting students in their efforts to open the circuit and find a way into the symbolic order as active, participating subjects. It also leads me to point to what I consider an absolutely crucial component of successful reading-based pedagogies: they must be aimed at uncovering the author and not merely deconstructing the text if they are to assist in the development of future authors.

While I agree with Dawson's sentiment that reading as a writer must involve more than just breaking the text down to uncover its structural components—as in the style of the techniques approach, for example—I am not entirely comfortable with his notion of a dialectics capable of handling the author as a literary subject as well as a sociological subject. To me, this seems to imply the relationship between the reader and author might somehow extend beyond the Othertextual—venturing into the impossible real—or even that the author were genuinely capable of being discovered at the site of the text by the reader through a reversal of those sociological clues (i.e. using the text to better understand the writer as a "real person", rather than using the writer to better understand the text, which is not so far removed from traditional psychoanalytic-literary theory anyway…). This, as I've spent the previous chapters arguing, is a difficult premise to entertain. Lacan himself, who insisted that the particularity of the human

being as subject is not a sociological phenomenon but a linguistic one, might have shown similar reservations—certainly, this was the point upon which he distanced psychoanalysis from the broader field of psychology (Brown 2008, p. 231). So, while I agree that it is important that the reader *believe* themselves capable of finding the author—even goes so far as to construct the figure of the imago, in response to the author—I cannot accept that any of this amounts to actually locating the author. The mother is a lost object and no amount of looking will uncover her. After all, she is not only lost, she is forbidden—or in Lacan's language, a barred Other.

Perhaps my reservations appear to contradict the point I have just finished making: this being that reading-based pedagogies *should* be geared toward making such a discovery. After all, what is the value in encouraging the student to strive toward an impossible outcome? If the two do seem at odds with one another, then it will help to point out that it is precisely by encouraging the student to set about achieving what cannot be achieved that the teacher is able to provide the most direct route to the exchange of readerly proclivities for a functioning position inside of the Othertextual. In fact, it is by growing and then "failing" as a reader—failing to pin the author down at the site of the text, failing to outmanoeuvre the Othertextual—that the student is eventually motivated toward adopting a compensatory authorial identity. In the end, what makes the subject is their desire, their chasing after the impossible; this, I argue, is as true for literary subjects as for Lacanian subjects.

For Lacan, the symbolic subject is always a desiring subject, a subject who *wants* but who cannot *have*. Lacan writes: 'Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby being exists' (1993, p. 223). The Othertextual works as both a compensation for this desire as well as the primary barrier to obtainment. In failing to

obtain its mother, failing *to be* its mother, the child sets about becoming its own subject. In this regard, it becomes its own compensation as well as its own obstacle, or it becomes the enforcer of its own prohibition by the very language it speaks. Because a large portion of the energy involved in supporting the maturation of this compensatory ego comes directly from primordial efforts to "locate" the mother since relegated to the unconscious—Freud supplies a term for this process in "sublimation" (2004)—we can say that the ego is formed using a type of displaced, or "failed" energy. Only by failing in their primary goal does the subject gain access to the energy needed to propel themselves into the symbolic order. Somewhat ironically, the more vehemently the child pursues its mother, the more energy available to the formation of its own ego, which is to be an ego based upon autonomy from the mother. Not dissimilarly, the more intensely the student pursues the figure of the author, the more beneficial to the development of their own authorial ego when the time comes.

As was explored in a previous chapter, one of the things Lacan's theory adds to this essentially Freudian process is the recognition that the shift from imaginary to symbolic is intermitted by a phase during which the child substitutes the unobtainable mother for the imago in the mirror. It is quite important to note that the child's interest in this imago is foregrounded by the loss of the mother. If it did not, in the first instance, fail to obtain the mother, then it would have no motivation to seek consolation in the surface of the mirror and the gestalt would remain meaningless to it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the mother's role fits the feminist approach to creative writing inasmuch as she is to play an encouraging rather than instructive role. Without her encouraging the child to find solidity in this image (propping the child up in front of the mirror and saying, 'Yes, it's you!'), the image would not go on to fulfil its constitutive role as an imago; it would simply appear to the child as yet another wholly external figure that *is*

not it. The child pursues the imago as a means of giving up its pursuit of the mother; entry into the symbolic order depends upon as much. Brown articulates the impositions of the order and its effect upon the subject's development succinctly when writing, 'the individual's understanding of who she is, is a response to the Big Other [in our case, the Othertextual], which controls and directs the acts of the ego' (2008, p. 231).

Desire *for* the mother

I have already interpreted *reading as a writer* as an act of anticipation that involves the student engaging the text as though the author *were* present and waiting to be found: *anticipating their attendance* in the very act of reading. This is an occurrence that, more often than not, needs no explanation or instruction on the teacher's part at all, only reassurance. It is often the case that the beginning student is completely unaware of their sovereignty from the author and sees the text as a finite series of signifiers leading them directly to the author, rather than the floating chain Lacan speaks of. In other words, the student thinks, when reading a novel by Hemingway, for example, that they are reading it as Hemingway meant it to be read: that they are in fact reading *Hemingway* (it is no coincidence that works of literature by the same writer get grouped into these metonymic collective nouns). In most cases, the student has not yet been properly exposed to the possibility that their reading of a particular Hemingway text is necessarily different to the way Hemingway himself interpreted the text. The lucidity of the text, upon which the student constructs their *connaissance* of the author, is precisely that, a construct. Nevertheless, it provides a clear enough starting point upon which to initialise the transition toward subjectivity by antedating the construction of the imago that will eventually replace the author and serve in the formation of the student's own authorial ego. When all is said and done, the "constructed" Hemingway is more

important to the student than the real Hemingway could ever have been. After all, the Hemingway whom the student is encouraged to pursue is largely one of their own making, and it is in making this figure that the student lays the groundwork for constructing their own identity from the ground up.

At this point, the task of the writing teacher is twofold. In the first instance, the teacher must refrain from challenging early misconceptions. If anything, the teacher should lean toward an even stricter commitment on the student's behalf, developing the student's *need* for the figure of the writer toward insatiable *desire*, to the point where the student feels they cannot understand a Hemingway text without understanding, or finding Hemingway, that is, without further developing their intimate *connaissance* of this author. In Lacan's discourse, this translates to the student pursuing the Hemingwayian object *a*—the object that apparently motivates Hemingway, his raison d'être. Brooke says that '[p]eople often learn to be certain sorts of people by…trying to take on the "identity" of those they'd "like to be"' (1988, p. 24), which leads me to suggest that the student should be encouraged to invest their utmost in tracking down the author rather than merely being told, like so many students of the postmodern era, that the 'author is dead', which would only defuse the energy. And the more completely the student is able to imagine the author into being, the more success they will have with the figure at the mirror stage, since, as already mentioned, they will have done the hard work of building an identity from the ground up.

Encouraging the student to read each text in search of that text's author is how I interpret the notion of *reading as a writer*. It is an attempt at identification, an effort to align oneself with the specific author of a given text, rather than to demonstrate any particular set of characteristics that might, in the most generic terms, be considered "writerly". It means reading as *the* writer, that is, as the reader of this text or that text.

On the teacher's part, assisting in this process need not involve a great deal more than continuously asking the student: 'What do you think the author means here? And what about here? And why this? What could have motivated them to take this direction? And how would another author have handled this differently, do you think?' and so on and so forth. What this does is promote the student's awareness that literary texts are created by authors (knowledge that will assist in the development of their own authorial ego), which will provide them with a much stronger portrait of the figure who will serve as the student's formative imago: the ideal reader of these texts, that is, the person who presumably knows exactly what the author did mean. By finding the author, the student becomes the ideal reader: the imago is cast onto the text's surface.

From the teacher's perspective, capitalising upon the student's readerly identity, rather than trying to hasten progression toward a unique authorial identity, is not an especially difficult task. In fact, it tends to work in conjunction with the student generally being more comfortable discussing other established writers' works than their own or their peers' in the early stages of development anyway. Even in the first-year workshop scenario where each student is forced into playing the role of "author" so that other students can comment on the work at hand, it pays to heed Dawson's insistence that '[h]ow a work is *composed* is not nearly as important as how it can be *read*' (2003) and focus on the group as a collection of readers and not authors. This has the immediate benefit of alleviating anxiety over the quality of work submitted for workshopping (students are encouraged to submit good feedback as opposed to good writing), but more importantly has the advantage of allowing students to consolidate their primary, readerly identities by asking them to draw on their experiences as readers in order to take part in the workshop. Immediately, and without instruction, each student performs the task of comparing the material at hand to all the other material they have

encountered. As inexperienced as they may be as an author, they can at least take on the role of a reader with some confidence. Just as the Lacanian subject needs to navigate the imaginary and fragmented body stages before passing through the mirror stage with a symbolic identity, it is my view the literary subject, in this case the creative writing student, needs to feel comfortable as a reader before they can be guided toward trading this identity for a fully-fledged authorial persona.

Again, though, this hardly needs enforcing. It tends to be the natural order of things. How many times does one student respond to another's work by saying something along the lines of: 'It reminds me of *such and such* a work'; or: 'You should read *so and so*, I think you'd really like her'; or: 'I don't normally like science fiction, but I enjoyed your story'; or even: 'I hate all science fiction which is probably why this didn't really work for me', and so on and so forth? In making such comments, not only do students continue to experience the Othertextual from a distance, but also mark out their readerly identities in relation to the maternal authors. The student who hates all science fiction, for example, does so because they have already aligned themselves with some other genre, some other author/s, because they favour the dialect of their mother. This, of course, is simplifying the matter to the point of caricaturising the student, but the idea is legitimate enough. In matters of literature the student sees themselves as a *y* or an *x* kind of writer and not an *a* or *b* kind. Because they have not yet established an autonomous sense of self, their castigation or approval of the writing of their peers is filtered through the personality of their own maternal authors.

What the workshop does is grant each student the opportunity to strengthen this relationship by asking them to respond as they suspect their favourite author would respond: to play the role of the maternal author amongst this group of imaginary writers, turning early workshops into a sort of come-as-your-favourite-author party

where each student dons the mask of their literary "mother" and reads the works accordingly. And, of course, while *reading as a writer* means reading as a very specific writer, it goes without saying that it would be somewhat pointless to encourage students to try reading as the "writers" whose work they are workshopping. Reading as a writer invariably means reading as another writer, since even the student who submits their work for group discussion falls short of the title of author in this environment, and who better than the maternal author?

Desire *of* the mother

In his reworking of object *a*, Lacan demonstrates an important shift in the subject's involvement with desire. The shift from object *a* as object of desire to object *a* as cause of desire is effectively the shift from desiring the mother herself to desiring the mother's desire. In the creative writing classroom, a no less important shift must take place if an authorial ego is to take root in the student. This is to say, there comes a time when the student must quit reading as a writer and actually become a writer, else they risk never breaking free of the mother, never overcoming their Oedipus complex. Remember, now, that for Lacan subjectivity is marked by the formation of an *I* function, staking one's place in the symbolic order through the enunciation of one's linguistic proficiency: 'I am a symbolic identity because I can say I am a symbolic identity': in effect, 'I speak, therefore I am'. The Lacanian subject is not born declaring their subjectivity (the symbolic order has long since prepared a place for them, though of this they are blissfully unaware); rather, they affirm their identity in due time in response to the growing awareness of their alienation, to the outright domination of the symbolic order. Doing so means announcing one's autonomy from the mother, which, as we know, is no small feat. It is only when the subject can no longer maintain the illusion upon which

their existence has thus far been predicated that they take their chances and declare themselves an *I*. It is something of a last resort: failure to uphold the illusion of the child-mother union and resist symbolic castration is what grants the child the power to take on an ego that Lacan says will 'forever remain irreducible for any single individual' (Lacan 2006, p. 76). As the old saying goes, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

This pre-mirror stage attitude, wherein the infant comfortably avoids its own symbolic fate and cleaves to its mother, can be likened to the cautious mindset of new creative writing students who prefer to stick close to their own maternal authors than risk asserting identities of their own. It appears "safer" to chastise all science fiction in the name of a favourite realist writer, for example, than to risk blurring the lines of one's own precarious identity too early on. For as many students who respond to the first-day get-to-know-you question of *why did you enrol in a creative writing degree?* with the response that they have *always loved to write*, an equal, if not higher, number will respond by proclaiming that they have *always loved to read*. This speaks volumes of how students, as authors in the making, perceive themselves at this stage. But as beneficial as these formative relationships are—or rather, as *necessary* as they are—they do pose a serious threat if allowed to go on too long. Unrestrained, the mother's desire is a dangerous thing. Lacan likens the mother to a big crocodile whose jaws can clamp down at any moment. For literary subjects, this is the danger of being swallowed up by the maternal author, of believing oneself to have actually found the author in the text and never letting her out of sight again.

In Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, the father is the one to be feared, as he is the formidable poet who threatens to overshadow and put an end to the aspirations of the beginner poet. In Lacan's theory, however, it is the father—or rather, the "paternal function" (who need not relate to the actual, biological father)—who protects the child

from the mother's desire. Unlike the Freudian father who bars the child from pursuing its mother, the Lacanian has the task of blocking the mother's and child's desire for each other. This now positions the mother as the poet threatening to overshadow the beginner poet, to obliterate them with her desire, and the paternal function as the one in charge of ensuring this does not happen. The father's role is to censor both desire *for* the mother and the desire *of* the mother (apropos the ambiguity of the '*de*' in Lacan's *le désir de la mère*). Lacan explains the father's protective role like this:

> There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap [the crocodile's jaws] and which holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close (1967-70, p. 129).

What I take from this is the view that some version of the paternal function (the phallus) must be introduced into the student-author dyad to ensure the student will take their own place in the symbolic order and not become stuck at the reading as a writer phase. According to Lacan, it is failure to triangulate the relationship that leads to psychosis: 'the sense of being possessed by a language that speaks as if it were coming not from inside but from outside' (Fink 1999, p. 87). Is this not an apt way of describing the student writer who never manages to shrug off the influence of their maternal author—the student who imitates the voice of their mother without ever managing to develop their "own voice"? Could it not be said that their writing is coming from outside of them—in fact, directly from the mother? In Lacan's view, the psychotic subject is a subject who learns to assimilate language without ever quite entering into language themselves, that is, without ever securing their own position in language (Fink 1997, p. 55). As Fink explains, one of the key features of the psychotic is their inability to create metaphors. This is 'due to the failure of *the essential metaphor: the paternal metaphor*' (1997, p. 91). They can assimilate the metaphors used by others (in this case, their

maternal author), but they lack the ability to create new ones—an obvious problem for anyone hoping to become a writer. The student who fails to "give up" the mother writer risks literary psychosis. It is at this stage that one perhaps thinks of the great works approach, where the student is encouraged to mimic the voice of the maternal author—in essence, to appropriate already-existing metaphors. The psychotic student would thus be the student who continues to write in the voice of their mother, the student who learns to assimilate the language of the maternal author, but without managing to stake out their own position in this symbolic order. The student who somehow manages to avoid alienation. This, I suggest, is the likely outcome where pedagogy is too focused on teaching writing, rather than developing writerly identities.

The question, then, is how to avoid such a situation. Or how to ensure triangulation—*Oedipalisation*, in Freudian terms—and the development of an authorial ego in the student. I suggest that in this instance the role of the teacher is to be the one who carries the paternal function. In many ways, the teacher's role is not unlike the nuclear father's anyway. Consider the following definition, taken from Fink's *Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*: 'the father is granted a position of authority, not so much because he is a "true master"—a truly authoritative, brilliant, or inspiring figure who commands total respect—but simply because he is the father and is expected to take on the functions associated (in many people's minds) with "father"' (1999, p. 81). We could replace the word 'father' in this definition with the word 'teacher' or 'instructor' and the statement would make just as much sense and be equally valid. The teacher carries the weight of the paternal function not because they are especially brilliant or inspiring but because as teacher they are expected (by most) to take on these functions.

The creative writing academy seems to have recognised this, perhaps unwittingly, and already has a number of strategies for capitalising on this role. The most blatant example is the awarding of tenures to teachers who, by way of publication record and/or literary fame, have established themselves in the market as "paternal" figures (again, this does not imply biological men). Such personnel are commonly referred to as "star writers". And in many cases, depending on the star power of the particular teacher, the paternal function is established before the first class has even taken place. This is to say, the student already has implicit trust in the teacher, recognises them as brilliant and inspiring, may even have sought out and enrolled in the class on the very basis of its "famous" instructor, and are eager to live up to the star's expectations from day one.

Favouring professional writers over persons with strong academic or theoretical backgrounds has drawn criticism from theorists interested in academic practice on account of its 'deemphasizing the importance of teacher preparation' (Ritter 2007, p. 285). It seems to suggest that the best people for teaching writing are those who have experienced some kind of market success rather than those who have particular expertise in writing pedagogy or writing theory. Where the university is seen as just another arm of the patriarchal capitalist society, this hardly surprises. To a cynical mind, the value of the star is undermined by their contemporaneous status as a figure capable of generating more revenue for the university, rather than providing quality teaching. Even in the face of suggestions that these 'writers are hired to teach; such teaching, however, is usually incidental' (Ritter 2007, p. 283), the academy continues to feature and support star faculty 'upon whose fame creative writing programs are built, sustained and regenerated' (ibid). But is this all the star lends to the academy, their drawing power?

While the interest a star writer can generate for an institution is undeniable, I do not think the pedagogical value of the star should be passed over too lightly or even disdainfully, as is often the case. So-called star writers contribute more than a culture of 'hero worship' (Ritter 2007, p. 285) to the university environment, they also bring with them the expectation of the symbolic order by providing a model for the student to learn from, not so much by way of deliberate, or conscious emulation, but through unconscious expectation, identification and encouragement. For the student, the star writer exists as an established, formidable symbolic identity, a fully functioning participant in the symbolic order who seems to understand the rules of that order (they are, after all, here to mandate those rules). Patrick Bizzaro states, quite derisively, that '[t]he star system, upheld at most universities…simply serves to reinforce the belief that the best way to learn how to write is to do what the teacher says' (1994, p. 242). But I would suggest that there is actually something reaffirming about this belief. Whether the teacher knows more or not is irrelevant when their role, at this formative stage, is not to instruct but to intervene and guide, to impose expectations. The power of the star is not in their wisdom—their ability to determine what is wrong with a student's writing and fix it, for example, or to pass on the "secrets"—but in the *perceived* insight the student grants them in this imaginary scenario. Lacan understood this when he wrote the following lines:

> As Plato pointed out long ago, it is not at all necessary that the poet know what he is doing, in fact, it is preferable that he not know. That is what gives a primordial value to what he does. We can only bow our heads before it (cited in Felman 1982, p. 42).

The star writer is a good teacher first and foremost because the student expects them to be a good teacher, an expectation that is complemented by the perception that the star writer expects them, the student, to be likewise a good student. Brooke puts it like this:

> [The] student writer is universally assumed *not to understand* what he has written, how it operates, or how it should work. The writing teacher is fancied…to *understand* writing, to *know* what writing should look like, how it's supposed to work, what the student's errors "mean" and how to fix them (1987, p. 687).

In other words, if a good situation for learning is established by both parties, then good learning will surely ensue.

It may therefore be that criticism of star teachers, such as that proffered by Ritter, proves both legitimate and false at the same time. Granted, the star teacher may know far less about writing and pedagogy than the university-trained academic, may even view their position as teacher with a certain dispiritedness (discussing his time as teaching writing at Iowa alongside star writer John Cheever, it is reported that fellow star Raymond Carver proclaimed, with a certain disregard of the program itself, that they had done less teaching than drinking). Yet, at the same time, they may still prove highly effective in nurturing future writers. I do not maintain that this is always or necessarily the case, but that at least where Lacanian theory has been used to 'suggest that students…improve their writing because they identify with and want to please the teacher' (Harris 2001, p. 183), the value of the star teacher cannot be discounted.

Acknowledging the attributes of the star writer, as I have done here, is not to imply that they are an intrinsically better teacher than the non-star. But it does serve to illustrate the point that there must be something more to pedagogy than simply teaching about writing. A stronger emphasis on subject formation is crucial. But, then, the notion of subject development has been privileged from the opening chapter of this thesis, when I asked the questions *what is an author? what is a reader?* If they seemed like silly questions at the time—the author is the one who writes the book, the reader the one who reads it—then I hope I have at least managed to show that this is, at one and the same time, an *inter*- and *intra*-subjective relationship. Inside of every author is the

reader who once did their utmost to get inside the head of another author, and so and so on. On this note, I leave the final word of this thesis not to Lacan but to the English neuropsychologist, Paul Broks, who writes:

> But these words you are now reading, whose are they? Yours or mine? The point of writing is to take charge of the voice in someone else's head. This is what I am doing. My words have taken possession of the language circuits in your brain. I have become, if only transiently, your inner voice. Doesn't that mean, in a certain sense, that I have become you (or you me)? It's a serious question. Written text is a primitive but powerful form of virtual reality. In the beginning was the word. And in the end? A liberating truth. There are no souls, only stories.' (2006, p. 61).

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The Cuckold, and Me

Tammie and Alan Bartlett were friends of ours then. Both of them were writers and I was trying to be a writer too. Cameron was the only one of us who wanted to be remembered for having not written anything. If she titled a shopping list and I told her this had already been done, she found me amusing and stupid. Shopping lists were going to be her thing, she would say. I think she truly didn't consider shopping lists to be anything less remarkable than the books of poetry I kept on a shelf in our lounge room. Certainly she didn't believe a blood plum to be anything more than a blood plum.

Alan titled most of his poems in French. He knew how to speak French a little, and I knew how to speak it a little, and it was only his pronunciations which gave the poems away. They were good poems on the page, though when he read them aloud he wanted everything to be feminine. The French feminine is closer to English than what the French masculine is, and is stronger too. Cameron didn't speak any French. I think for her there was something else that gave the poems away. Anyway, she could smile at all the right places. She was convincing and beautiful.

Alan's book of poems, which he called *l'Eléphant*, but pronounced *l'Eléphante*, was his best. This wasn't only my opinion, but the opinion of people who wrote reviews. For them *L'Eléphant* was nostalgic and prophetic at the same time. After *l'Eléphant* was published, then favourably and paradoxically reviewed, Alan began reciting the title poem at all of his readings. He was a hit. Often there was somebody at the recital, wearing a pair of bright-red reading glasses or an ushanka, who would cry to hear it and then laugh loudly to show they understood its irony. *L'Eléphant* was ironic down to its emasculated title.

Alan was good with irony as Hemingway was good with homosexuality. A university journalist once asked Alan what, precisely, he considered irony to be. He told her it was like any of the base-metal adjectives, coppery or nickely for example, and nothing to be raved over. Then he slept with her on the passenger seat of my Toyota. In her article she called him 'the Hemingway of irony and the Scott Fitzgerald of car seats rolled into one'. It wasn't a good analogy and I'm sure Tammie was clever enough to decipher its absurdity.

Tammie wrote stories not poems. She was clever at spotting irony and absurdity but could not use either in her stories. Or didn't want to. I think her stories were mainly about people who bought lots of art and hung it inside trains which they didn't have the tickets to be riding in the first instance. Of all the writers I was reading in those days, she was the only one writing about absconders buying art and hanging it inside trains. All of her characters were named after people she knew personally. I was often a character and Cameron too, and in one particular story Cameron was a man and I was still a man and we were homosexuals together. I guess this made Cameron the Hemingway of something also. Or at least the Brett Ashley of something.

Cameron was one year older than me and we'd married each other when she was twenty-nine and I was twenty-eight. We'd been married for two years when we first met Alan and Tammie and they'd been married for seven years. Alan was the same age as me, and Tammie was seven years younger. In her first-person stories Tammie was always much, much younger. Sometimes she was just a kid and the homosexuals and not-homosexuals who bought art together would call her *kid* the way a private eye calls a kid *kid*. 'You look out for yourself, kid,' they'd say to her. The real life Tammie was always looking out for herself and she wasn't out to make a cuckold of Alan, but in the end that's just what happened.

Alan took speed. Tammie might have taken it too for all I know. I know that Cameron and I weren't taking it and that Tammie wasn't taking it in front of us. Alan would take it in front of us all and tell us to take it with him and we'd tell him that when we were famous and great like he was, then we'd take the famous and great drugs; until then we'd have to settle for drinking mediocre wine and good but not great beer. Cameron called speed the laureate's drug. I think Alan liked the connotation and he wouldn't stop anyone from calling him The Laureate when he was running around bent and on speed. He even started promoting himself as The Laureate. Only when he was on speed though. When he was sober he was ironic and very modest.

In these earlier days Alan didn't know he was a cuckold. He only discovered he was a cuckold when Tammie discovered he'd slept with the poetess laureate C.M. Alan slept with C.M. on the night of Tammie's book launch. Tammie had found a publisher for her book of art buyer stories (in which the art buyers would hang their purchases on different trains as they crossed Europe, never stopping for longer than two days in any one city) and they'd agreed to pay her three thousand dollars in advance and she'd used that money to launch the book aboard a tram which had been hired specially to drive nonstop around Melbourne. Alan wasn't with us at the boarding stop at seven p.m. on the night of the launch, and neither was he there at seven forty-seven p.m. when we next passed. At eight thirty-four p.m. he wasn't there, and at nine twenty-one p.m. he was there and we disembarked and Tammie didn't ask him why he'd been missing for one hundred and forty-one minutes and he didn't say that it'd been because the poetess laureate C.M. had accused him of having a small dick at a party the night before and had then cajoled him into sleeping with her by continuingly and playfully taunting his masculinity. C.M. could speak French better than Alan or myself and she'd nicknamed Alan *La Petite Bite*. Unlike Alan, C.M. didn't give her poems French titles, but she

often implanted slabs of unitalicised patois into her poems and when she read them aloud she read them unitalicised and untranslated too. Alan italicised all of his emasculated French and C.M. told him it that was because he preferred to be fucked by men than women. C.M. used words like 'fucked' and 'psychoanalysis' and didn't italicise any of the things she said—except for the names of cats. She kept more than ten cats and talked about them as a student talks about flatmates who are always late with their rent.

On the night of Tammie's book launch, Alan had gone to C.M.'s house with a lot of speed in his gut. He'd opened the door without knocking and gone inside to find C.M. lying on the floor with a lot of something in her gut too. She wasn't dead but she was unconscious and Alan had had a hard time waking her up. Eventually he woke her up and everything he did between waking her up and leaving again is written in his poem *Le Papillon de Nuit*. It was supposed to be his next great poem after *l'Eléphant* but it didn't review near as well and eventually he stopped reading it at his public performances. *Le Papillonne de Nuite*, as he pronounced it.

Of course Tammie knew that Alan had slept with C.M. as soon as he arrived that night. We all did. He was still quite bent and was proclaiming himself The Laureate of Poetry and Fashion, since it was both incredibly fashionable and incredibly poetic to be late to a book launch in which many of the book's stories included protagonists named for oneself. The Alans in the stories were thieves and retired football players and rich Americans and poor Spaniards, and in one of the stories the Alan was a goat being herded along the tracks by a man who kept calling himself Georgette in the song he was singing. The real-life Georgette was a woman and was close friends with Tammie and Cameron. Cameron could make anyone her friend. She had flat, tanned breasts and a pink mouth and we'd been married for two years when we first met Alan and Tammie

who'd been married for seven years. Georgette wasn't married. She was singular and androgynous, like the slash between *S* and *Z*. Rather than calling himself the L of P and F, Tammie told Alan he might better refer to himself as The L of C. Alan found this hilarious. He still had a lot of speed in his gut.

It wasn't until two days later, when the sharp mathematical lines had thoroughly dissipated from Alan's mannerisms and prophesies, that he understood the implication: Laureate of Cuckoldry. It affected him very steeply and for three months he didn't sleep with a single woman. Even Tammie didn't get a look in during this period. Alan would prise her for a name, constantly, but she wouldn't budge. Forget about it, Alan, she'd say to him. And if we were all there, drinking wine and trying to get drunk and have a good time together, she'd say to him, Stop being The Laureate of Bad Conversation, Alan. Alan was the laureate of many things then. After being reprimanded he'd threaten to kill this cuckolder if Tammie didn't come clean. No, she'd tell him, and he'd threaten to kill her then. And if she called Alan The Laureate of Acting Like A Baby he'd become sulky and threaten to kill himself. Luckily, The Laureate of Suicide would usually behave much more nobly and civilised than The Laureate of Murder and Bad Conversation.

It took two years for Tammie to write another book of short stories. In that time I think Alan didn't sleep with her once. Her style and psychology changed and she was no longer naming her characters for the people she knew in real life. There was a Tamarin in one story, though he was African and not at all like Cameron and even Cameron didn't think there was an association between herself and the muted character of this tribal initiation story. I think Tammie was reading García Márquez at the time of writing a lot of the stories for this second book. There was a humidity in every page. I was reading a lot of Albert Camus then and Cameron wasn't reading anyone. Cameron

had started writing though. Of course. She was writing short, autobiographical stories, little whimsical things that didn't irk me to read, though I never took much away from them. She was writing them for herself and wasn't aiming to publish any of them. Camus was making me write like a dry rash and I couldn't get published anywhere. All of my prose seemed to itch and if I scratched at it, it'd begin to bleed and then it'd feel thin and wet and it wouldn't stop bleeding. The only way to make it stop was to quit writing for the day and go off to find Alan. He'd be in a bar talking to some dumb girl who studied creative writing at the university and knew him from the jacket cover of *l'Eléphant*. If he was able to convince the girl to let him put his hand up her top or down her pants after a lot of bullshitting, then he'd feel around and tell her that she had the anatomy of an acrostic poem. That's how Alan was insulting them in those days.

'Camus is making you write badly,' Cameron said to me one afternoon.

'Yes, I know,' I told her, looking up. 'But he is making me read brilliantly.'

Cameron was annoyed with all the writers who were reading other writers. They all sound the same, she complained often. She'd made decisions about this sort of thing. They sound like they've been reading too much of each other.

'Yes, but how can you know that unless you read them first too?'

'You can tell by the way they talk about their work. Only the bad ones talk about their own work. The good ones want to discuss the great ones, and the great ones rattle on with the classic ones,' she explained.

'Who do the classic ones talk about?'

'The classic ones don't talk about anyone. They're blind and deaf and only have time for writing.'

'Are you a classic one, then?'

'No, I'm not even a good one.'

‘You know about Camus though.’

‘I only know that he’s making you write badly and blindly.’

‘Alan is writing badly and blindly. Is that Camus’s fault too?’

‘Alan was a cuckold when he was writing well. And he is still a cuckold.’

‘Maybe that’s why his pronunciations were always off?’

‘His pronunciations were always off and nobody ever told him. Poor Alan. Are his pronunciations still off? It’s been such a long time since I heard him make one of his pronunciations.’

‘I think they’re still off.’

‘In his head they’re off. Poor Alan.’

‘You know they’re off and you don’t even speak French a little,’ I said to Cameron.

‘You don’t need to speak the language to admire it,’ Cameron said.

And we left it at that.

Of Rivers and Blood

At night-time, the river sounds like a dozen lanes of blackest highway bitumen. The speeding and constant flow of heavy-vehicle traffic drafting so closely not a single tail-light shows through the trees lining its edges. Only the occasional glint of the rolling silvery undertow: a log being swallowed, a kid being knocked down and pulled to his death, a fish taking a Christmas beetle from the surface and swiping away again.

The drowned kid is a kind of fiction invented by the boy's father to keep him close by when they go to check on the setlines and rebait any spoiled hooks. They have a system of walking one after the other too, carefully stepping on all the exact stones to avoid stirring the ghost of that dead river kid. His father always goes in the lead and takes small half-sized steps and often turns to point out the precise steps using his torchlight. If it's a complicated move from one stone to the next, then he pauses before taking it and says, Watch how I do this now, Michael, and Michael watches and tries his best to replicate the pivot or leap with the same precision and carefulness. His father is precise and careful and Michael is still only a boy but recognises that it's the kind of care which says something about a father and about his level of resolve—if nothing for the sanctity of fiction and all its tragically deceased.

When they've checked the lines a final time each evening and returned to the campsite, Michael's father settles with his back towards the pines and his face to the fire and recites all the familiar stories while drinking beer from short-necked brown bottles. Many of the stories are about rivers and about handling fish, and some are about marriage and about handling oneself in life, and almost all of them are in some way about men who drink and converse drunkenly with themselves or with other people. Michael likes best the ones where the men are soliloquist drunks and the rivers are

indifferent and full of easy-to-catch fish. There are lessons in these stories, and the lessons seem to Michael as familiar as the stories, which are familiar to the point of being visibly worn through.

After a dozen or so stories, Michael's father takes to cursing and spitting mouthfuls of his beer onto the campfire, making the coals hiss and fall down from the stack like broken kiln bricks. Michael thinks he is protective and cautious always, except for late at night when he is utterly defeated and drunk and narrating loudly for himself and anyone else to hear. When he is like this, he is pitiful and loquacious and as marvellous to listen to as all the other downtrodden soliloquists scattered throughout the stories, be it the absconded soldier waiting to be picked up by the military police or the bankrupted criminal lying on his bed waiting to die. Michael has befriended and made heroes of them all, and thinks they would often be better off without the women who accompany them through the scenes and who speak perfect sympathetic English though who choose to remain loyal to their own despondency.

In real life, the women are the visibly worn through ones who have not left the house or slept in the same bedroom as their husband in more than a year. They rise and dress in the afternoon, unlocking the door to the spare bedroom and coming out into the living area resembling wearied Greta Garbos. They don't speak a great deal more than their fictional counterparts, except to make occasional announcements like, It's raining outside, or to ask silly questions like, What day was it the day after tomorrow please, Michael? They pronounce their son's name with disdain. They resent their son now like they resent the morning and all first-born things.

When the women are in good moods they stand in front of the vanity mirror playing with their loose hair, messing the strands forward over their eyes, then flicking them back again and asking, What do you see now, Michael? When it's a good mood

and vicious mood mixed together, they forget about the hair and about their son and follow their husband around the house, calling him Saint Bartholomew as they go. Bartholomew is their husband's sarcastic Confirmation name. Michael thinks these women look very pale and very crazy, dressed in their black chemises and pearls, tiptoeing about the houses and calling people by their confirmation name. While he thinks the husband looks very tired and overly tanned from working out in the sun all day, chipping burrs and erecting barbed-wire fences and checking his hands for splinters out of simple habit and periodic frustration. Michael's father is the kind of man who has never been able to work indoors, but only out in the open where it feels natural to him to be uncomfortable and hot. If you can work through the heat, telling yourself it's all coming at you from some far away place like the sun, then you can work through anything, he tells his son.

When fishing for trout, it's necessary to awaken before sunup and be positioned by the water before full light and to put everything from the previous night behind you. Setlines left baited and unattended are one thing, often returning small adolescent trout or carp more likely; to take a decent-sized rainbow or brown, though, requires skill and participation and a willingness to forget completely and wholeheartedly and begin anew.

Chasing along in the dark of morning with his rod held out in front and his left hand keeping the satchel about his waist from rattling and rousing the spirit of that mythical drowned kid, Michael thinks that the river belongs to him and his father alone and that the two of them are exclusive title holders to all of its stocks. If between them they landed four decent-sized trout only yesterday, and all four were gutted and scaled at the edge of the river, then threaded through the gills with the one length of tie wire so

as to be carried back and cooked in aluminium foil over the grill plate and eaten with fingers not forks on laps not tables, then there's a great deal to forget and put behind today.

Using his rod for balance, Michael's father squats forward at the edge of the river and looks across. There's a pre-dawn light playing on the surface and the water has lost its oily sheen from the previous night. It seems less dangerous. Michael squats beside his father. He can smell the heat rising out of the damp soil along the bank. It smells as metallic and premature as his mother's blood rising out of the upholstery on a humid day.

'I think we'll be able to cross by this time tomorrow,' his father says to him. 'Maybe even late this evening. Provided they don't open the dam wall some time throughout today, of course.'

His father has talked over their chances of crossing the river and fishing the hidden spot since arriving, and has made the feat of lowering the water sound like a delicate religious trick. To Michael, it's a benevolent and sporting god who permits a river to be turned on and off like a tap for the sake of improved fishing conditions. He's been dreaming of such conditions and such a judicial god since hearing the story for the first time.

'What'll happen if they open the dam wall while we're on the other side still?' he asks his father.

'We'll need to keep an eye out for that too. We'll put a stick at the edge of the water, and if the water creeps up over the stick we'll know it's time to leave. It doesn't come on so fast that we'll get caught out.'

'Did the water creep up over the stick last time we were here?'

'I don't remember,' his father says.

The last time they were here, Michael's father still called Michael's mother Glory. This was before she moved her pillow into the spare bedroom and returned to the earliest, most extended version of herself she could remember: Gloria Louise Carter: her maiden self, that is. It frightens Michael to have to speak to her now and he only does so when she's sitting down and he's sure she will not be bothered to stand up and come towards him. She's pale and thin and her eyes are like dull coins. The times she is bothered to respond, she comes right up and stands over him and tells him to put his hand on the spot where there is still a raised scar. If he shakes his head and refuses, she puts her thumb in her mouth and goes, Mum-mum-mum-mum-mum-mum-mum, sucking and teasing until she has succeeded in making him cry. She laughs then and forces him to touch the scar anyway. The consecutive mums is a joke only to her, and the scar feels hard and raised beneath the black silk chemise, which she wears with pearls and without variation.

'Can you remember when I was still little and you had to put me in the landing net to carry me back across?'

Michael and his father are moving downstream now, with the river on their left and the campsite behind them and to the right, Michael remembering all the fondest bits and his father keeping a close eye for signs of rising, feeding trout.

'I remember. I was trying to catch a giant trout and thought I needed a giant worm,' his father says without taking his eyes away from the water.

'No, it was because the water had crept up and I was only little and didn't know how to swim yet.'

'Oh, is that why it was?'

'And also because the drowned boy was trying to pull me under, to make friends with me.'

This is a new detail.

‘I don’t think I knew about the drowned boy the last time we were here,’ his father responds. ‘Maybe I knew. How old are you again?’

Michael ignores the question to which his father already knows the answer. They are here, after all, as a promise to his turning seven nine and a half months earlier. The faux coonskin cap, cut and sewn from a second-hand fur coat, is the part of the promise which was given to him on the actual day in late April. As is the new fishing rod. The fishing rod had his mother’s name attached to its card, though Michael knows it was his father who went out and bought it and who wrote both given names on the card, and who sewed the cap also. The cap has rudimentary stitches, and the *G* a stubby masculine tail.

At the first setline, Michael’s father leans his own rod against a bough and sits his torch on top of the bough and begins ravelling in the line. He can tie half-blood knots in the dark when he has to, but with a torch he can tie them so that they do not need even a millimetre trimmed off their tabs. Michael can tell by the smooth spooling that there’s no fish attached to the other end this morning, not even a poor-sighted carp allowing itself to be dragged sideways through the mud. His father casts out again and they keep moving along.

‘I think all of the stupid ones have been caught already,’ his father announces after he has stripped the worm from the fifth unsuccessful hook in a row and thrown it back into the river.

‘The stupid ones don’t know about the hidden spot, do they?’

His father says nothing for a moment, busy replacing the waterlogged worm with a fresh tiger taken from the beetroot tin filled with damp soil. Then he says, ‘I don’t think so. Maybe that’s what makes them so stupid in the first place. I don’t know.

I know they're no good for eating. Maybe we're the stupid ones, waiting days on end for the river to drop like this.'

'I forget what the hidden spot looks like.'

'You were very young.'

'What does it look like?'

'It looks like this spot, only more hidden.'

'But in the stories it looks different.'

'That's just because of the way the stories make it look. Besides, the stories are just stories.'

'How many fish did we catch last time?'

'You were still very young. You only remember because I've told you too many damned times.'

'How many?'

'Hundreds, I think.'

'How many really?'

'Seventeen in one afternoon. Your mother caught eleven of them. She was the one who discovered the spot. We carried you across and she was happy, and then the water level started coming up. It comes up much quicker than it goes down. I had to carry you back in a net with your mother holding onto my back. We'll have to keep an eye on it if we get across. We can put a stick at the edge of the water. Do you remember it all now, Michael?'

Michael thinks it over, crosschecking the details against prior recollections.

'Was it always like that?'

'Sometimes,' his father answers.

'I wish it was like that now.'

His father says nothing.

‘How old was the boy when he drowned?’

‘Which time?’

Michael doesn’t specify. He wants his father to think there is only one time and for him to answer truthfully.

‘Much, much younger than you,’ his father eventually answers. ‘Really not even a boy yet.’

‘I’m nearly eight.’

‘That’s pretty old.’

‘The boy didn’t really drown, did he? Not in real life, I mean.’

‘I guess not.’

‘I can swim by myself now.’

‘Eight is not that old. It’s dangerous. Even when it’s low it’s still dangerous.’

‘I learned when I was six.’

‘Six is a good age for learning.’

‘You taught me.’

‘I showed you and you taught yourself. But that was in the backwaters where the water is calm and there isn’t any current and where the water level doesn’t come up so unexpectedly.’

‘Was he younger than six when he drowned?’

‘Much younger.’

‘Was it his father’s fault really?’

‘Probably.’

‘Couldn’t it be nobody’s fault?’

‘No.’

When the setlines have been resubmitted with their hooks fattened and knots checked for durability, Michael and his father find a shaded spot on top of a rock and cast their lines out into the middle. It's almost 6 a.m. now. The sun is showing through the trees quite well and the water is blue with definite streaks of light brown. Already it's very hot.

'How many days did we have to wait for the river to go down last time?' Michael asks.

'Last time we were lucky. It was down when we arrived. We fished on this side for two days and made camp, and then when we had not caught anything substantial we went and found the hidden spot. Your mother found it.'

'And was she still wearing a feather behind her ear, like the little boy in the story?'

'I don't think I remember all the details quite as well as you remember them, Michael. You have a superb memory.'

Michael smiles. His father smiles too. On the other side of the river a dragon lizard drops off his branch and disappears beneath the current. It's the elongated shadows of birds on the water that make the lizards hide away like this at a given second. Michael picks up a handful of pine needles coloured like pencil shavings and throws them out in front. A trick his father has taught him for gauging the wind. The birds and lizards and heat are tricks for other things. The needles float away on the surface of the water and Michael quickly forgets which direction the wind influenced them and what difference it makes anyway.

At quarter past eight Michael's father takes the first real strike of the morning. Michael sees the fish come on too. The line pulls diagonal and tight towards the centre of the

river. The reel's drag sounds like the mosquito fly being unzipped, and the dragon lizard, which has returned to its branch, sits upright, ready to leap again. Judging by the angle, it's a fish that knows the benefit of lodging in the centre, where the current is strongest and the water deepest. Michael's father stands and begins palming and winding and fighting it back toward the surface. He keeps the rod tip high at all times, explaining the methodology of the fight to Michael as he goes.

'You have to know when to let it run. If you let it run too early, it'll make straight for a snag. You can't stop it outright though. You'll break it off if you try to stop it outright. You have to know just when.'

'Can you feel what it is yet?'

'You can't feel for sure until you have it on the surface. This one doesn't want to come up either. I'll bring it up. If it's a rainbow, I'll make it jump. Then we'll know. You better take the rod, Michael. If it's the rainbow of all rainbows, then you better be the one who pulls it in, so that you can be the hero of the next story.'

After eight days of camping and fishing, Michael is all too familiar with his father's ability to make an undersize troutling seem like a fifteen-pound fighter just by loading the rod right forward and over-flexing his forearms and talking in disjointed breathless rhythms. He takes the rod charily, expecting a tadpole-like pull and his father's laughter, though immediately feels the weight of the fish for himself. He adjusts his stance. It's real weight.

'Like I showed you,' his father says.

Michael cocks his wrists so that the fish has something to labour against. At the same time he keeps his elbows malleable to avoid the clean break. His left foot is slightly forward. He has the line tight enough that it shakes the entire rod each time the fish surges into a deeper pocket. It shakes enough that it puts him off balance. He opens

his stance, but there's no effective way to completely brace against it. The shock goes too many ways at once. It rattles down past his knees and makes him hold his breath and lose depth in his shoulders. Somewhere in his imagination he sees a dog trying to win a game of tug-of-war against its owner, two arm-wrestlers with tattoos on their biceps and no shirts. The images are from stories told to him by his father, like the one in which the man flogs his son across the backside with the thick, fibrous, plaited skipping rope for playing too loudly during the middle part of the day when his mother is trying to sleep and repair herself.

'How is he, Michael?'

'My back hurts,' Michael says.

'Don't think about your back. Think of how he will sound cooking on the grill.'

Michael thinks of the blue Bedford van with the blue tarpaulin and mosquito fly fixed to its side, of the tie wire running through the gills and out the mouths, of the green and blue sleeping bags lined with leopard-print fabric which he and his father sleep side by side in and without taking their shoes off. He thinks of colour and water, of that drowned boy holding onto the rainbow trout at the other end, refusing to let it up for anything, and of his mother's hair. He thinks if they could wait it out and return to the hidden spot, then he could tell his mother just how it was and she would say, 'I remember it just that way myself,' and then it would be just that way, and it really could be nobody's fault.

The fish shudders the line and Michael begins to cry because of it.

'Don't think of it hurting,' his father says.

It goes again, and Michael undoes his grip and watches the rod topple over the lip of the rock and disappear into the water. It goes over like crane.

‘Your goddamned back,’ his father says, dropping Michael’s birthday rod and leaping in after his own.

Michael stands atop of the rock crying. He would like to see the hidden spot before they leave, but he knows there’s no chance of his father taking him across now. The river falls much more slowly than it rises, and even then it may come on again at any vicious moment.

Later in the day, when they have packed up the camp and are driving home together with the windows all the way down, he will tell his father what was really attached to the end of the line and why he had to let go, and his father will say that not everything is about that goddamned drowned boy. And because of the taste of his mother’s premature blood rising out of the seat behind them, flapping and tugging in the breeze like that drowned boy who fights against the current and against the hook and against his mother’s craziness and against everything else that is after him, Michael will know that this part of the fiction is a lie.

Gutted, for Carl Solomon

I went to the skate park today to see if I could murder a kid. I didn't have any preconceptions about how I wanted to do it. It's just, I'd been listening to some old Ginsberg recordings and felt the need to do something for Carl Solomon myself.

Ginsberg trying to keep his cool, 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' Ginsberg: this was me with one foot rested up on the slide rail and the bottle of bourbon swinging lidless in the pocket of my suede jacket. It was about four p.m. and the sky was overcast and pretty dim. My plan was to use the bourbon to lure one kid away from the others, and then, I don't know, bludgeon him with a rock or something. There were hunks of concrete lying all around the skate park and I'd had one thrown at me once while walking home drunk with this girl from my creative writing class. I remember being very disappointed that night. Earlier in the week the girl had written a poem about her pierced clit-hood and had read it aloud to the entire class and everyone had thought *Jesus Christ!* and subsequently I'd been expecting Mursi-like capabilities from the thing, rain-hat capabilities. In the end, the cheek-sized slab of concrete was more memorable and the bruise it left behind no less functional.

By half past I'd drunk most of the bourbon myself and the majority of the kids had left the skate park and gone to the service station across the street where they skated in front of cars and beneath the fluorescent lights and showed off the tricks and bad language they'd spent the day practising with each other. Only the serious ones stayed behind with me. They were the ones determined to become rich and famous skateboarders. They whizzed up and down the ramps and thought I was some talent scout, who worked for Sony Playstation or Globe shoes. When they knew I was watching they did special air tricks and backwards things to impress me and I nodded

my head and pretended to take notes in my Moleskine. If I wasn't writing notes I was flicking the bourbon cap up in the air with my thumb like it was a lucky coin and me a big-shot shaker from the States named Fifty-Fifty or Silver-Up or something. The act went on like this for about another hour.

By quarter to six the remaining group had been whittled down to two. One of them a baby-faced kid wearing a Good Charlotte t-shirt. He had a long blonde fringe that seemed to react half a second slower than the rest of his hair, which was dark-brown and immediate. He was about fifteen years old, I think, and if he kicked down with his back foot and made his skateboard leap up and turn over in the air, then his fringe replayed the entire move a split-second behind. Up, over, and flush against his forehead. Nicely executed. Real sponsorship stuff. There was also a skinny girl whose collarbones were too broad for her shoulders and chest, and whose t-shirt was grey and didn't have the names of any bands on it. She was around the same age as the boy, though she was much plainer looking and more damaged too. I wondered if she wasn't somebody's victim already, an alcoholic mother's or unemployed father's. She seemed specially prepped for the role of bludgeonee.

'Hey,' I said to her when she came onto the platform near where I was standing. It was well and truly dark by now and only the glow of the adjacent streetlights made it possible to see. 'You read poetry, do you?'

She turned her face toward me and didn't say anything. I held up my Moleskine. A sign of honesty, of intent.

'No,' she said.

I shrugged and put it back into the breast pocket of my jacket. It was a suede jacket. I think Martin Amis wore one like it once. Maybe his was straight leather. It was the same style anyway, waist-length, floppy-collared and too big in the elbows.

‘What about this stuff?’ I asked, showing her the other pocket.

She stared at it, then shook her head and looked around to see where her friend was. He was jumping his skateboard over one of the bench seats down below. Each time he jumped, his fringe flopped up and caught the glint of the streetlight the way small waves catch the moon before breaking apart on the low-tide sandbars. I took the near-empty bottle all the way out and held it to my mouth and showed the girl what it was like. Just a small sip from the bit that was left, enough to make me remember what it was like myself. I let it go straight past my teeth and tongue and into the throat cavity. And it was difficult, that’s how it was. I didn’t put the bottle away completely when I was finished, but left it sticking a third of the way out of the jacket pocket with its smooth bald neck straining and screaming up at me like a hungry baby bird.

‘You spit back into it if you don’t like the taste,’ I explained to the girl.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

I did a fake cough into the closed mallet-end of my fist then. I liked the weather was cold and dim like this, because you could get away with wearing your collar up and dry coughing a lot and didn’t look like you were trying to be Martin Amis or Holden Caulfield or anyone else too literary. In my head I had very red cheeks from standing out there in the cold all afternoon, and my mouth was shaped like Paul McCartney’s. I’ve always enjoyed the namedropping. In reality I think my mouth was probably as big and pink and vulgar and whiskery as the piercing-hooded vagina of that stupid girl I’d taken home from my creative writing class. A Ringo Starr mouth. And a mouth which had performed one hell of an ugly duet that night too, I’m sure.

The creative writing class is full of stupidity. I think a good creative writing class needs a certain level of stupidity in order to be productive. By stupidity I don’t mean playfulness or silliness, but base dumbness. Prose writers with no sensibility

toward dialogue. Poets lacking all natural cadence. Screenwriters interested in vampire lore and the philosophy of American comic books. The smart writers need these stupid writers to learn their mistakes from. Carver didn't get good by reading Faulkner and drinking with Cheever, or even by sharing his bed with Gallagher, but by latching onto his first wife for twenty-one years and seeing how he could really shit over a person. Maryann Burk: passive co-writer. Hadley Richardson: scrupulous editor. Girl with piercing-hooded vagina: workshop supercritic.

A writer must be blooded first, and educated second. Like a dog. You bring him a dead rabbit, and you say, Here, chew on this for a while. The taste of the dead animal will make the dog feel proud with himself and he won't let the carcass out of his mouth. I didn't kill this thing, he'll seem to say, but look how I carry it around with me nonetheless—look how I *might* have killed it. After a week or so you bring him a rabbit that's still alive, but that has had both its back legs broken so that it can't run away. When the dog has got the hang of this second game, you deliver a live, jumping, running Chekhov and you say, Graduation day, boy—now, catch! If he's been blooded properly he'll chase after the thing and believe himself capable of getting a hold and the taste of the first dead rabbit will be in his mouth still, making him too proud and mad to stop running or even to look over his shoulder for encouragement.

'What do you do, then?' I said to the skinny, sad girl who didn't drink and who didn't read poetry. She wasn't really sad, but for the sake of Carl Solomon I thought she was sad on the inside. Be brave for Carl and all the other best minds of your generation, Charlotte, hide your worries from the world. In my head I was calling her Charlotte and myself Allen now and the names seemed perfectly suited and so did the meter and the assonance was wonderful.

‘I write poetry,’ Charlotte said, a kind of amendment to her statement about not reading poetry. As in, I don’t read poetry, I write the stuff. That is, it reads me. It reads me and we write each other. Right?

‘So, you’re a poet?’

‘No,’ she said.

Thank God, I thought. Then, ‘Why do you write it and not read it, Charlotte?’

‘I don’t just write it, Allen,’ she said. All very informal stuff. Allen this, Charlotte that. It’s how we played.

I smiled and nodded and the crude, cold, hard hunk of concrete suddenly didn’t seem to be the right thing to do by this girl. She deserves subtlety, I told myself. I could see how her parents and teachers agreed with me, how they were clandestinely grinding up tiny amounts of poison and slipping it into her food night after night. Rohypnol. Paracetamol. Rat Sack. Shame. Anything they could get their stubby little hands on. This kind of attack risked her building an immunity though. Immunity to death almighty and poetry ever after. Were her parents and teachers aware of the immunity risk? I wondered.

‘How come you talk to people without looking at them?’ I said to her.

She thought for a moment. Then turned her damaged face right at me. ‘I don’t do that to everyone.’

She had thin, dry lips. I wanted to rub chalk on them.

‘Is that how you talk to your parents and teachers?’

They closed together. Nothing. She didn’t want to talk about her parents and teachers. I didn’t want to talk about mine either. We wanted and didn’t want to talk about all of the same things. We were kindred.

‘What sort of poems do you write?’ I asked her.

‘Ones about people,’ she answered.

Yes, I thought so, I thought.

‘But you’re not a poet,’ I said.

‘No.’

‘Are all of your poems about people?’

‘No. Some of them are about old ships that have been retired and stripped of their guns.’

‘Do you know who Carl Solomon is?’

‘No.’

‘And what else?’ I asked.

‘Former schoolgirls,’ she said.

‘Yes?’ I said.

‘Cornered and beaten by nuns,’ she went on.

‘Do they all rhyme like that, then? Guns and nuns?’

‘Not always,’ she said. ‘But most of the time.’

‘Would you sing one of them aloud to me?’

‘No.’

‘No. Good.’

‘I hate music.’

‘Everyone hates music.’

I couldn’t help thinking of the poem about the pierced clit-hood then. Of course, it was the kind of poem that didn’t rhyme at all, and that relied on dissonance and terseness for effect. I think this was symptomatic of the creative writing class and not necessarily the author. None of the people in the class who wrote poems liked to use rhyme, and those who did were shamed into pretending they didn’t. All of them feigned

to detest alliteration too. I think the majority had been made to study Wilfred Owen at high school and were now afraid of stylisation like they were afraid of mustard gas. Often they would hyphenate a word like *clitoris* to make the syllables sound less processed, and hardly any of them could write a full line without hitting the *Enter* key six times between the first and last words. What's more, they hated giving titles to their poems and a resigned fashion for naming poems after their first word had caught on quite early, so that too many of the poems were manufactured with adjectives and prepositions for titles, 'Hundredth', for example:

hundredth

hundredth clit-

hood he's done

he says,

tats on

his face too,

none

bigger than mine

but

he says,

a parrot

a skull

and set of blackened tits…

There were those that skipped on for world without end, and then there were those that sat like red wheelbarrows with flattened tyres and could not be pushed any further than three or four lines. 'Hundredth' was made up of seventeen twelve-line columns and plumped somewhere in the middle of that array. The girl with the pierced clit-hood

didn't like her columns being referred to as stanzas. She was against titles and against stanzas. She had a tattoo of Athena on her calf and said the strongest columns were the ones that fattened out at the bottom to give the effect of a straight line. I was on my knees at that stage and thought there was very little truth in such perverse mathematics. Only when the foreplay was over and the disappointment didn't seem to matter so much anymore did I tell her that *Hundredth* was the hundred-and-first I'd performed, and that Ginsberg himself was a direct descendant of Pythagoras and me a direct descendent of Ginsberg, which made us all first cousins. Aww, it's bleeding again, she responded.

The kid with the Good Charlotte t-shirt came skating up to where Charlotte and I were standing and talking. His t-shirt said *Good Charlotte* in lime-green and had a picture of some raggedy old Michael Corleone lookalike mixing drinks, or chemicals, on its front.

'Who are you?' Corleone said.

I looked at him seriously.

Charlotte looked at him seriously.

'This is Allen,' she said, answering for me. 'The famous poet. He does not have a beard. Only me.' She laughed.

'I shaved it off,' I added. The kid glared at me. 'You got an agent?' I said, in reference to his skateboard.

Corleone pushed his fringe away from his eyes and straightened it back down with his fingertips and looked at Charlotte for confirmation. She looked back at him like he was very stupid. He *was* very stupid. What are you looking at her for? I thought. She doesn't have any use for a dead rabbit like you.

'No,' he answered timidly.

‘Chew on this, Corleone,’ I said. I handed him the bottle and he swigged from its glassy beak. He was keen.

‘You spit back into it if you don’t like the taste,’ Charlotte explained to him.

‘Eat pussy, Alex,’ he said between sips.

I used my pencil to make an important mark in my Moleskine. *ALEX*, I printed.

‘Don’t be so crass,’ I said to him when I’d finished. He glowered.

My own poems were always criticised for being too polite. Even the creative writing teacher thought my poems were not aggressive enough and she’d suffered through a miscarriage. Aggression is not necessarily violent or tragic, she assured me. See, aggression can be something as subtle as a bread crumb refusing to give over to an ant. To me that sounds like a polite way of talking about forced sex, I argued back with her. Good, she said, write a poem about forced sex, then. She was determined to show that she hadn’t been affected by her miscarriage. I wrote a poem called ‘The Frailty of the Human Condition, for Gertrude Stein’. It was a very short and polite poem about a rapist called Ford. In it I rhymed the word ‘fingernail’ with the word ‘derailed’. This decision received much criticism on account of its lyricism and its politeness, and eventually I was pressured into replacing the word ‘derailed’ with ‘scum-fucked’. The teacher who’d suffered through a miscarriage called me Ezra-fucking-Pound for the rest of the semester. She was clearly very affected.

When the boy had drunk it all, he handed me the empty bottle. I thanked him. ‘Whatever,’ he said. Then I took it by the neck and lunged forward and used it to strike him across the face. ‘Howl!’ I yelled. And I howled. The glass bottle felt like a piece of concrete in my hand and didn’t break apart when it struck him on the cheekbone, but jarred both of us instantaneously like an electric fence current. Rather than going over dead like I’d anticipated, the boy recovered from the jolt almost immediately and picked

up his skateboard and ran away. ‘Go!’ he yelled as he ran. ‘Quick, go!’ He was screaming to Charlotte. But she didn’t go. She just laughed and howled as well. We both howled. Howled like first cousins caught in the act.

‘Scum-fucker!’ she yelled after him.

‘Scum-fucker!’ I repeated. I repeated it as aggressively as possible and even threw the bottle too. ‘Scum-fucker! Play that on your hydrogen jukebox, you fucking scum-fucker!’

When that stupid boy was out of sight I sat down on the slide rail and reopened my Moleskine to the *ALEX* page. I calmed myself and started writing. I tried to remember what it was like just at the moment when the bottle had connected without breaking, the moment when the piercing-hooded girl had dropped her head back and lifted her erratic knees, the moment when I ‘d first pressed play on the VCR and seen Ginsberg with his stroke-mangled face and big pink lips reading the opening word from that Parthenon of a poem of his. By contrast the first thing I came up with was an adjective that started with the letter *G* and rhymed with ‘head-butted’. ‘Gutted’. I wrote it down and underlined it for a title.

‘You chickened out, Allen,’ Charlotte said.

‘For Carl,’ I said.

The Rat in the Wall

‘I think we may have a rat living in our wall,’ I announce, not so unexpectedly. I’ve been tracking the creature for some hours now. Loudly and intrusively enough that the work can’t possibly have gone unnoticed. Even from the lounge room. Really, the announcement is no more than icing, and the artistry is in the word *living*.

Dana looks up from her novel but doesn’t say anything. It’s unfortunate for her that somebody she has come to detest so deeply should be the bearer of such pertinent information. She wishes I’d said something trivial like, We’re out of milk, or, It has stopped raining, or, I’ve accidentally broken another chair, dear. She could ignore no milk and no rain and nowhere to sit, but she can’t ignore *living*.

‘Should I call somebody?’ I say, spreading the dollops as consistently as possible.

Dana considers how she might answer my question without actually answering it. I feel for her. If it’d been something about clouds or cows or carpentry, then she could have scowled at me and replied simply: Big whoop. And if it’d been something only slightly less trifling, Tuesday’s appointment with Doctor Levsky, say, then she could have got away with breathing deeply and calmly and answering, Alan, I really couldn’t care less what you do; do whatever pleases you, Alan; do or do not come, Alan. But no. Instead it’s an issue concerning a living creature. A living creature that will likely chew its way through the plaster wall and disinter our sleeping eye sockets if we don’t act immediately and in unity. A living creature intent on avenging all the other living creatures we’ve encountered in our lives together.

‘Who should I call?’

‘I couldn’t care less,’ Dana says. ‘Look it up.’ She’s happy I’ve provided her with an opportunity to reply curtly.

‘Under *rat*?’ I say.

Dana breathes in through her nostrils. She retrieves the bookmark from the back pages of her novel and inserts it into the splayed open section. Closing the pages, she places the novel on top of the coffee table and reaches for the bottom drawer. She pulls too hard and the drawer comes all the way out and lands on the carpet at her feet. She isn’t perturbed and accepts that this is how it must be for her. We know each other too well. Inside the drawer is the area phonebook. We’ve been here before.

‘Let me,’ I say.

Dana sees my outstretched hand but makes an effort not to look at it. When she opens the phonebook for herself she turns it straight to the page that says *Pest Control* in the top corner. I sense her satisfaction. And understand it too. I’ve had the same fortune with dictionaries and thesauruses, with unlabelled compact discs.

‘Phone,’ she says, this time with her own outstretched hand. I guess it’s expected that a surgeon performing procedures as complex as opening telephone books to their desired pages first go shouldn’t have to fetch the scalpel or thread the needle or make eye contact with the theatre nurses. Nor attach cumbersome and superfluous auxiliary verbs like *may* to ones like *have*.

‘Phone’s in the kitchen,’ I say. She looks up at me. ‘I’ll do it.’ I’m repeating myself now.

‘I can,’ she responds. It’s very specific language. Not *I will*, but *I can*. Nurse, the retractor…I *can* do this.

‘You were reading,’ I insist.

‘Fine.’ She hands me the phonebook, her finger trailing off on one of the black and yellow advertisements. It’s a picture of a middle-aged man wearing dark sunglasses and holding a piece of pest control equipment against his shoulder, its narrow barrel pointed straight up in the air like a sawn-off shotgun. He has a flat-top hair-do. I put my own finger where Dana’s was and say the man’s name aloud. The Pesterminator. His *nom de guerre*. Dana’s *nom de guerre* is *dear*. She takes up her novel again. She’s rereading *Anna Karenina*. Some perfumed edition with a tactile ruffled fore-edge and matt-finish jacket. It’s what you get for dipping into the classics.

I take the phonebook to the kitchen, dial the number and wait for the Pesterminator to pick up. It’s a cordless phone, but I remain near the receiver. The line rings once and I switch ears and hold the phone in place between my head and raised shoulder. My freed hand goes flat against the wall like a stethoscope. The other sits raised on its fingertips like an alarmed huntsman. Each hairy leg takes its turn at tapping a message through to the rat, while the stethoscope hand listens carefully for any responsive murmur or knock. The tapping reminds me of a line from one of Dana’s poems: *Worm taps holes in the soil/rich as Braille and ply*. She’s a half-respectable poet, and writes in an old exercise book which she keeps hidden between the travel guides on our bookshelf—a place she suspects I would never go. Dana and I know each other too well.

Waiting for The Pesterminator to pick up, it occurs to me that the rat living in our wall is probably living quite comfortably and tastefully at this juvenile stage of its life. All of our walls have been freshly painted and hung with sepia-toned prints of our trip to Cairo, from a time when we were newly married and still excited with each other. On the wall opposite the rat’s is a colourful piece of art that Dana bought from a man in the marketplace on the second last day of our trip. Dana bartered the man down to

almost nothing and it was sad and exhilarating and spiteful to see him give in and accept her offer. His eyes were the colour of frozen sea water; he had a son, who sat beside him on a mat with his head bowed and his hands tucked into the front of his pants.

'Hello, Gary speaking.'

'Yes, hello,' I react. 'Could I speak to the Pesterminator, please?'

'Speaking.'

'Yes, hello, my name is Alan Broderick,' I say, turning the phone back to its original ear and keeping hold of it with my hand. There's a moment of silence then, a gap where the Pesterminator might reply with something suitable like *affirmative* or *proceed*. He says nothing. I switch ears a third time, 'I'm sorry, is this the number for the Pesterminator?'

'Yes, speaking. How may I help you, sir?'

'My wife and I think there may be a rat living in our wall.' The earpiece feels uncomfortable and sweaty.

'A rat? I see. Okay. Okay then.'

This run of *okay*s is The Pesterminator pulling the lid from his pen with his teeth, scribbling on the back of an already-opened envelope to get the ink flowing, licking the print-side of his thumb and leafing through his appointment diary in search of today's date. A transitionary okay. The Pesterminator is our intermediary now, our Doctor Levsky.

'Okay, what did you say your name was again, sorry, sir?'

'Alan Broderick,' I tell him. A flash of relief. The pen works. 'And my wife's name is Dana. Alan and Dana Broderick. We live at forty-nine Campus Road.'

'Is your wife there now, Mr Broderick?'

‘Yes, she’s here. She’s reading in the lounge room. One of Tolstoy’s. C-A-M-P-U-S,’ pause, ‘Road.’

‘I know the street,’ the Pesterminator says.

‘Yes,’ I say, and warn myself against too much information.

‘Tell your wife that there’s no reason to be afraid. Rats are often more afraid of you than you are of them. You should tell your wife that, Mr Broderick. I know how it can be. Tell her now.’

‘Right, yes.’ I let the phone drop slightly, so that the earpiece is about level with the top of my jaw and the mouthpiece is somewhere below my chin. ‘He’s probably more afraid of you than your are of him, dear,’ I call to Dana.

‘Are you talking to me?’ she responds.

I clear my throat. ‘Yes, he says he’s probably more afraid of you than you are of him. I’m speaking with him now, dear.’

‘The rat, or the man on the phone?’

‘Yes, the rat. The man on the phone says he’s probably—’

‘Ask the man on the phone why must it always be a *him*? Ask him that, Alan.’

I pause.

‘We think that maybe the rat is female,’ I relay.

‘That’s okay, Mr Broderick, I heard. Mr Broderick, tell your wife there’s two ways of handling this. We can go directly into the wall with traps, or we can drill bait holes and deal with it that way. Two ways. Both equally good in my opinion.’

‘Which is the safest and cleanest?’ I ask quietly. There’s a bead of shame running past my temple.

‘As I said, they’re both equally good in my opinion, Mr Broderick.’

I think for a moment. To me, going straight into the wall sounds the quicker and most-direct method. No doubt. Though the baits do seem less intrusive. The only concern with the bait holes, as far as I can see, is the issue of retrieving the dead rat afterwards.

'I'll have to ask my wife,' I say to the Pesterminator. I let the phone drop down again. 'Dear, he says there are two ways.' Dana doesn't reply. I can tell by the way she doesn't reply that she's begun reading from her novel again. Following the words with her index finger now. Pointing them out for her eyes. Instructing her ears to ignore all sentences containing the word *dear*. This is the way she reads when she's sitting up in bed with an extra pillow behind her back and glasses on the tip of her nose. The image of a secretary hoping to file an harassment claim. The image of a woman looking for any way out.

'Dana?'

She stops. Her finger still on the page. Surely. Marking some conjunction word like *and* or *but*. When she resumes, the sentence will be meaningless to her. I will have ruined, or at least interfered with, one of the classics.

'Dana, he says there are two ways of doing it. Both equally good. And safe too.'

'Fine. Both are equally good? Fine. You decide, Alan.'

'Both are equally good?' I repeat into the phone.

'That's right, Mr Broderick. Both are equally effective and equally safe.'

'Both are equally effective and equally safe,' I confirm loudly, for Dana's benefit.

'*Equally effective*?' she calls from the other room. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

This is the West. We have ethics.

‘Now, Mr Broderick,’ the Pesterminator starts.

The trip to Cairo was a two-year anniversary gift to ourselves. Above all other destinations, Cairo had been suggested to us as a city of terrific romance. Of marketplaces smelling entirely of hessian and saffron. Snake charmers who make their real money dealing small vials of poison milked from cobras and native species of scorpion. A city where the fear of being pick-pocketed is no more real than the fear of being invited to dinner by some friendly local intent on selling you a gun. Where gypsies disfigure their children at birth and still believe in magic curses. Of Cairo’s hospitals and doctors, we knew and were told nothing in advance.

We flew direct. Dana threw up once in the departure lounge, three times on the plane and again as soon as we arrived at our hotel. The hotel foyer was painted and tiled in gold colours, and Dana threw up into a gold-coloured pot positioned in front of the main bureau. When she’d finished we were shown to our room and she lay on the bed. Not long after, the hotelier called from the foyer and asked me whether we would like a jar of mint tea sent up to the room. I told him we would not need anything sent up to the room, and he told me one of his staff was working very hard to make the gold-coloured pot look and smell clean again.

‘I’m sorry,’ I told him.

‘It is not a problem,’ he assured me. ‘Here we have very good and hard-working staff. Maybe the best in Cairo, Mr Broderick.’

‘Yes, some tea would be nice,’ I told him. ‘For my wife.’

By the third morning of our trip Dana was feeling a little better and wanted go out into the city to take some photographs. Before leaving, I asked the hotelier for a map of all the best places to visit within walking distance. The hotelier said he’d grown

up in this part of Cairo and had known it all his life, and that all of the best places to visit were in this part anyway, and we wouldn't need to take a taxi to see some of the truly, truly best sites, nor would we need a map. The hotelier was very proud of his hotel and its position and had taken to calling me plain *Broderick* by this stage.

A week went by. On the days we left the hotel, Dana took lots of photographs and wrote short poems in her notebook. When we stopped for lunch she read the poems aloud to me and asked the waiters for bottled water only, which she usually she threw up within an hour anyway. We would return to the hotel then so she could lie down and I could drink imported European beers, which came served in warm lacklustre glass jars. The jars were really just regular drinking glasses and it was the hotelier who called them jars anyway.

Out and about, we found Cairo a very romantic city, just as we'd been informed. On the nights Dana wasn't feeling overly nauseated we tried walking further than was recommended by the hotelier. We followed the Nile for more than three miles and allowed ourselves to be cheated out of some money along the way by a fortune teller who didn't speak a word of English and who acted as if *we* were trying to cheat *her*. Afterwards, we tried having sex for the first time since arriving and Dana threw up into the vanity basin beneath the bedroom window.

After nine days of feeling very nauseated and throwing up everything she ate and drank, Dana suggested that I take her to see a doctor. I asked the hotelier where we would find a good doctor and he told me that we would need to go to one of the major hospitals. He arranged for a taxi to come to the hotel and explained to the driver that we needed to be driven to the hospital and then waited upon and driven back to the hotel. The taxi driver spoke English quite well and told us not to worry, he knew the best route and would wait for us.

After waiting several hours at the hospital, we saw a doctor who was pleasant and well mannered with us, and was able to diagnose Dana's condition very promptly and without the need for further testing.

'You may arrange to have a blood test if you're still in doubt,' she said to us. 'But really, I am quite certain.' She was an attractive woman, and our naivety amused her greatly. 'It's common for you to feel this way,' she assured Dana. She was smiling. 'Enjoy the rest of your holiday and don't worry so much,' she said. 'You'll have all the time in the world for worrying. Believe me.' She had photographs of her family on her desk and when we stood up to leave she put out her hand and I shook it. My grip felt weaker than hers.

At the hotel that night, Dana and I both drank beer. Dana said she wished to keep drinking until it was the beer alone making her feel nauseated, while I was trying to drink through the nausea altogether and to the other side. After eight or nine beers each, it was the hotelier who brought up the next round, and when he came into our room with the jars on his tray, he went straight to the wooden chair I'd broken against the large wooden dresser beside the bathroom doorway. He placed the tray on the dresser and picked up a piece of the broken chair.

'You are staying in all night, Mr and Mrs Broderick?'

'Call him Broderick,' Dana said. 'He prefers to be called Broderick without the Mr.'

'It is a hot night and I am afraid we have run out of beer after these ones,' the hotelier said. 'If you like I will send tea instead.'

'Mr Broderick doesn't enjoy tea nearly as much as he used to,' Dana explained to him. She was smiling and crying at once. My hand was bleeding from where I'd

broken the chair against the dresser, and I didn't think the hotelier's staff would be capable of putting my hand or the chair back together, despite their reputations.

'You will forgive me,' the hotelier said, taking the tray of beers from off the dresser again.

'He'll forgive you for almost anything,' Dana told him. 'How's your own marriage? Maybe your wife breaks the furniture in your relationship, while you do the forgetting? But then, who does the forgiving?'

'Goodnight then,' the hotelier said.

Dana and I went downstairs and walked to a bar that was in the same block. The hotelier was right and all the things worth seeing truly were in the same district as his hotel.

The next morning, I went to see the hotelier to pay him money for the chair I'd broken. 'It is in your expenses already, Mr Broderick,' he said to me. I asked him to call another taxi for us.

This second visit we didn't have to wait long, and the doctor we saw wasn't the same as the day before, but was male. Judging by the certificates on the wall he'd earned his diploma abroad. He was a man with extraordinarily dark lips, who showed no shame in expounding his prejudices and proving himself a discourteous user of the English language. He was particularly disapproving of Americans. 'It's a procedure that must be paid for up-front,' he told us. 'Your travel insurance won't cover it.' There was paperwork for Dana to sign. He could smell the alcohol on her breath. None of the paperwork was written in English and Dana signed where he told her to sign.

'It's probably for the best,' he said to her, after which she wouldn't look directly at him. And after which I felt the need to defend our decision.

‘I suppose you support those gypsies who disfigure their children to make efficient beggars of them?’ I challenged him.

‘Yes, and who harden their arteries with snake poison,’ he laughed at me.

We returned to the hotel sometime in the evening. Dana lay on the bed without speaking and still appeared very nauseated. I broke another piece of furniture, against the wall this time, and the hotelier asked for a further deposit on the room. Dana didn’t detest me so much at this stage—it still seemed like a decision we’d made together. For spite, the doctor had whispered into her ear as she was coming out of the anaesthetic and she was still very upset. He was a man with deep lips and deep prejudices.

By way of retribution, Dana waited until she was feeling well enough to leave the hotel, and then went out into the marketplace and humiliated one of the doctor’s countrymen, a hapless Egyptian street artist, in front of his son. The trophy, she carried home with her to hang on the wall of our two bedroom apartment. A colourful work which doesn’t remind us at all of Cairo itself. Nor our time there. Nor the city’s prejudiced doctors. Only of the street artist, with his deep sea-coloured eyes and ashamed but healthy son.

‘Now, Mr Broderick,’ the Pesterminator continues, his professionalism unimpeachable. ‘Given your wife has no preference—‘

‘Oh, she has a preference,’ I stop him. In the lounge room Dana might laugh or cry, might tip her head back and gulp down the remainder of her book with one throw.

‘Yes, Mr Broderick?’

‘Yes, she prefers to hear me called plain Broderick when we are bonding like this.’

None of them moved. They might have bolted at the sound of the train braking and then hitting. Pushed through the fences and escaped into the surrounding mountains even. But they didn't so much as flinch. They stood motionless and fearless as antique furniture. Dressers and wardrobes and grandfather clocks stowed away in a vacant mansion somewhere, with sheets thrown over the top of them for protection against the dust. The polished, muscled legs and walnut-veined necks protruding out from beneath their big canvas sheet-coats were the only visible signs of the workmanship that'd gone into shaping them and bringing out their excellent patinas. They were racehorses, these. Gallopers. Animals accustomed to the smack of leather and screech of steel, to the rigidity of human involvement and catastrophe of its machines.

Inside the train carriages it was a very different story. The emergency brakes sent them all moving. Forward-facing passengers sprung upright and into the laps of their rearward-facing companions like swimmers reacting to the sound of some horrible starting pistol; a young man returning from the amenities launched off the balls of his feet like a backstroker into the long narrow laneway whence he'd come; even those who managed to remain seated threw their arms and papers up into the air like excited grandstand supporters.

'We must have hit something,' an older woman told her husband. She was the first to speak in their carriage. She told him like it was a fact she'd confirmed merely by saying it aloud. And like he was the kind of idiot who needed to be told these sorts of things. Which is how it went in their marriage. For forty-five years it'd gone this way. Her the teller, him the idiot listener.

‘It didn’t feel like we hit anything,’ the husband muttered in the most non-argumentative way he knew how. Both of them were holding onto the handrail still. Neither had been injured or tossed about too badly.

‘They don’t just put the brakes on like that for no reason, Neville,’ she insisted.

‘Maybe we *almost* hit something,’ he said hopefully. ‘They might have pulled us up in time.’

The woman scoffed. ‘It didn’t feel like they pulled us up in time.’ She let go with one hand and pressed her cheek to the window in an attempt to see all the way to the head carriage.

It was a four-car train, with an upstairs and downstairs compartment in each car. Their downstairs compartment was quite empty. Besides them there were three schoolboys sitting together, all of whom were laughing now and reenacting with the expected degree of exaggeration the involuntary flight path they’d taken a moment earlier. Toward the middle of the carriage a man wearing a suit but no tie was gathering and repacking the contents of his leather satchel.

‘You know what I bet it was?’ the older woman put to her husband, abandoning her cheek from the cool window and looking further up the mountain.

‘No, what?’ he asked.

She brought her index finger up in front of her face and tapped lightly on the glass. Her husband glanced past to see precisely what she was pointing at. Unlike her, he was still holding onto the rail with both hands, expecting perhaps for the train to start up again all of a sudden and stutter forward. ‘I bet one of them got onto the track,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll bet you that’s what it was all right.’

The husband considered the horses standing about in the paddock with their big heavy coats fastened from the brisket all the way back to the base of the tail. He knew

his wife well enough to understand that the discreet voice and restrained finger-tapping actions were an indication of assuredness rather than self-doubt. She spoke in the same hushed tones at home when looking through the kitchen window at the neighbours showboating around in the front yard with their new caravan, or when she was expounding some other scandalous and libelous hypothesis involving people she could not help comparing herself to.

'Just you wait,' she continued. 'I'll bet the driver comes on the microphone in a minute and tells us that we're going to have to sit here until they can get a forklift or something to move it out from under the train. Neville? Did you hear what I said?'

'Maybe,' her husband conceded. He'd stopped listening and begun counting the horses, giving each a nod of his head to indicate its place in a series of mental numbers that was already up to twelve. He might have been the owner of the horses, counting to himself like that, looking to determine whether one was missing. But, of course, he was not. He was not the owner of much, in fact. As a younger man he'd been the owner of a panel-beating shop and an opinion and he was not even the owner of those anymore.

'*Maybe*? You're kidding me right, Neville? You don't go slamming the brakes on like that over nothing. *Maybe* we hit something he says—ha! I thought you were supposed to know a thing or two about collisions.'

'It didn't feel like we hit anything,' he paused the counting to explain his response.

His wife scoffed again. 'You think you're going to feel a thing like that all the way back here? Use your brain, Neville. Actually, you know what? I'd like to see what the owner of the horses has got to say for himself when he sees the kind of trouble he's caused by letting one of his stupid animals get out onto the track like this. That's what I'd like to see. You don't just get away with a thing like that. Costs hundreds of

thousands just to get one train up and running on time. God, read the papers if you think I'm exaggerating. Probably got more money than sense, this guy. Anyone who owns that many horses has got to have more money than sense, if you ask me.'

On the low side of the train line the gaping national park stretched out to the Pacific Ocean. For the horses in the paddock and the people on the train, the sun had disappeared behind the back of the mountains, making the air cold and damp. Out over the ocean though, it was at such an angle as to be giving the water a bright, warm looking swell, like corduroy rubbed against its grain.

Before retiring and moving to the south coast, Neville had run his own panel-beating shop. It was in a small country town where there was never any shortage of kangaroo-damaged bonnets to be straightened out, smoothed in with pink epoxy filler, and repainted at a fee only slightly above cost. Occasionally a more serious accident would occur on the major highway that fed into the town from the east, and a crumpled car would be towed into his yard so that he could determine whether it was worth repairing at all. If somebody had been killed in the accident, then the car, regardless of its condition, would be towed or carried by flatbed truck to the enclosed storage yard at the back of Neville's shop. This yard was the property of the local council and was not to be accessed without direct permission from the police sergeant. Neville had been given a key for unlocking the yard's padlocked gate by the sergeant, and was often phoned up and asked if he wouldn't mind saving the sergeant a trip and going over to let some insurance assessment agent in or some sunglass-wearing relative of the person who'd been killed driving the vehicle. Just as often it was to chase out a group of schoolboys who'd been seen climbing the fence in order to get a look at the car somebody had been horrifically crushed to death in the night before.

Neville found that he too had a strange curiosity for those vehicles that'd facilitated a death. As with the boys, there was something that compelled him to stand peering in through the windscreen, wondering whether the congealed blood on the upholstery wasn't keeping the spirit of the person sealed in, or whether the angle of the steering wheel wasn't a sinister trap prepared by the ghost of the victim—something to catch him if he ever dared to open the door and sit down in the death seat. If he came upon a group of trespassing boys who'd done just that, as a way of better experiencing the car's haunting, he would lean in through the window and ask them if they knew the name of the person whose seat they were sitting in. He'd tell them the name then, saying it aloud, as seriously and morosely as he could manage. In truth, it frightened him as much as the boys to announce the name of the dead person while hovering over the very place they'd died. But then, like the boys, it excited him too. He'd walk away feeling too afraid to look back and the boys would follow after him very closely, not wanting to be locked behind in the yard with a ghost whose name they now knew.

Not too many years before he retired from panel-beating, closed the shop and brought his wife to live where she'd always wanted to live, Neville was called up on a Thursday afternoon and told that some kids, still in their school uniforms, had left their pushbikes at the gate and squeezed themselves underneath the fence—probably hoping to get a look at the car that'd done the Brown girl in. A year or so earlier, the fence along the front perimeter had been raised with two lines of barbed wire, and consequently there hadn't been the need for Neville to go down there and chase away trespassers in quite a long time. On this day though, the town was in a state of hypersensitivity and just the sound of the phone ringing in his workshop was enough to proclaim to Neville that the ghost of the dead Brown girl was being disturbed.

The Brown girl, whose family was as well known as all the other families in the small township—her father a horticulturist and her mother a registered nurse—had been struck by a four-wheel-drive vehicle while riding her horse along the roadside. Neville had learned all about it the day before during his lunch break. His wife had come down to the workshop specially. She'd explained to him the way the girl had been out early, riding her horse before school, when some out-of-towner had come up alongside her without being aware of the way a horse is prone to spooking from the rear. Listening to his wife talk about this business of spooking from the rear, Neville had found himself wondering why he'd never heard of it before. He'd asked his wife where she'd learned of it. But instead of answering him, she just went on to say that this out-of-towner was not an irresponsible teenager or impassive male either, but a mother herself. For Neville's wife this was obviously the most impossible part of the whole story. Much more impossible or unheard of than the spooking from behind stuff. And like most of the women running around town that morning, she'd been at a total loss to explain what this mother could possibly have been thinking, coming up alongside a young girl on a horse like that. That the woman was from out of town seemed to be the only thing giving the situation any sort of comprehensibility.

After hanging up the phone and taking the key from the hook attached to the wall of his office, Neville went outside into the bright, sunlit yard. The blue metal aggregate crunched beneath his boots as he walked toward the closed-in yard next door. He could not yet see the group of kids who'd broken in to get a look at the car which had killed their schoolfriend the morning before, but their bikes were lying against their handlebars and pedals at the gate.

Handling the heavy brass padlock, Neville had the uncomfortable image of cupping another, more formidable man's genitals. It was almost enough to make him

forget about the kids and go back to the race car (the folly of a local business owner and nothing remotely professional) he'd been beating back into shape before the sergeant had called. Peering in through the gate though and seeing the four or five boys and two girls crouched behind the beige-coloured four-wheel-drive that'd been brought in the morning before, Neville found himself unable to turn away.

It was grotesque to think that kids so young—thirteen, maybe fourteen—were being forced to face up to the responsibilities of death. Yet it was clear to Neville that this was exactly what was happening. They were not gathered there in morbid fascination, like the boys he'd chased out so many times before (the bikes left openly at the roadside gate were testament to their forthrightness), but instead had been drawn there by the responsibility of having known the girl before she died. Approaching, it occurred to Neville that the most frightening thing about death is the utter decency it evokes, the maturity and pragmatism it imposes upon those who, till such a time as they come into direct contact, are prone to treating it so sacredly and so fearfully.

'Hey,' Neville said to the group of kids squatted in the dirt. They squinted up at him. One of them had been drawing circles in the dirt with a stick. 'The police says you kids can't be in here.'

One of the two girls smiled. 'Do you know what her name was?' she asked.

'Brown,' Neville answered. 'She was the girl Brown. I know her parents well enough.'

It was then Neville noticed the big swipe of blood and hair that started at the front passenger-side blinker and went almost as far back as the rear passenger-side door handle. It looked like carpet burn against the skin-coloured duco.

Smiling up at him still, the girl shook her head. 'Maggie Girl,' she said. Neville didn't know what this meant. But he nodded anyway. The girl who was still smiling

could see he hadn't understood properly and she shook her head again. 'Her horse's name was Maggie Girl,' she explained. The words hit Neville very hard and very crudely then, like a man punching another man below the waist. 'And they had to put her down too. After she saw what happened to Melissa and everything. Look,' the girl said, putting her hand up on the smear. 'The car didn't even hit Melissa. It hit her horse, Maggie Girl. And now both of them are dead.'

The girl stopped smiling then and began crying.

Neville reached out and put his hand on the spot where Maggie Girl had come into first contact, the spot just behind the blinker. The streak was already hard and gristly, baked on by the hot sun.

After Neville had touched it, the kids all took their turn too, and then they left together, Neville padlocking the gate behind them.

Just as Neville's wife predicted, it was not long until the driver's voice came over the speakers to say something about why they'd stopped so suddenly and what was to happen next. He spoke with what sounded like a Scottish accent and didn't say anything about the horses, just that the train would not be moving for quite some time. He asked that everybody remain seated. And said that anybody who'd been injured should make their way to the front carriage. He said he was very sorry then and repeated the part about injured passengers making their way to the front car while everyone else remained seated. This second time he said it, Neville recognised the accent for what it really was: the intonation of somebody trying not to cry, a grown person trying not to cry.

Unbelievably it was not until later that night, after Neville and his wife had been bused home with all the other passengers, that they found out what'd happened. It hadn't been a horse that'd caused the driver to apply the train's emergency brakes with such vigour the track beneath them had physically buckled; it'd been two small girls. The pair had wandered down from their uncle's barn to play in the spillway that ran alongside the tracks. But for some reason they'd climbed up onto the tracks instead. Despite the driver's best efforts they'd been struck. One of them had been killed instantly. The other was lying in a hospital bed waiting to be put to sleep when Neville closed his eyes and began re-counting the racehorses whose names he hoped never to hear.

L'Inconnue de la Plage

We find the fish washed up on the beach, its skeleton an armoury of leather and cartilage-plate. I crouch over the top and stroke it along the spine like a sleeping cat. Georgina stands back and tells me not to touch it. 'It might be poisonous,' she says. The band on her right arm measures her heart rate and communicates the results to her wristwatch. The band on her left arm plays compressed music files, communicating the soundwaves to her ears. Her wristwatch beeps three times and she begins jogging on the spot.

'It looks dead,' she says.

'It looks otherworldly,' I reply, one-fingered and careful not to rub it against the grain in fear of waking it.

Georgina doesn't like the word *otherworldly*. For the same reason she doesn't like to see pictures of people wearing balaclavas. A nightly TV commercial shows a ham-fisted criminal trying to prise his way through reinforced window mesh with a screwdriver. When that trick doesn't work he takes to it with a steel bar. Still no luck. The mesh is too strong. The product too reliable. The jingle too catchy. She puts her fingers in her ears and hums loudly and can't look away. When the same man returns later in the evening to break in through our unmeshed bedroom window, she puts her arm around me and I tell her to forget about it and to go back to sleep, and she tells me she can't.

'What are you doing?' she says.

'Go back to sleep,' I tell her.

Her watch beeps again and she quickens her tempo. The shadow of a seagull cuts a line right between us. A photographer passes by carrying her shoes in her hand.

Today is Sunday. Sunday is the day Georgina and I jog on the beach. We jog from the clubhouse to the ocean baths and back, three times over. The distance is measured in time. One circuit equals fourteen minutes. After three circuits we drive home in our car and have sex on our bed. Sunday sex. We like the taste of salt on each other's skin as well as the appearance of our glistening, frictionless bodies in the wardrobe mirrors. It reminds us of sex we had in a very humid hotel room once. On that occasion we took turns filling a drinking glass and pouring water over each other. There was a large mirror on the backside of the door and we wrestled on the bed like clumsy assassins. The next morning we left the hotel and drinking glass behind and booked into a more-expensive motel with air-conditioning and minibar. The sex we have on weekdays is more cautious than the sex we have on Sundays and more like the sex we had in that second motel room, where there wasn't the need to refill glasses from a ceramic pedestal basin in order to keep each other cool and alive at the same time as trying to kill each other with overheated passion.

I say something.

Georgina takes the phones out of her ears and stops jogging and asks me to repeat myself.

I say it again. 'Look at its eyes. Must be a deep-sea.'

'Deep-sea fish don't have eyes,' she says. She's out of breath. But not facts. Sweat lines run from her knees down her shins and her damp socks have sunken into the tops of her shoes. She puts her hands at the back of her hips and her shoulders protrude forward like body armour. In my mind's eye I see the evolution of lungs.

'How does that make sense?' I ask her.

'I saw a thing. There's no light at the bottom of the ocean, so they don't need them.'

‘You’ve got an appendix,’ I say.

‘No tonsils though,’ she responds, in quip form.

Georgina’s inflamed tonsils were removed last December. The pethidine they gave her for pain relief made her throw up and for twenty minutes she lost all sense of smell. Another dose and it’s likely she would have lost her sense of smell permanently. This near-tragedy is something she likes to remind me of when I’m eating flavoured ice cream in front of her. Since the operation all ice cream tastes to her like vanilla and she can’t stand the creaminess of it.

‘You’re disgusting,’ she huffs, watching me inch my mouth closer.

‘I just want to see what its teeth are like.’ I blow carefully into the fish’s puttied-over mouth again. The caked-up sand falls away completely this time and leaves the carcass with a jagged overbite. All fossils have jagged overbites. The Tyrannosaurus rex was a petrified tree trunk until some archaeologist took his dust mask off and gave it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Look at it now; the museums quake.

‘You know, Georgina, a fish like this in the middle of a prehistoric desert would be flawless.’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ she says.

‘It means something is most beautiful when it does not belong or is unexpected.’ I tell her the story of the leopard found frozen high above Kilimanjaro’s hunting belt, and the one about the volcano that birthed an island in the middle of the Pacific ocean one June day. ‘Let me ask, how do you think this fish got here?’

Georgina shrugs. She would like for the answer to be light-hearted and simple. A fisherman named Skip left it behind. Some children carted it from the shoreline in their blue and red sand buckets. A smiling pelican wearing a sailor’s cap got the hiccups and dropped it right out of the sky, heavens forbid.

‘They die,’ I tell her. ‘First, hundreds of miles out to sea, and then they rise to the surface and the tide carries them in. Usually something eats them off the top before they get to land. A seagull or another fish or something. To make it this far is a rarity, Georgina, an evolution.’

She gasps. For breath. ‘Maybe it isn’t even a fish,’ she says. ‘It hasn’t got scales like a normal fish. It’s got skin like a cactus.’

‘We should bring it home with us,’ I say.

‘My heart rate’s dropping,’ she says.

I picture a return to gills.

We brought a woman home with us once, Georgina and I. A girl really. We let her eat ice cream naked and straight out of the bucket while we amused each other on the rug at her feet. Our only modesty was the bra Georgina refused to take off. It was pink and lacy. The girl found this curious and begged to see her without it. Afterwards, Georgina went to bed immediately and without saying anything. Ashamed, I guess. With herself and with what the girl and I had talked her into. The girl and I sat out on the balcony under the one blanket recalling all the funny street names and constellation signs we could think of. I told her the story of how the ghost of Cleopatra had appeared to me in a dream once. After telling her the ghost story, which Georgina already knew, we moved onto gods and goddesses beginning with the letter A. The next morning the girl was gone by the time Georgina and I awoke. The money we’d given her was laid out on the kitchen bench and she’d used the red-coloured biro from beside the phone to draw the queen’s death mask. In the corner of the note was her two-pronged asp, waiting to strike.

‘Well, we can’t leave it here like this,’ I argue.

‘Why not?’ Georgina asks.

‘Because it isn’t a fish to be poked at by children. Look at its eyes. It’s a black star, Georgina. A battle-ready bomb. We need to bring it with us. We’ll lacquer it and sit it on our coffee table. Make it into art. Imagine the conversations. We’ll put diamonds in its eyes and tell people it’s an original Damien Hirst. The poet’s glowing abortion.’

‘What happened to exercising?’

‘We’ll run circles around it every night. I promise.’

‘I’m not sleeping with that thing in the house.’

‘We’ll install security mesh on all the windows. You’ll be safe.’

Georgina arrived at my grandmother’s house the morning after my grandfather finally died of his prostate cancer. She had with her a bouquet of flowers and a cheesecake still in its baking tin. For fifteen minutes everyone forgot about the heavy garden statue that had also blown over during the night (an omen, surely) and sat on the grass to eat a slice of her cake with whipping cream poured over the top. My grandmother sang the flour song and my dad said, Georgina, did you make this cheesecake out of a recipe? and we all laughed at his dumb joke. Politely Georgina waited until the funeral reception to ask me why my sisters and parents and grandmother had laughed at her that day, and I told her that they were not laughing at her, but that it was a stupid joke my family had: Did you make this *out of* a recipe; the sentence is completely meaningless; Did you make this *from* a recipe. Georgina pretended not to feel stupid and went straight up to my father who was standing beside the hors d’oeuvres table and said to him, with a certain kind of reverent flippancy, Priests are such judicious beings in times of tragedy, don’t you think? So adept at finding the words to speak on behalf of you, themselves and God, and yet such harlequins the rest of the year round. My dad put his head on her shoulder and began

crying and my sisters and mum put their arms around each other and began crying also. Only my grandmother, who did not cry once throughout that day, asked me why my lovely girlfriend had not brought another one of her delicious baked cheesecakes with her. I wanted to run and kiss and marry her on the spot, my lovely girlfriend.

'It might be poisonous,' Georgina says.

'It's dead,' I assure her. With my hand and some spit I prove it the way someone checks to see whether a hotplate has lost its sting. 'See? See?' I say, quickly drawing my hand back after each strike.

'Wrap it in this first,' she says, untying the jumper from around her waist and passing it to me. I put the jumper over my hands and make a burrow beneath the fish, so as to lift it from its resting spot in one fell movement. Like a newborn prince. Or the healthy first son of a bloodthirsty dictator. Something disorderly, reprising and wonderful, something the world has not yet encountered.

'Careful,' she tells me again. 'Don't let it spike you through the material.'

Georgina, you cautious creature, I think, raising the fish from its resting spot, the yolks of its eyes morose as tortoise skin. Georgina's eyes might be tiny blackened mirrors now. The place where reflection turns on itself and becomes cannibal.

'What are you going to do with it?' each of her pupils asks me.

'Take it back to the womb,' I say.

'Careful,' they tell me a final time.

I take the fish and put it into the outgoing tide, where it won't be poked at by kids, nor sniffed at by dogs, nor scavenged at by land birds.

When I return, my shoes and Georgina's jumper are wet through. I give the jumper back to her and she ties it around her waist again and we begin jogging toward

the baths. Less than twelve strides later, the detached spine hiding in the jumper's neckfold pricks her above the hip and she stops.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Do you remember that dream you had?' she says to me. 'Was it really Cleopatra? Or were you just being cute?'

She sits down then and stops breathing.

The blood comes out of her nose first and then her mouth. It mixes in with her saliva. I begin waving. To somebody. No, to anybody. A group of kids potting for mullet beneath the break wall wave back. The blood makes me think of the time she bit me on the lip. My knee was between her denim thighs and the music was going '*...I know you're gonna have it your way or nothing at all, but I think you're moving too fast...*' We were young and couldn't move fast enough.

The kids leave their pots and ride over on their pushbikes to watch the lifeguard perform CPR. A lady walking her dog says to me, 'She'll be okay, love. You just have to have faith.' She links her arm through mine. 'Lady ate a cane toad once and we thought she wasn't going to make it,' she adds. I look down at the dog called Lady, a schnauzer-cross, and think, How did you make it through, Lady? What tricks do you know that we don't? Give it to me in pun form if you must. Just give it to me.

Our second kiss happened behind a large religious tapestry, which hung in the auditorium of our high school. Nobody bit anybody.

Out of respect, the photographer puts her camera away and shoes back on.

The ambulance comes right down onto the beach. 'Keep talking to her,' one of the paramedics says.

'I don't know what to say,' I tell him.

'Something positive,' he says.

I lean in close. ‘It’s terrible to say, Georgina, but Lady ate a cane toad once and managed to pull through. And if she can do it, then…’

The tyre treads fill up with sand and leave smooth fossils prints all the way back to the road.

At the hospital they start Georgina on an intravenous line, which stabilises her. They put a line on her other arm to measure her heart rate. A priest doing his rounds takes his funny hat off and tells me to remember the good times. ‘Make me laugh,’ I say to him. He puts his hat on and leaves the room then, and we are alone together.

I count twenty minutes out on the clock, then ring the emergency bell to remind the nurse of Georgina’s pethidine allergy. The nurse tells me the bell is for emergencies only. ‘If you really want to help, then you should keep talking to her,’ she says.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ I explain.

‘Something positive,’ she says.

I begin talking about the photographer we saw walking along with her shoes dangling by the heel from her index and middle fingers. ‘She seemed concerned,’ I say aloud. It occurs to me then that I should have asked the photographer to take a portrait before she put her shoes on and camera away, something reminiscent of *L’Inconnue de la Seine*.

Somewhere in the house, there’s a charcoal portrait of Georgina lying still like this. Can it be called a portrait if it lacks a head? I drew it without her knowing. The top sheet was pulled off to the side and her nightshirt was twisted. I showed her the next morning and she told me she wanted me to draw her every night without her ever knowing it. For a week I drew her every night without her knowing it. On the eighth night she woke midway through and asked me to turn the light off. I never attempted her head. The neck was damaging enough.

The machine attached to the intravenous line beeps, communicating something to the nurse. ‘I’m going to have to call a doctor,’ she says.

‘I was just being cute,’ I say.

Georgina doesn’t say anything.

A Near-Death Interruption

So I hanged myself. From the cherrywood bookcase in your study. Where you used a silk cravat and volumes one through to six of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, I used a length of rope and three-rung aluminium stepladder. It was not a sexualised thing, mine. That is to say, I was not waxing lyrical with my piece in my hand at the time and there was no pantyhose crotch pulled down to my nostrils or soiled undergarment stuffed into the foyer of my oesophagus. No, it was just a regular morbid suicide attempt, with all of my clothes on and none of anybody else's. Yours, you old romantic you, was slightly more playful.

Strange word this *hanged*, before I go any further. Strange both connotatively and syntactically. Connotatively, it insists completion of deed, success of task; it insists death, does it not? But why? I mean, that I persevered where you perished, does this somehow imply I did not hang? Of course I hanged (syntactically the word shows all the deference of a fourteen year old wielding a can of spray-paint). Believe you me I hanged. I felt the lead in my veins rushing to fill my toes, the mercury in my eyeballs swishing side to side like the water inside two precariously-placed fishbowls. Hey, not only did I hang, but I also swung (*swing*, now there is a teenager who knows how to conjugate respectfully). I swung and hanged as you must have swung and hanged, without rhythm and without breath. Like a starfish. Back and diagonal. Forthways and sideways. A real swinger and hanger, me. A real chip off the old echinodermic block.

After cutting me down—hanged though defiantly alive—they rushed me to A&E, where a white-haired doctor was impatient and cold-handed and an auburn-haired nurse played pretty and flirtatious. Not flirtatious with me so much, I was in no state to reciprocate her winks and pouts anyway, but with the ambulance driver who had

brought me in certainly. The two of them waited for the doctor to finish his examination, then together they lifted me off the ambulance gurney and onto another bed with wheels. 'He must have pissed himself after he passed out,' the debonair driver whispered intimately while she his silver-time-piece-chested lover took count of my pulse and wiggled her button nose. Oh, it was sweet being at the centre of their lovesick innuendos, and I must say, father, the smell of my soiled woollen trousers did not embarrass or cause me any special concern. Not after seeing what you did to the back seat of those fishnet stockings, you old dog.

After only a short period of lying around like this mother arrived at the hospital. You remember mother, right?

'You *tried* to *hang* yourself?!' Part question, part exclamation. As difficult to separate as the Catholicism and Spanishness. If forced I should guess the exclamation portion of it belonged mostly to *tried* and Spain, and the question portion mostly to Jesus and *hang*.

'Is that what they've told you?' I replied coolly. This, after all, was a public hospital in Taunton, father, and no place for me to be acting all sulky now, not in front of such noble creatures as this nurse and her driver, working on a pittance as I am sure they were. 'Well, okay, if that's what they've told you, then. Did they mention the bit about me pissing myself also?' I could see the hurt in mother's eyes and wanted to let the ink run. The magnificent blueness of it.

'Is this the kind of boy I have raised?' she responded quietly, putting her hands to her chest to fondle that cleavage-stricken Christ of hers as she is prone to doing in times of distress, like some clean-necked virgin fending off a house of vampires with nothing but her clever little talisman. 'The kind who would try such a thing as this? To hang himself? *Hang* himself!' With the second *hang* she turned away from me and

tugged down on the Christ with such force its silver chain could only sharpen the briefest line across the back of her neck before snapping clean in half. For a moment I thought she might have been weeping. Then she swung back to face me, still clutching in her tight little fist that miniature figure who would not have looked out of place between the letters *S* and *U*. 'Not to mention poor Marcella. Tell me you are not so selfish you would attempt such a thing.'

I was impervious. 'Must we go on about Marcella?' I yawned. 'The woman really should start knocking before entering a room. The sound of a knot tightening around a neck must ring in her ears like some kind of high-pitched dog whistle.'

Mother moved to slap me but stopped herself. 'You would mock your father like this?' she scolded beneath her breath. 'Talking about his accident like some funny joke. In front of any-old person.'

'Yes, father's accident.' I looked past mother and at the nurse, who in turn looked past me and at the driver. She may have even winked to him. Code, of course, for, How about a handjob in the janitor's, my love? The two of them left the room hurriedly then and it was just mother and me. Allowing the sarcasm to inflect my voice with its nasally undertones and offbeat emphases, I continued. 'That accidental morning in accidental August. What an accidental shame it was.'

This time mother's hand connected well with my cheek, the Christ getting his own piece of the retribution too. 'That you would even dream.' The jolt of the slap frightened me only half as much as it frightened her, I think. You must remember, father, this is the woman who used to eroticise me into syrupy slumbers by smearing her own areolas with honey, her little apple-berry and custard dumpling—just look at him suck himself to sleep! And now, thirty-seven years on, showing more concern for the fragile disposition of the cleaner than for her own lacteal kin. What heartbreak!

I touched the stung spot with the back of my hand. ‘Yes, poor Marcella and her poor sweet cleaner lady’s life. And poor father too. Poor you and poor me, while I am at it. And rest assured, mother, none of it is true.’ Lies, lies, lies. ‘They have confused me for one of the other boys on the ward. Hang myself? I was only trying to gratify myself sexually. I swear it. It is a Briton’s pastime. I will show you the rope burn on my penis if you do not believe me. A boy like me getting mixed up in a thing like suicide! Even when Laudie left me, even then I did not contemplate putting a noose around my neck for the purpose of killing myself. Not to mention death being the most thorough talent scout there is, mother. If I had shown potential for a thing like suicide, then believe you me, death would have sniffed me out at a very early age, set me up for life, scholarship and all. What, with our family name. No this is just a case of pushing the boundaries of perversion too far. The apple and the tree and all that proximity talk. Oh, please do apologise to Marcella for me. What a dreadful mix-up.’

Mother looked at me. Studied me. And then she huffed. And then she left the room. And smiling, I went to sleep.

An hour or so later I awakened to find in mother’s place a woman whose makeup promised to outlast her face, whose foundation alone seemed heavy enough to negatively preserve her features for at least another three hundred years, to a time when Western Europe’s frescos will be dissolved into camera-flash oblivion and the gothic clocks of Bavaria cried for like the felled trees of fictitious Amazonia. And in place of my woollen trousers, father, complementing the shift from mother’s moody toddler to psychiatrist’s prized patient quite well, I think, a sort of plastic-legged skirt with these built-in elastic-legged pantaloon thingies.

‘Your admission card says *Albert*,’ Tutankhamen’s lovechild insisted. I don’t remember for how long we had been arguing the point. Though I do recall that at one juncture she even went so far as to show me where the name had been filled in: *Albert Dean Childes*, silent *s* and all.

‘It is an error,’ I explained to her.

‘Not according to your mother, Albert.’

‘According to my mother my uncle is the rightful king of Denmark. Who are you going to believe?’

‘Do you think this kind of talk impresses me, Albert?’

‘Hamlet,’ I corrected her. She said nothing. I went on. ‘No, I do not suppose so. Would you be more impressed if I told you the real king of Denmark wore ladies’ stockings and used lipstick in place of Vaseline?’

She stood up and moved her chair slightly closer to me. Or perhaps she did not move it any closer at all, but rather just stood up and sat down again to give the impression of having moved closer. Either way, I found myself near enough to identify each swamped hair follicle now. Her eyelashes looked like they had endured the most recent Exxon disaster. Her upper lip was a Puerto Rican mudslide.

‘I know all about what happened to your father, Albert.’ She seemed to be whispering at me.

‘You like to remind people of their names, don’t you, doctor?’ I deepened my voice, doing my best to match her gravity.

‘Now, I never said I was a doctor, Albert. If you must know I hold an Honours degree from the University of Warwick and a Masters from Somerset.’

I frowned. Felt played. Found myself yearning for mother who wore her heart and diploma on her sleeve.

‘Albert, you are not expected to be unmoved by what happened to your father.’ She put her hand on the bed, next to my shoulder, to assure me some. She seemed to know you so well, father, know all of your moves. What if she had leaned forward next and rubbed her cleanly-shaven chin against my forehead, to kiss me good night? Would I have begun sucking my thumb and wet myself a third time?

‘Unmoved, why of course not,’ I said to her. And to some degree, meant it too. It was after all quite a shock to us, father, to learn of the promiscuous double life you had invented for yourself. When we found you, the tip of your penis was squeezed out through the top end of your fist like a tongue between two pursed lips, and the pearly sequins on the fronts of your stiletto heels shone up at us like droplets of you-know-what. And whatever shade of lipstick that was, smeared around the edges of that makeshift orifice, well, mother has refrained from restocking her supply—from wearing lipstick altogether in fact. The poor woman, since your death her lips have taken the semblance of a pair of mating slugs just doused in salt. You know what else, father? I cannot help but wonder whether the whole scene wasn’t staged for mother’s benefit in the first place, aimed at notifying her of some sexual underperformance on her part. That you went so far as to make a face of your fist. Nothing subtle about that. Tell me I am not on to something.

‘It must have been very distressing. Your mother tells me it was your aunt who discovered him.’

‘It is an affectation,’ I said to the Master of Psychology graduate with her hand upon the mattress beside my left shoulder. ‘Marcella is not really my aunt. Just a cleaner.’

‘She seems to care for you a great deal. She was here earlier while you were sleeping.’

‘Did she try to tip anything in my ear? That is how she did father, you know? She has been with us a very long time, but is completely untrustworthy.’

‘Your mother tells me you were homeschooled, Albert.’

I nodded. Silently. I did not dare speak in fear of divulging information on the chivalrous suicide vow I had made to an already-spoken-for Beatrice during our grade-three reading of *La Vita Nova*, father. Sure evidence of my long-term psychological state.

Continuing unprompted, ‘Your father was in charge of your education? Or your mother?’

‘My father taught me the humanities and sciences, and my mother the guidelines for a healthy soul. Neither was “in charge”. A person’s education is his own charge.’ I was churning it out now.

‘And your father was a professor too. At Somerset. I remember him from one of my own classes, would you believe?’

‘Some kind of professor, yes.’

‘A very clever man.’

‘With an ear for trouble.’

‘Hmm,’ she said. Then, ‘I would like permission to speak with your wife, Albert.’

‘My wife is deceased,’ I told my interrogator.

‘That’s not what your mother has told me.’

‘My mother was in charge of discipline, if that is what you mean by “in charge”. Though, she was a forgiving disciplinarian. If father sent me to her for corporal punishment, then she would close the door and beat on a cushion and I would moan in time with each stroke. She stopped smearing honey on her tits when I was two.’

‘We are talking about your wife now, Albert.’

‘Is it important?’

‘Very.’

‘Yes, poor Laudie,’ I said. ‘She drowned in a terrible house fire, you know. It makes me too sad to mention. Sorry I cannot be of more help. I have long suspected her brother of foul play. A chap with washboard abdominals.’

She gave me a stern smile. Her nose might have fallen to ruins along with a swag of other famous decayed noses, led of course by the Sphinx. (The answer is *man*! I thought to yell.) ‘Okay, Albert, I’ll visit you again later this evening. We must talk seriously before I can allow you to leave. It’s necessary for my report. You see me carrying my reports, don’t you?’

‘I see nothing I am not supposed to see.’

But that was not entirely true either, father. From my bed beside the window I could see the advertisement for the cheap carpet warehouse pasted on the back of the bus shelter down below. Some stand-in with a cartoonish face who had been paid to put on a pair of tights and pose himself in a manner befitting the tagline *To carpet or not to carpet? That is the question*. You will agree, father, it’s a disgrace the way they exploit the classics like that.

The Saddest, Proudest Thing I've Ever Seen

My cousin wants to be an artist, which is why he's studying art at TAFE. Really he doesn't want to be an artist any more than he wants to be a native American Indian, he just doesn't want to wind up killing himself like his brother did. His brother killed himself with a shotgun when he was only seventeen years old. My cousin was fourteen. It wasn't my cousin who found him but one of our uncles who'd gone to their house to get his cricket bat. At first he didn't know he was dead because of the way he was still sitting up. He even tried talking to him. He said, 'What are you doing, wuss?' When he saw it was the shotgun that was keeping him propped upright on the end of the bed he ran out of the house crying and screaming. My aunty who was waiting in the car thought he was joking. She started laughing. He fell down onto his knees on the lawn in front of my cousin's house, which was across from the high school. I was on the other side of town swimming in the neighbours' pool and heard the ambulance's siren. I went and stood at the fence.

It was the school holidays. The neighbours were away and we were looking after their pool and collecting their mail. It was an overcast day and my sisters and I were doing jumps off the diving board into the pool. It wasn't really hot enough to be swimming but the neighbours didn't go away all too often and when they did we took the opportunity and swam in their pool for hours everyday. Dad came down to the neighbours' and said, 'I've got something to tell you kids; Dean's just killed himself.' My eldest sister said, 'Dean Bedford?' who was a boy from her class. Dad nodded his head and my sister said, 'I mean, Dean Schiller,' who was our cousin. Dad kept nodding and somehow we all knew which Dean she'd meant in the first place. The worst part of it all though was the way dad said it. Dean's *just* killed himself. God it seemed bad.

After dad told us like that we kept swimming for a while. None of us said anything. At one point my sister looked at me and started laughing and I told her to shut up. It's funny that she laughed like that though because I was feeling the urge to laugh like that also. I don't think dad would've been too mad if I had—he wasn't mad with my sister—but I think it would've disappointed him because he probably felt like laughing himself and the laughter had to stop somewhere down the line.

At the time that dad was telling us what'd happened, my cousin who wants to be an artist was somewhere around town with his friend Jacko. Jacko was his friend who got booked by the police for riding his dirt bike on the footpath one time and who knew how to play 'Nothing Else Matters' and 'Enter Sandman' on the guitar. My three sisters and I walked home with dad through the back paddock and when we got home dad told my sisters to go and play in their room. They went and played with their Barbies while I sat on the lounge and dad moved around at the other end of the house washing coffee cups and straightening chairs.

Probably twenty minutes later my mum and my nan arrived at our house with my cousin and his friend Jacko. Both my cousin and Jacko were crying and my mum walked Jacko past me and into my bedroom, which was just off the lounge room. He was wearing a dental plate and I'd never seen anyone with a dental plate before, just a thin line of wire across the front of his teeth. His face was red from crying so much. My mum had her arm around him and his t-shirt had a hole in it. My mum didn't look at me and when I looked at Jacko I thought to smile but didn't in case he told me to shut up. My nan walked my cousin past the lounge room and down the hallway into the kitchen. He was crying too, but not as much as his friend Jacko.

When we were very young my sisters drew on the wall of my cousin's bedroom with texta. He shared a room with his brother who killed himself then. I was reading a

pamphlet about rugby league, which I'd found on the floor of their bedroom. My uncle and dad came in and saw what my sisters had done and both of them swore at me for being the eldest and not doing anything to stop them. Some months later my cousin who killed himself accused me of doing nothing but fucken-well watching. I knew my uncle had told him that this is how it'd happened: them drawing and me fucken-well watching. On the day he killed himself I watched again as my sisters played with their Barbies and wished there was some way I could count as a kid again and go in there and play with the Barbie who wore jodhpurs and knee-length riding boots and do so without getting sworn at by anyone.

My uncle Mick was the next one to arrive at the house after my mum and nan. Back then we all called him Mike. He came into the kitchen where we were sitting and went and stood behind my cousin. He put his arm over my cousin's shoulder and patted him on the chest with his open hand. My cousin was leaning forward with his right elbow on the table and his forehead in his hand. He had a black eye. He didn't turn around and look at my uncle Mick and my uncle Mick didn't say anything at first. My uncle Mick was a farmer and I never noticed until after that day that he always patted his sheepdogs in the same way, on the brisket with an open hand, and they were very loyal to him. Then my uncle Mick said, 'What happened to your eye?' and my cousin said, 'Dean did it.'

Before anyone else arrived at the house my mum brought my cousin's friend Jacko out into the hallway to use the phone to call his parents. The phone was on the wall beside a green dresser. Before my cousin killed himself there were never any flowers on the dresser, just empty vases for decoration. After the funeral my mum brought flowers home from the church with her and then there were always flowers on the dresser. My cousin's friend rang his parents and I stood beside him while my mum

stood in the kitchen doorway. I listened to him say, ‘It’s Dean, he’s shot himself.’ He began crying again then like he’d been crying when he arrived. He shook his head and answered, ‘No,’ and then he couldn’t say anything. He just put his head down and moved the phone to and from his ear trying to say, No, he’s dead. He said no three times and then said, ‘No, he’s dead.’ My mum took the phone from him after that and spoke to his mother. My mum was the strongest of everyone, even my nan, at that stage, and right throughout too.

That night things got real bad. All of the uncles and aunties from my mum’s side of the family arrived at the house. Only my aunty Margi and my uncle Pat, who was my cousins’ dad, were not there yet. My uncle Pat was away camping in the mountains near Tumbarumba and nobody could contact him to tell him what’d happened to his son. My aunty Margi was in Tumut with her own family and her husband had returned with their kids so that Margi could go into the mountains with someone who knew the area well and find my uncle Pat and bring him home. It was good that somebody would be bringing him home. I heard lots of people say how good and lucky it was that my aunty Margi was so nearby.

In some ways having everybody in our house like that made it seem more like Christmas than anything else. It was all the same people who celebrated Christmas together and there were even some moments of good cheer when my uncles made jokes or called one of us kids a wuss. Each time a new person arrived at the house, though, the cheer went out. My uncle Pat arrived very late with my aunty Margi and it was the worst thing to see them pull into the driveway, which had been left empty for them.

My uncle Pat seemed very defeated, more defeated than my cousin even. He seemed of no use to anyone and didn’t seem to have use for any of us. He was capable of talking about sensible things like contacting his ex-wife, my cousins’ mum, but

incapable of people and consolation. It wasn't that he was incapable of being soothed, and I didn't ever see him crying loudly or uncontrollably so that he needed soothing, but more that he was incapable of the concept of consolation. People said comforting things of course, but to him it was no different than the sound of people breathing. I could tell by the way he nodded and breathed in response. Consolation floated around the house like a lot of hot breath all night and I went from group to group listening to people converse in this manner. Some of the groups were laughing together and some of them were crying together. It worked like this, on rotation, inhaling and exhaling.

I sat in the kitchen for a while, which was where most of the people were. When the kitchen became too humid I went to walk out and I didn't know whether I wanted to go left down the hallway or right toward the front of the house. The front of the house was for reasonable cheer and the back for real grief. Coming from the back of the house I saw my pop walking along bawling like a kid who goes from adult to adult until they find the set of knees they identify as belonging to their mother and then latches on and uses them to wail against. He pushed past me and was already howling loudly. No one in my family had ever seen my pop cry before that.

At the front of the house my cousin was sitting with his and his brother's friends. They were saying things like, 'Imagine if Dean came back as an insect,' and were laughing and slapping their arms as if he was now a mosquito who just wouldn't leave them alone. One of them was a champion boxer for his age and he'd driven all the way from Sydney where he was training to become a future champion. I remember my cousin who killed himself being very proud of that friend, as if being friends with a champion made him champion of something also.

I went across the hall and into the en suite bathroom of my parents' bedroom to look at myself in the vanity mirror. I didn't have a black eye like my cousin did. He had

a black eye from where his brother had punched him. They'd had a fight the night before and my cousin's friend Jacko had told him to fuck off. He'd gone home, turned a Guns and Roses' album on very loud and called my cousin and his friend, saying nothing into the phone at first, just holding it against the speakers. They'd hung up on him and he'd called back to tell them he was going to kill himself and then come back and haunt them. They'd hung up again. He'd gone and got the shotgun out of my uncle Pat's wardrobe then and propped himself over the top of it with the butt-end against the carpet and the barrel-end hard against his forehead. He was only seventeen. He was not very good at football or boxing or any of the things we prized in my family. I heard somebody say that it probably sounded like a car backfiring.

While I was looking at myself in the mirror my aunty Margi came into the bathroom. It was the first time I'd been near her since she'd arrived with my uncle Pat. My uncle Pat and my aunty Margi are my godparents and when I looked at her I just started crying. Amidst all of the terrible crying it was the first time I'd cried. I felt as if the crying would make me seem like an adult, since all the kids, some of them only a year or two younger than me, had given up hope of finding their mothers' knees and were using the event like it was Christmas night, playing the same games we always played on Christmas night without fully understanding why it felt amiss to them this time. I cried and my aunty Margi cried too and hugged me and said, 'It's just not fair, is it.' After she let me go I looked up and saw they'd brought my uncle Pat and my cousin who wants to be an artist into my parents' bedroom. Both of them had tears in their eyes, but neither of them was crying. They looked strange together, like two brothers who'd had a fight and were now being made to reconcile against their will.

The next day the men in my family, including my dad, went to my cousin's house and cleaned the room where his brother had killed himself. They removed the

carpet and cleaned the walls and when they got home they all had wet, combed hair. I sat on the front veranda and my uncle Pat said the only thing he said directly to me all throughout the period. He said, 'It shows you how many friends you've got.' We were the only two on the veranda when he said it and I think he'd always thought of me in a funny way, right from back when I was very young. I never spoke to him then out of shyness, but I had a toy figurine who wore a yellow hardhat and blue overalls and was called Big Pat after him. I think it was my mum who gave Big Pat his name, out of compensation for my shyness. I said nothing, just smiled.

Not that many months after it all, my cousin came to live with us. He was fourteen still and was allowed to smoke cigarettes with my parents on the back veranda and shower for longer than what me and my sisters were allowed. It was good to have him living with us. He slept on the bottom bunk in my bedroom and at night we played basketball in my sisters' bedroom with a soft inflatable ball. I didn't ever feel like he was my brother but I hoped other people would think that this is how we thought of each other. I wanted to seem closer to him than anyone else.

At the time he went to the public high school and I went to the catholic primary school and most mornings we walked to school together. It must have been winter because I remember him wearing a grey striped t-shirt under his grey school shirts, which he wore with the sleeves rolled down. Before leaving for school each day we would each shoot the soft inflatable ball from the doorway of my sisters' bedroom. If it went in the hoop we thought it would be a lucky day for us and if it missed we thought it would be unlucky. At the school I went to we were made to wear yellow and blue ties and weren't allowed to have t-shirts visible through our blue shirts.

On one of the lucky mornings my cousin said that we should walk to his house first. No one was living at the house anymore because my uncle Pat was away with work and my cousin was staying with us. When we got to the house my cousin showed me a peace pipe he'd made out of bamboo, and a marijuana plant he was growing in one of the pots on the front porch. He put some pouch tobacco in the peace pipe and smoked. I watched him smoke and knew that he came here on a lot of days instead of going to school. Next he took me to the bedroom where his brother had killed himself. I was very afraid. Inside the bedroom he showed me a picture he'd painted in art class. He told me the teacher had instructed the class to paint self-portraits. He'd painted a picture of a native American Indian. In one hand the Indian was holding a tomahawk. He was a lifeless looking Indian except for his face, which was the saddest, proudest thing I have ever seen.

A Clean Heart

The seductive power of the stigmata first impressed itself on Galvin when he was aged nineteen. He was playing the role of Jesus in a community production of the Stations of the Cross. He was very serious about the role despite having been selected primarily on weight and not talent. That's not to say he was without talent altogether, but of all the actors in the troupe the boy playing Pontius Pilate was the most experienced and was generally considered the best, having landed the role of a Capulet cousin in some small Australianised production of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as the part of a magi in the local shopping centre's most recent nativity scene. In the end it was the scrawny-armedness of the two Marys, though, and their call to carry a rigor-mortis-stricken Christ from cross to papier-mâché temple which landed Galvin the lead role. Simply, a beardless pubescent saviour with a concave chest and gross weight of fifty-seven kilograms, fully loin-clothed, proved much easier to haul across the countless school stages planned into the group's itinerary than did the plumper figure of Julianne Capulet's first cousin turned Roman procurator.

To begin with Galvin was not out to seduce, only to prove himself a dedicated and deserving crucify-ee. In the baptistery wing of St Damien's Catholic Church where the players convened for rehearsal every second weeknight in the lead up to Easter, Galvin trotted about barefoot and insisted on being called by his stage name at all times. Such a methodical approach was revered by the other lightweight actors filling secondary positions and a number of them followed his lead. Simon-Peter went a step further than the rest even, calling Galvin 'teacher' and refusing to speak to him without blessing himself in the pattern of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit beforehand, while Mary-the-whore mistook the slight erection showing through Galvin's robe one

evening for something wholly divine and stopped washing his feet with her hair mid-scene in order to howl real tears and beg his forgiveness for a list of crimes committed throughout her assumed and troubled life. Galvin adjusted his robe and put on a show of flogging himself with one of the Roman guards' stage whips. 'Like this,' he demonstrated, berating his peers for their lack of conviction and himself for his awkward mortality. He went on swinging the piece of vinyl over both shoulders, leaving welts as low down as the backs of his knees, until the bulge beneath his robe had dissipated and showed no signs of resurfacing, and the group knew their part in the call-and-response chant by heart. Galvin was a charismatic and natural-born sufferer. Even Pontius Pilate, whose real name was Leigh O'Neil, found himself obliged to admit so. 'For the forgiveness of mankind,' Leigh and his peers echoed after their sneakerless commander-in-chief.

It was not until the completion of the group's final and most important recital however, the Good Friday matinee performed on the lawns of St Damien's Primary School, that the compelling power of the stigmata revealed itself to Galvin in full. After receiving a post-performance ovation from his peers for an unparalleled Lenten run, never once forgetting a line or missing a cue, Galvin lost his virginity to Mary-the-virgin in the maths classroom doubling as the actors' greenroom. Both of them dressed in full costume. Galvin in full persona even. For Galvin it was earth-shattering sex. He felt the walls of the temple crashing around him, the breath of life inflating inside him, orgasming he shouted, 'Eli! Eli!' then remained silent and meditatively lifeless for three whole minutes. As for Mary, who was a year older than Galvin, the act proved a dissatisfying incest. Even the wounds on Galvin's back, which had attracted her to him in the first place and which she fingered throughout the deed like they were the part of her own shy and curious anatomy she'd only recently become aware of, were not

enough to bring her to climax with him. Standing in the chalky post-coital glow of the classroom, knees shaking, lungs pulling for air, Galvin felt more like the son of God than ever before, while Mary-the-virgin, previously called Tabitha Louise Noonan, felt foolish and used and unfulfilled.

After his success with Tabitha-the-ex-virgin, Galvin went on a rampage, bedding more than half a dozen girls from his church community. Most of them good girls who did not believe in sex before marriage. Such was Galvin's overwhelming allure that they couldn't refuse. They'd witnessed him commanding the authority of the sun and moon and swaying about in his loin cloth, and to them he embodied the passion of the Christ the way other boys, the altar boys and choir boys whom they would not even French kiss, embodied hollowness and insincerity and fears of teenage pregnancy.

When Galvin grew tired of the girls from his church—it was a small community—he visited brothels in the city and paid real whores to perform their cleansing acts on him. He had them dress the scourge wounds on his back with expensive oils ordered over the internet—aloe, myrrh, bergamot—and arranged for them to play Arabian music through their bedroom speaker sets while fondling him with their glossy pink fingernails. If he struck a particularly religious whore, say a Spanish girl with a tattoo of the bleeding heart on her thigh, or an older Bolivian lady with a silver crucifix dangling from her neck who kept saying '*Mi hijo'* as Galvin flung himself around on top like he was being tortured for the entertainment of the masses, then he could often move her to wave the fee altogether, or at least reduce it to such a miserly sum it barely covered rent on the bedroom, by presenting the picture of Willem Dafoe which he carried folded in his wallet alongside the condoms and breath mints. This screenshot from *The Last Temptation of Christ* was proof of Galvin's link to the sacred heritage of the Christ.

As the months passed, Galvin invented new stigmata constantly and put them on show with such accuracy and assurance there was not a spectator who doubted the miracle. It was no longer an Easter-time special but a year-round routine, a lifestyle. With the aid of a Phillips-head screwdriver he impaled his hands and feet, paying meticulous attention to ensure the holes matched up evenly both front and back so as to give the impression of having been driven through with one devastating knock. Taking a fork he gouged a wound in his right side and waited for it to bleed water, and when it scabbed over he lifted the dead skin and rubbed the area with an anti-coagulant powder made entirely from ground rat-sack and aspirin. His pièce de résistance was the row of thumbtacks he crowned in a line the whole way around his skull. These lesions gave him such a hallowed air he would often bring his own mother to tears. If while watching him eat his breakfast she observed a trickle of blood run down the bridge of his nose and streak left or right onto his cheek and into the cereal bowl turning the milk a pink colour, then she would lay herself on the floor in front of him like a lame and undeserving sinner and not rise again until he had spoon-fed her from the very same consecrated bowl. Such was the level of her belief. Complementing his sombre afflictions with a kind of wistful artistic beauty, Galvin also grew his hair to shoulder length and kept it trimmed in the Nazarene fashion, while at the same time allowing the fluff on his chin and upper lip to sprout into a soft and mirthful-looking goatee. The complete picture was reminiscent of a Rubens Christ, or a mid-career Rembrandt perhaps: enchanting and human and completely undeniable.

To have labelled Galvin's behaviour exploitative or hedonistic or megalomaniacal would have been provincial and ignorant. Because there was an altruism imparted in each of his sexual interactions too, a courageous and charitable and often parabolic wisdom which he shared and sharpened on numerous Christian chat

sites under usernames like JCSTAR and MANCHRIST. These were sites where he would spend hours indulged in deep and meaningful conversations on the topics of spirituality, selfhood and *soulship* (a term he coined to mean 'the labouring of the spirit') while simultaneously gratifying himself over the webcam. Connected girls of all ages would post pictures of themselves to aid his endeavours and it was only the smutty out-of-place remarks he made in post-ejaculatory haziness that gave any credence to those criticisms of him being manipulative or underhanded: *i ccccccccccccc ovr u*, the bent-knuckled script might unexpectedly flash up on the viewer's computer screen, making her fear she'd just been infected with a nasty Trojan virus rather than the seed of the Lord. Occasionally Galvin's mother would pick up the downstairs phone midway through, prematurely and accidentally severing his dial-up internet connection before such an ending could take place. In such incidences Galvin would take equal satisfaction in recognising the genuine *deus ex machina* and would stamp his bloodied foot on the floorboards and question his mother's role in a number of other known religious histories. Tell me you've never been to Lourdes, he would accuse her with his penis still in his hand and the static interrupted visage of a girl called Bernadette frozen mid-blink on the monitor in front of him.

When he'd had his fun with the forum pages—banned from most of them by that other divine and godly hand, the site administrator—Galvin placed a personal ad in the classifieds section of a pornographic magazine. A direct and extraordinary invitation promising readers an intense journey into the spiritual and corporeal suffering of Christ in His last hours. Furthermore, a guarantee of at least thirty minutes of foreplay. He was almost twenty-one years of age now and had perfected the holy art of the striptease and amidst the other personal notices which avowed such pleasantries as 'a quick fuck no strings' and 'more V8 manpower than you can handle' Galvin's ad demonstrated a kind

of tenderness and irresistibility and writerly prowess. Lustful applicants filled his inbox overnight.

Of the dozens of responses it was Ebonysexy who made the deepest impact on Galvin's attuned sensibility. Rather than plying him with images of pierced sexual organs and hairless tattooed body parts, blown up to a point where they were no longer identifiable as masculine or feminine and where the surrounding skin pores took on the irresolute semblance of never-before-seen sea molluscs and alien landscapes, Ebonysexy charmed Galvin with her disjointed grammar and deep skin tones. *Lot of person you know say I look it just like Beyoncé! >>> Too sexy! >>> Check me out!* Oh, she was undeniably sexy, Galvin agreed, scrolling down through her folio of bottom-centric pictures. But even more than that she was also a pensive soul, a girl fronting the lens with the grace and sadness of a broken-winged swan, whose eyes alone were enough to numb his glands and poison his bloodstream, whose limbs and shiny hair swelled his heart and filled his veins with calamity and sugar, whose hidden sex charged his skin with electricity and histamines and drove him to write and dedicate ream upon ream of such delicious and insatiable poetry.

Of course Galvin thought he and Ebonysexy should meet. Impossible though! Ebonysexy's mother was too ill, the medical bills were too high, the distance was too far. Then he would go to her. *You make it trouble for you self*, Ebonysexy refused—selflessly so. Okay, then they would love each other in blindness and in times of impossibly-slow download speeds, in faith and in ISP despondency, until fate would allow them to be together in the flesh. Galvin told himself it was the compassion of the Lord, the final stigmata, which had entered his body and made him so full of magnanimity and understanding for Ebonysexy's difficult financial situation. And when Ebonysexy wrote in her next email that *maybe he send it dollar$ for her plane voyage*

for to visit it at him in Australie only, Galvin felt his heart leap and he forwarded his bank account details without hesitation. A month later the pornographic magazine ran a notice to all of its readers about the dangers of these Nigerian schemers: *phishers of men*, they called them in their notice.

The next decade of Galvin's life passed in waiting and without quandary. He kept at his racket and made love to tens of women each year. Often he would be asked to show up at a parish fundraiser night and say grace before dinner, or to stand in as the guest acolyte at some First Holy Communion service. Inevitably he would wind up in bed with the divorced quizmaster, a tight-bunned lady who answered telephones at the presbytery, or with the aunty and sponsor of one of the communion receivers, a bipolar woman who opted to have the host placed directly on her crazy and anachronistic tongue—which she later used for howling and licking his wounds—rather than dropped into her hand as per the current trend. For theatrics' sake Galvin would always make sure to spill a bit of blood, either by rubbing his heel up against the bedpost or by working his hand along the mattress until the old abrasion opened up and remembered its lines. The first sign of claret would revive in him a spirit of times past, of sheets soaked red in arterial baptism, of groupies emerging from the other side of triple orgasms (once he had discovered the female orgasm at the age of twenty-seven, Galvin settled for nothing less than two per session) looking as if they themselves had been fully conflagrated in the plasmatic fires of the Holy Spirit. Galvin would follow through with the entire routine then, which by the time he'd turned thirty-two involved speaking in tongues (a slightly more sophisticated version of the pig-Latin he'd practised as a child), rising himself up onto his hands and toes so as to give the impression of ascension, and letting his eyes roll back in his head as the life faded from his manhood

(a gesture which nullified any obligation to snuggle). All of this activity while waiting for the Church to make its mind over the authenticity of his miracle.

For Galvin sex was one thing, the prospect of becoming a bona fide beatified personage was another. His parish priest thought it would do the community wonders to have a celebrated messenger of Christ among them and he petitioned the archbishop who in turn petitioned the cardinal. The cardinal was more sceptical than his underlings and sent medical practitioners to examine Galvin's lesions. Psychologists made notes on his behavioural tendencies. In the end it was determined that Galvin's lesions were most certainly genuine (you could put your finger in the fork hole on his side right up to the first knuckle), though not necessarily miraculous. This was good enough for the cardinal, whose job it was to be slightly more faithful than sceptical, and he reported the case to his brothers in Rome, whose jobs it was to be homogeneously faithful. The Church decided to send the head of its investigatory team, a Monsignor Hennessy.

It was the week before Galvin's thirty-third birthday. He was feeling a little nervous about the visit and had gone down to the kitchen to prepare something to eat. Opening the fridge he saw there were eggs but no bread to put them on. He wondered who could eat eggs without toast and made a mental reminder to chastise his mother for her poor domesticity when he next saw her. It was his mother's duty to keep the fridge stocked just as it was her duty to launder the clothes and mow the lawn and go to work six nights a week. For his part Galvin was responsible for bestowing upon the household a celestial and reverent aura. In many ways this was a more demanding job than all of his mother's put together, which was something she all too often failed to see. Jesus died and rose from the dead when he was my age! Galvin would often scream before running off to his room to sulk over some minor disappointment she had caused him, such as

forgetting to record one of his TV shows while he was out in the garage doing his nightly bench press, or buying the wrong brand of hair conditioner.

Next to the eggs there were four remaining beers in the fridge also, and the one closest to the back looked frozen through, with foamy lacquer-coloured crystals formed at the top of its neck beneath its lid. The other three looked cold and good. Galvin had certain rules against drinking while getting himself into character, but he didn't think it would be compromising to drink a single beer when Hennessy wasn't expected for at least another two hours. He used a tea towel to twist the cap and tipped the first thirty or so millimetres into the sink to make room for the red cordial he liked to infuse into his beer. Aside from the sweetened taste, Galvin also liked the Blood-of-Christ sheen the cordial injected into the beer's natural amber colouring.

Taking the beer, Galvin went and sat on the couch. Outside it was raining again and he sat with the beer rested between cushions and his left foot propped up on his right leg, with the sole facing toward him. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. His mother had gone to work at two and wouldn't be home for another nine hours. The blinds were drawn and Galvin was naked except for a pair of satin boxer shorts that had pictures of chillies printed all over them and the words *HOT STUFF!* intermingled between peduncles and apexes in bright orange letters. Using his thumbnail Galvin began working open the wound on the bottom of his foot. When he was finished with the first foot he moved onto the second, and then the hands and side and finally the head. It was important he look his absolute best for Hennessy.

Next Galvin went up to his bedroom and dressed himself in the original tunic he'd worn all those years ago in front of the Saint Damien's crowd. He owned a wardrobe full of such garments, most of them sewn from old bed sheets by his mother, but it was the original linen article which roused Galvin's self-belief the most.

Showered, bleeding and dressed with an hour to spare, Galvin followed his bloody footprints back down into the kitchen and opened another beer for himself. The first one had made him feel a little light-headed and he was confusing this light-headedness with etherealness and floating back toward the couch with the beer in his hand he didn't doubt for a moment that Hennessy would be completely taken in with his charms.

At six o'clock there was a knock on the door and Galvin had drunk all of the beers from the fridge, including the frozen one which he'd defrosted in the microwave—in fact, heated to room temperature so that going down his throat it not only looked like the blood of life but soothed his tonsils with same warmth, and was feeling quite drunk.

'Come in,' he called, without getting up off the couch. One arm of his tunic had slidden down to the elbow so that he looked like a shambolic outcast from the School of Athens.

The door stayed closed, and after a minute there was another knock.

'Come in,' Galvin called again, this time flinging himself up off the couch by the leather headrest and turning back into the small foyer immediately to his rear. He stepped toward the door and pulled it open.

'Blessed are the punctual.' The little joke made him laugh and the man standing in the doorway smiled along also and stepped inside the house without being asked. He was a polite-looking man and was wearing a long black robe. 'And please be seated,' Galvin said to him.

The man didn't say anything, but sat himself on the leather couch, carefully straightening his robe and crossing his legs one over the other, right over left, then linking his hands together at the kneecap to make a triangle shape with the top half of his body. He was an average-sized man with rosy cheeks and short curly hair, which

formed a wispy-looking halo where it stuck out beneath his damp biretta. Apart from the white Reebok joggers, he was dressed as any Catholic priest might be dressed on a given weekday and his collar was not so tight that Galvin couldn't see his Adam's apple beating away like it were a miniature heart lodged inside his throat, the heart of a rabbit or a chicken.

'You have come a long way,' Galvin said to him.

'Rome,' the man said back. He was a pleasant-looking man, fifty or fifty-five years old perhaps, and spoke with a French accent.

'It is a beautiful city,' Galvin nodded approvingly.

Of course, Galvin had never been to Rome himself, but he'd heard people call it a beautiful city and thought that beautiful city could not hurt his chances of appealing to this pleasant-looking man who'd come all this way to meet with him and assess his candidature. The half a dozen who'd come before him had all seemed impressed with Galvin's ability to small talk. Beautiful this, beautiful that.

'It is a city of fleas,' the man said in return, and smiled. The smile indicated that he didn't mean to be contradictory for argument's sake, but that he quite literally thought of it as a city of fleas, just as Paris might be thought of as a city of rats and Venice a city of pigeons.

'Fleas,' Galvin smiled. 'Beautiful fleas, though.'

The man smiled.

Galvin hiccupped and smiled.

Galvin had moved beyond feeling ethereal and was now feeling a little ill. The alcohol had gone from the good front part of his head and had travelled backward into the unbalanced middle section. He tried the old trick of focussing strongly on one point in the room—a photograph of his mother standing beside him while he was lying in a

hospital bed—and he stared so intently that the man seated at the opposite end of the couch began to chuckle to himself.

'You know the Pope,' Galvin broke away from the photograph, trying his best to appear contemplative rather than intoxicated.

The man stopped laughing and nodded. He was a peaceful-looking man, handsome even, with very dark eyes and round, high cheeks.

Neither of them said anything for a period and then Galvin said, 'I can show you the marks?' And he began pulling his tunic across to reveal the abrasion on his side, certainly the most vicious of the set, the one he would normally save until last.

'No, thank you,' the man stopped him.

'You don't want to see it?'

The man shook his head and smiled politely. He was wearing a ring on one of his fingers—Galvin could not tell which with them clasped together like that—and a small wooden cross attached to a thin red cord around his neck.

'Which one would you like to see first?' Galvin asked him.

The man unclasped his hands and put his fingers up to his chest, to indicate the area of the heart.

'I have no marks on my chest,' Galvin said to him. He felt a little confused, and the conversation and smiling and overall pleasantness was making him feel very dizzy and very much like he was going to be sick. He felt his head tip forward and he quickly righted it again. 'My heart is clean,' he announced.

The man smiled and moved his hands back to their resting place on his knees and said nothing. He was a nice-looking man and was fond of smiling and Galvin thought that he would likely make the necessary recommendations to ensure the beatification went through.

‘I can show you my back, if you like?’ Galvin offered. ‘That’s where it started, you see. Whip marks, just like the ones they gave Jesus while he was carrying the cross to be crucified.’

Galvin slipped the top half of his tunic down over his shoulders and bowed forward so that the man could see the marks along his back. When Galvin lifted his head back up the man had dropped the top half of his own robe and the two of them were sitting bare-chested with their bodies facing toward one another.

Galvin looked at the man’s chest and felt himself beginning to cry. ‘You’re not Monsignor Hennessy, are you?’

The man shook his head and smiled. He had a kind smile and the hair on his chest looked soft and downy and his breasts were slightly drooped, like he’d spent his entire life with his shoulders sadly hunched forward.

‘Why did you come here?’ Galvin asked.

The man smiled. ‘I came from Rome to see you,’ he answered. ‘You are a special boy.’

‘What do you do in Rome?’

‘You know what I do in Rome,’ the man said.

‘You know the Pope.’

The man began laughing gently to himself and Galvin threw up over the floor rug.

When Galvin had stopped being sick he looked up and saw that the man had taken off his robe completely and was sitting naked on the couch except for his Reebok shoes and satin boxer shorts, which were identical to the boxer shorts Galvin was wearing beneath his own tunic.

Galvin put his hand up to his brow and there was a lot of blood coming from the thumbtack wounds now, and when he pulled his hand away the blood began streaming down his face and onto his chest and then it absorbed into his linen tunic which was gathered about his waist and turned clear.

'I have a pair just the same as those,' Galvin said to the man.

The man smiled and shifted his legs. His shorts were clean and dry and his Reeboks were very white and didn't have any mud or dirt on them despite the fact that it'd been raining outside when he arrived. He was a beautiful man and his chest was beautiful and his shoulders and breasts were sad.

'Your shoes are clean,' Galvin said.

'I have come all the way from Rome,' the man said.

'There are a lot of fleas in Rome,' Galvin responded.

Than man laughed a little and took his hands off his knees and uncrossed his legs and reached forward and touched Galvin where his heart was beating strongly.

'I love you,' Galvin said to him. And he said it like he'd had his knee tapped with a reflex hammer. He didn't say it, but rather he heard himself say it.

'I love *you*,' the man responded, soothing Galvin's heart with his soft old hands.

'I know who you are,' Galvin said. He could feel the hands moving all through his body and they made all of the wounds feel connected, like jellyfish stings or lovebites. 'The Pope is a beautiful flea,' Galvin said. And then he fell asleep in the man's arms.

The Supermarket Play

Ken was an oldish guy. Maybe he wasn't as old as he looked. The sun had made him look very old. He'd spent a good deal of his life working outdoors, painting houses and lacquering fence panels and earning money at the race track, and the sun had accompanied him throughout these years with a severe loyalty. It'd given him blotches on the backs of his hands and down his forearms and neck, and his face was mottled with atolls which looked light and tropical beneath the stark fluorescent bulbs of the supermarket aisles. It was in quasi-retirement that Ken had taken the job at the supermarket. He said there wasn't enough money in trackwork alone, and he'd been unable to climb a ladder for some time on account of his damned head spells. Ken didn't think there was anything remarkable about the way he said damned all the time, but I liked it very much and thought it made for a pleasant and decent character trait.

'Ken, I'm going to put you in one of my plays,' I said to him one night, while the two of us were standing together stacking tins of beetroot on the shelf.

'I don't want to be in no damned play,' Ken said back to me. It was a very Ken thing to say.

'But you're the lead role,' I tried reasoning. Ken said nothing (also very Ken). I went on. 'See, it's about this guy who paints houses his whole life and gets damned head spells from having been in the sun so damned much. He says damned a damned lot of the time and carries a pocketknife on his belt which looks like something a soldier might carry for slicing up rations of spam.'

Ken took his pocketknife out of its pouch and looked closely at its blade. He was the only nightfiller to carry a pocketknife like this. The rest of us used the disposable knives issued by management. They were galvanised three-piece jobs, with flimsy razor

cartridges for blades. We carried them in our shirt pockets, and if we leaned forward too steeply they fell out and broke apart on the floor and couldn't be put back together again without being bent out of shape in the process. Ken's looked old and indestructible.

'And who else is in this damned play then?' He stuck the knife end into the top of the box and cut it from ear to ear. Inside a can gurgled.

'No one else. It's strictly a one-person play. You're the lead role and the supporting ensemble, Ken. And it's quite political in parts.'

It would need to be quite political to do Ken any real justice. Damned play and damned disrespectful, ain't it? Come into this damned country. Ken was himself quite a political man.

Shaking his head then: 'I thought plays were meant to be hell full of romantic guys called Romeo and Shakespeare and the rest of it? Never heard of no damned political play about a guy called Ken working his arse off in the sun all his life. What's he do when he gets bored?'

'Okay. Well, he congratulates himself on having lived a good and honourable life. When he gets bored of that too he masturbates. Sometimes in public. Though this is quite a rarity. Nevertheless, Ken. You're okay with this, though?'

Ken shuffled awkwardly and hitched his pants. The masturbation thing worried him. I could see that it worried him. The name worried him also. Perhaps he was right to be worried about the name. I was a little worried myself. Ken may have qualified for a good and decent prose name, but who was to say it would make for a good and decent play name? The two were very different animals. You could get away with a lot more when you were writing prose. Especially when it came to names. A good prose name was like an illustration. It had only to look nice and perform the occasional action, whether it be dancing between paragraphs, or stumbling drunk from margin to margin,

and that would be enough to carry its reader throughout. Lolita was an exceptional example of what could be achieved with the right combination of phonemes and some professional typesetting. Lo-lee-ta: two ripened, plump legs parted beneath the bum cheeks and a rickety motel nightstand. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, Humbert-Humbert: out of breath but persisting on with its awkward back-and-forth rhythm. A good and decent play name, however, had nothing to do with action or syntax or the great Franco-American dream. A good play name was one that performed with dignity across all vocal registers. Stella, for instance. You couldn't take anything away from Stella. Shouted, whispered, deep-South or thick-Polack; Stella traversed them all with clarity and decorum. And if there was one trick to writing failsafe play names that I was aware of, it was to seek out the longest possible title which couldn't be broken into any shorter derivative of itself. Stella, good. Rosencrantz, better. Mephistopheles, bravo.

Ken piped up again then. 'Hell of a goddamned play that shows a guy talking to himself and playing with himself all day long. In front of everyone too, no doubt. Mothers and grandmothers and the lot. Goddamned no kind of play I've ever heard of. That what politics is come to in this country, goddamnit?'

God was the mother of Ken's fucker, the cunt of his faced, the jolly of his good. A lower-case god in any event. And a god he inflected with spite and without recourse to the religious tattoo on his left forearm. I say religious, it was a Ned Kelly in the image of Saint George, and more related to Ken's sense of nationalism than piety, I'm sure.

'If it makes you feel better,' I said, 'the masturbating thing is purely nostalgic. And mostly futile. It reminds him of his younger days. He's been to war, see. Watching other people die has made him very self-congratulatory. Have you read a great deal of Mailer, Ken?'

Ken shook his head without shaking it. Ken could agree and disagree like this without moving a single muscle. It was the way he breathed, the source of his breath. A belligerent breath came all the way from his gut.

'Mailer's middle name was Kingsley.'

Ken didn't respond, though he breathed easier and from the larynx.

'How do you feel about Kingsley, Ken? It's almost impossible to give Kingsley an undignified slant. Wouldn't you agree? The critics will read into it. Critics love names. Makes them feel politicised to talk about names in a creative and historical context. Kingsley—at the risk of King or Kingsy, that is.'

'Well, first of all, I ain't never been to no damned war and that ain't something you damned-well lie about neither,' Ken stated emphatically. 'And second—'

I'll stop you there, Ken. Always difficult for me to believe any old person who says they haven't ever been to war. Yes, but where did all those scars come from then? And why do you insist on saying things like, 'Come into this damned country…' and, 'Damned disrespectful…' and, 'If you can't be bothered learning to speak the language…'? Am I expected to believe you accumulated all these prejudices while swatting flies with paintbrushes and spoilt racing guides? While listening to silly girls laugh and drink champagne and say things like, 'Ooh, you missed a spot!' and, 'Oh, what a funny name this one has!' and, 'What's a gelding, now, darling?' Surely you must have passed at least one semester of your youth being drilled over the precision of your bootlace knots and the gradient of your morning hard-on? With a surname like Marsh too, for Christ's sake. What better name for shouting and bearing down upon than Marsh? It struck me then that maybe the play needed a second character after all. A drill sergeant. Someone to shout 'Marsh!' whenever the audience looked tired or ready to leave. Certainly something very comical about the military and their drill sergeants.

‘War is a liberty like any other,’ I began explaining to Ken, who was looking puzzled and upset by this stage. At his feet a pool of blood had begun spreading slowly and outwards across the linoleum floor, the pierced beetroot heart in the box’s chest pumping with supermarket fever and fear of its impending vacuous death. ‘Very similar to sex in fact. Sex being the biggest of them all. Are you sure you haven’t read any Mailer? How about Miller? Miller often uses liberties to make things seem truer. Although, I must admit, it’s difficult to make sex seem true on the stage no matter what liberties you take. I think your character will need to use a lot of heavy language if he’s to have any success with sex. Don’t look so bothered, Ken. There are other tricks that can be used. And I’ll see to it that the actor in charge of playing you knows his stuff. I’m afraid, however, that the war bit is an absolute must. No questions. Maybe even an injury—just to remind the audience. Could your character affect a limp for the sake of believability and bravery, do you think? It’s very important that your character seem political and brave, and I think a limp is the best way of demonstrating both these traits. In the end, it’s the details that make the thing seem true and believable.’

Ken didn’t seem to understand too much of what I was talking about, with all the technical play stuff and so forth. Admittedly there were some long-winded ideas in there which would need simplifying if this thing was to work in front of an audience. A prose writer might get away with such sloppiness, such contrivances, but a playwright would be found out quick-smart. It was all to do with the collective mind of the audience. The collective mind was sharp and impatient. The collective mind would disappear for refreshments and never come back. The collective mind had no reservations in leaving their seats empty and the actors looking beyond the stage lights for encouragement from the house cleaners.

‘Leave it with me, Ken. I’ll make you seem entirely believable and heroic at once,’ I said.

‘Goddamned no goddamned hero here, boy. Forget it.’ The false modesty was entirely Ken-like. While the pool of blood at his feet smelled sweet as pineapple juice.

A week later I’d finished a draft for the play. It was called *The Supermarket*. It wasn’t a heroic play by definition, though there were some heroic parts in the middle when the main character took his pocketknife out and talked directly to the audience about how he’d been forced to kill a bare-chested Korean during the war. As he talked he used his knife to wipe sweat from his neck and this made him seem vulnerable and doubly heroic. The main character often addressed the audience directly and when he wasn’t addressing the audience directly he was addressing the Kelly tattooed on his forearm directly. It was a post-Nolan Kelly and unlike Ken’s lithe, romantic, horse-bound Kelly, this one rode shotgun in an army tank which was drawn onto his skin as squarely as the well known head armour. The Kelly was a symbol of the character’s sense of duty and religion, and when he chastised it, he chastised himself.

‘How do you get all this stuff about the tattoo just from listening to him talk? Is his forearm so big that people at the back of the theatre will understand and laugh along?’

I’d taken the idea for the play to a group workshop. I wanted to hear the other actors and playwrights say it wouldn’t work. Which was largely the point of the workshop. It was a very successful workshop in this way.

‘The tattoo is projected onto a screen,’ I explained to them. I’d thought through the technical components in advance. It would be projected onto a screen the size of a beach towel. The audience would be able to see the hair follicles rising up out of the

character's skin. His pores would glow with perspiration and ink, each one like a sweaty little porcelain eggcup.

'Popeye,' another of them jested. Everyone laughed accordingly and I felt pleased to be involved with such a successful bunch.

Several minor forearm jokes and some pleasant conjecturing later, it was decided that *The Supermarket* would be a suitable addition to the group's rehearsal schedule and, pending its ongoing appeal, the group's performance schedule later in the year. It was a small enough play that it could easily be performed between sets with the curtain closed, employing just the front, open area of the stage, and this counted in its favour. Some concerns came to mind regarding the lead character's dislike for tight and confined places—a deal of which was a direct result of the months of his life spent locked inside a POW cell (being made to breathe the ammonia from his own urine was like holding his head over an opened tin of paint)—but I was eager for the play to go ahead and didn't wish to hamper its chances in any way by demanding extravagant props or greater floor space or any other unnecessary privilege that wasn't mine to begin with. The only suggestion I dared to make sprung from my belief that whoever was to play the part of Kingsley should first of all spend some nights observing the real-life Ken at work in the supermarket, to get a feel for his persona. The actors didn't like this idea one bit. 'Scorsese, take a chill pill,' they scoffed at me, while the other playwrights rolled their eyes at one another and smirked condescendingly. Nobody in that workshop group thought very much for field research and all of them were much older and more experienced than me.

After trialling the play with the group at the writers' centre, I took it to the supermarket for Ken to read during his tea break. It'd been reduced to a one-act play as a result of some intense workshopping and much of what went on in the act wasn't

written directly on the page but implied through discrepancies in the character's vision of himself. The workshoppers were big on this kind of drama: character-discrepancy drama, they called it. Ken read the lines without reading through them and slurped lukewarm coffee and when he'd finished he handed me the copy of the play and remarked that he wasn't happy with the setting.

'Don't like where it happens,' he said.

'It happens here, in the supermarket,' I said to him.

'I know,' he said back to me. 'I don't like it.'

'But it's based on you,' I reasoned. 'It's called *The Supermarket*.'

'It's me, all right,' Ken agreed. He seemed almost pleased with himself at recognising and confirming this fact.

'And you work in a supermarket. I even changed the character of the drill sergeant to a department manager.'

'Eddie,' Ken said.

'Eddie, yes. That's Eddie calling you a lousy sack of shit and firing you.'

'That's Eddie making me cry in front of the juice aisle?'

'Yes, Ken. Eddie Debbman. See how I changed the letters around so that I wasn't using his real name? It's a play on his real name. Eddie Debbman: Danny Beadman.'

'I don't like the robots either,' Ken said.

'The robots are not real, Ken. They're a metaphor for youth, for foreign invasion, for technological consumption of the species, for hand-to-hand jungle warfare. It's frightening. Just like Eddie firing you and giving your job over to a Japanese robot is frightening and at the same instant metaphoric for the way the supermarket treats its aged employees, for the way the government treats its war veterans. All of it's

connected.' I waited for Ken to say something about his dislike of faux war veterans and Japanese robots in general, but he let this go for the time being. 'Do you see?' I implored him.

Ken looked at me. He was a man whose eyebrows gave the appearance of a frown even when he wasn't frowning. 'And I didn't go much on all the talking. There was too much talking,' he said. 'All talking, really.'

'Ken, it's a play. If it was a story I could do away with a large part of the talking, I could just *say* things outright. But in a play that's all you have, the dialogue. The dialogue and the setting. It's very difficult. You can see how difficult it is. Look at the way I have you talking to your arm. Which is a sort of a metaphor too, Ken. Do you think the audience is going to be able to see what's going on here? Imagine, I'm going to project the tattoo onto a screen the size of a beach towel and whenever you start talking I'm going to light up the screen and it'll be a metaphor for God and for the character's sense of self. It's quite a religious and political play, Ken, and quite risk-taking. I told you it would be quite political and religious. Were you wondering how I was going to broadcast the character's tattoo right across the audience, so that even the people in the back would see and be able to laugh along? Or did you think the character would need forearms the size of Popeye's?'

Ken didn't laugh at the Popeye joke. I considered that I'd been fooled by the workshopping group. Fickle, I thought. Fickle was a word I often pronounced in my head. Out loud I preferred the direct expletive. I imagined it was the opposite for Ken: 'goddamned fool' out loud, 'daddy-cunt-face' in his head.

'And it's all double-meanings and that?' Ken asked. 'The robots and the setting and all of it?'

At last, you've turned the page, Ken: *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *mise-en-abyme*! Yes, this is you smack bang in the middle of the play discussing your wariness of appearing smack bang in the middle of plays, functioning yourself as a metonymy of yourself, as an infinite regression of yourself. Now you see! Clever, clever, clever. Do you not think? *You*, *Ken*: the ultimate metaphor of instruction and deliverance and futile masturbation. How about it? What do you say? Pat on the back, eh?

'It's better than I thought it would be,' Ken conceded. It was a noble and difficult thing for him to say and he said it nobly and concedingly.

'Ken, you must agree to play yourself,' I said at that moment. I'd only just decided and it seemed right.

'I ain't no damned play actor,' Ken scoffed.

'What acting? You would be playing yourself, Ken.'

'Too old. Besides, I ain't got the time to be worrying about any of that business. Got to keep me greyhounds fed and looked after.'

'But, Ken—'

I thought to tell Ken the story of the ANZAC, something to rouse his self-belief. Not the story every Australian is familiar with, the one so often expounded through the medium of Television Miniseries (to date the most provocative means of communicating both the pragmatic horrors of war and the tenderness of masculine camaraderie at once), but rather my own personal account of the ANZAC: how eager to demonstrate my inborn and indebted respect, I'd leaned from the window of a first-floor apartment one 25 April cheering and clapping the houndstooth procession past Heiner's Hair Salon and toward the town hall clock, when one of the processors, an old chap sporting every medal known to Caucasian man save the Western movie star's shiny Sherriff badge, stopped the march dead in its tracks and pointed up at me and told me to

stop acting like such a goddamned hard-on (*goddamned*, Ken—I swear I'm not making any of this up!) and to show some goddamned reverence for the poor sons of bitches who hadn't come back. And when his pals began patting him on the back and telling him good job, Smithy, well, I may as well have been the hard-on who'd just leaned out his first-floor window to spit on the crippled widow of one of those poor sons of bitches, right in the wheelchair, the old grey-tooth!

But instead of telling the ANZAC story, I said, 'Will you at least come to the play's premiere, Ken? To call "goddamned bravo" from the first row? For authenticity's sake? To show those other playwrights and actors how they got it all wrong.'

Ken

(walking out of the break room with a war-sustained limp)

Not my scene, boy.

Me

(wiping a single tear from my cheek)

God bless you, Kingsy.

(Curtain)

Heart Trick

My mum wants my sister to think this is the most serious thing she's ever been involved with. My sister is only eight years old and it probably is the most serious thing she's ever been involved with. I'm fourteen and have been involved with tonnes of serious things. My mum reaches forward with both her hands and takes hold of my sister's arms above the elbows. My sister is standing in front of my mum and my mum is sitting on one of the dining chairs at the table. My mum lets her hands slide all the way down until they are holding onto my sister's hands. I'm sitting at the kitchen bench where we normally eat breakfast. Mum cups my sister's hands together then and brings them toward her chest like they were covered in feathers and filled with tiny organs and worm guts and whatever else fragile baby birds just fallen out of their nests are filled with. Right between her boobs she rescues them.

'Now, Neddi,' she says. She pauses because she wants my sister to see that this isn't just serious like now-Neddi-was-it-you-who-tried-on-my-brooch-and-left-it-lying-on-the-floor serious, but serious like now-Rachel-was-it-you-who-went-and-took-the-keys-to-the-Gemini-while-I-was-at-work serious. I know all mum's tricks. This is called the heart trick. Put your hands on my heart and tell me the truth, she says. You may be able to lie to my face but my heart will know if you're being honest. Can you feel it beating faster? It knows, it knows. With my sister though, she dips her chin so that she's looking out from the very top of her eye sockets, and goes on much more gently. 'Because I need you to be as honest with me as you possibly can. Do you understand, now, Neddi?' Somehow finding a way for her pupils to remain afloat while her chin keeps slipping lower and lower into her fat neck.

Neddi nods. *Neddi*—I haven't called my sister Neddi since she was four years old. Neither has mum. Father David is the only one who still calls her Neddi. Goddamned Father David. I called Father David a goddamned fart eater one night while I was saying my prayers beside my bed. This was back when I used to say my prayers, and when I shared a room with Nadine still. 'I wish dad would come back and that goddamned fart eater would just fuck the fuck off,' I said. 'I'm going to tell,' Nadine said to me in the dark. 'Amen,' I said back, and went to sleep happy. The next morning Nadine dobbed to mum who made me apologise to the "golden fart eater's" face. I guess priests get people apologising to them all the time for stuff they haven't got any idea about, and from people who don't really mean it. Anyway, he smiled and liked it a lot, you could tell.

Seeing her own hands on mum's chest like this now must remind Nadine of all the times she's seen my dishonest paws there because she spins her head around and looks right at me for instructions or support or something.

'Now, Neddi,' mum takes hold of her by the chin and turns her face back in line with the rest of her body. 'You must look at me when I ask you this. And only at me. If you look at your sister for answers, then my heart will know that you aren't being entirely honest. I want you to tell me in your own words. No one else's, okay?'

'Whose words is she going to tell you in?' I say.

'Rachel. Please.' Even when mum is getting me in trouble she keeps hold of Nadine's chin and doesn't look away from her eyes. This part of the trick is the staring guilt part.

I remember the morning after I took her Gemini, mum sat down at the table and asked me to tell her where I'd spent the night. To begin with I told her at Lucy's. 'Lucy's,' she repeated back to me in this sad voice. And then she looked right at me

without blinking and didn't say anything until it got that weird that I just had to tell her the truth, that I hadn't spent the night anywhere in particular, just driving all over Canberra in her Gemini. She cried then. And for nothing too, because I found out later that Lucy's mum had already told her I wasn't over at their place like I said I was, so she knew I was lying from the start and didn't need to waste what is probably her best trick, the crying one. I don't think she'll need to use the crying trick on Nadine. Nadine's ready to crack already. Mum picks up from where I interrupted her.

'Now, Neddi,' she says, 'I need you to tell me what happened at Father David's yesterday, while I was at work.'

Nadine thinks about the question carefully, as if she can feel mum's heart getting quicker already, on its way to exploding and killing all three of us. It's like one of those TV shows where the cop doesn't know which wire to cut, so he just sits there sweating out of the temples and watching the clock tick down until it gets to zero. It never gets to zero, but in one movie I saw it did get to zero and then the screen just went white and that was the end of the movie. I think the same thing would probably happen if you left mum too long without answering her; her temples would sweat and then her eyes would go totally white. I'd prefer if it killed me outright in one big blast. At least you'd know how it ends.

'We went swimming in the pool,' Nadine says.

Mum nods for her to go on. This much she knows already. 'Yes, when you went swimming in the pool, Neddi.'

Nadine's mouth opens right up then like she's just remembered the bit mum's looking for. 'And we went swimming in the pool and when Father David dived under the water all his hair fell out!' She can barely get to the end before she starts laughing.

'Fell *off*,' I correct her.

Mum gives me some kind of a bad look with just her forehead and eyebrows.

'Well, it's true,' I say. 'And what difference does it make if I say *off* instead of *out*? It's still in Nadine's own words. Your *heart* knows what she means.'

'Because,' mum says, 'it's very important that Neddi remembers and tells me in her own way what happened, without any interruptions or help. If she says all of Father David's hair fell out when he dived under the water, then that is just how we have to believe her. My heart *does* know what she is trying to say, yes. And if she means it truly then my heart will be happy enough that she has tried her best to be honest. And that's all I can ask.'

'Fine, it fell out just like she said. And it didn't float across the surface and into the filter either, like you'd think, but stayed together in one big clump and sank to the bottom of the pool. What a miracle it was. Tell her what a miracle it was, Nadine. And was that before or after he upped and walked across the top of the water too?'

Nadine and mum both ignore me. They're being serious again. Christ, I think, even an eight year old should know the difference between real hair and fake hair. Father David's rug isn't even a very good one. The colour's okay but the curls at the back don't match up at all. Probably because he combs them in place before putting it on his head and then forgets to comb the real bits down the bottom afterwards. I've seen him in front of the mirror with it on his hand, held out in front of him like a sock puppet or something. I came up behind him while he was sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of tea with mum once and pulled on it. He was helping mum to get through it with dad then and was wearing his rug and all of his official priest clothes. I never see him in his priest clothes anymore. After I yanked on it he turned around and slapped me on the hand and mum didn't say anything.

I'd rather have him slapping me on the hand like that then tickling me under the arms though, which is what he tries nowadays, especially with Nadine. He gets her in the armchair while she's watching cartoons, from around the back too. If I'm on the armchair, he sits in front of me on the coffee table blocking my view on purpose so that I'll get cranky and pull one of his curls again and he'll be able to slap me on the hand and then tickle me under the arms to make up for it.

Tickling is the worst. I must admit, though, that dad was a worse tickler than Father David. Dad wouldn't even let you get a breath in. Nadine is too little to remember, but if you begged him to stop then he just used to say, 'Sorry, what? I can't hear you properly. Keep going, you say? Okay then.' But dad lives in Perth now, which is why Father David is around here all the time. If Father David wasn't a priest he'd probably have married mum already and then he'd be me and Nadine's stepdad, and we'd have to let him tickle us whenever he wanted. I could easily swipe the keys to mum's Gemini and drive over to Perth if that ever happened. That's if the Gemini would make it. Which it probably wouldn't. But who cares? I'd rather live in a broken down Gemini out in the desert than having Father David as my dad. He already practically lives at our house, and whenever he stays the night me and Nadine have to share a room again.

'Yes,' mum says. 'And when Father David's hair went to the bottom, what happened then, Neddi?'

Nadine thinks some more. 'He made Rachel swim down and get it,' she answers. And seems happy with her ability to remember so well.

'Very good, Neddi. My heart knows you're being very honest now. Can you feel it beating away calmly? That's because it always knows the truth. Now, do you

remember what happened next, when Father David asked your sister to swim down and fetch his hair from the bottom of the pool? What happened then? It's very important.'

Nadine thinks about it and then shakes her head to show that she doesn't remember. It's not that she doesn't remember, it's that this time she isn't so sure she knows the answer mum wants. The part about his rug falling off was easy, but not this bit. 'I don't remember,' she eventually says.

'That's okay,' mum tells her. 'Just hold your hands together over my heart and let your head think it over for a minute. Do you remember whereabouts you were when your sister swam to the bottom to get Father David's hair piece? Maybe that will help you remember.'

Nadine shakes her head some more and looks like she might cry. She always looks like she might cry. Either that or like she might laugh. It's not as if she ever has to deal with anything serious either. I've had the cops ring the house because someone told them that they saw me taking alcohol into the movie cinemas at the mall. That's serious. You can get taken away and put in a foster home if the cops have to ring your house and talk to your parents more than five times. That's what happened to my friend Melanie's cousin, she spray painted a bus sign and had to move to the other side of Canberra and into a house with six teenagers.

'Were you sitting over by the slippery dip?' mum asks her. Mum only knows to ask her this because it's what I told her already. Nadine was on the slippery dip and me and Father David were in the pool at the deep end. I don't know what kind of a priest gets to own a swimming pool with a slippery dip anyway. Not just an ordinary straight slippery dip either, but one with bends in it so that you go up and down while you are sliding, and then a jump at the bottom. Half of the money the priests get paid is supposed to go to poor people who can't afford Christmas presents for their kids.

‘Now I remember. I was sitting on the bottom of the slippery dip,’ Nadine goes along with the story. She’s that scared of water she doesn’t even get her head wet when she goes off the end, but holds it up stiff and grabs hold of the person waiting to catch her straight away. Unlike me, I’m not afraid of water at all. Even before I started school I knew how to swim underwater with my eyes open. My dad used to take me swimming at the town swimming pool where there’s three massive diving boards. When my mum and dad were still married, dad didn’t work because of his moods and he used to take me there basically everyday. Nadine wasn’t even born back then.

Actually, around the time when Nadine was born is pretty much when dad and mum first spilt up. They split up in a less serious way to start off with, with dad having his bedroom out in the garage and mum still having the main bedroom in the house. I wasn’t allowed to sleep out in the garage, but I could go out there in the day, and dad had photos of his two other kids on the wall. Dad’s two other kids live in Brisbane which is where he lived before he moved to Canberra and met mum. So I know all about stepfamilies, and I wouldn’t want a stepfamily with Father David if you paid me.

‘You were on the slippery dip when your sister swam under. Good. Good,’ mum congratulates Nadine. ‘My heart knows what you’re telling me is good and true now, Neddi. And from where you were sitting on the slippery dip, could you see your sister swim under and get Father David’s hair piece for him?’

‘It was all the way at the bottom,’ Nadine laughs. ‘It fell out when he dived under and then it went all the way to the bottom. Like a turtle.’

‘Like a turtle,’ mum repeats.

‘No, not really like a turtle,’ Nadine changes her mind. ‘Turtles have got a shell and are really old. As old as trees, some of them.’ This is a fact from Nadine’s ocean

book. Mum waits for Nadine to tell her about the patterns on their shells too. But Nadine doesn't say anything else about the turtles and mum starts up again.

'Did you see Father David swim down to the bottom too? Or did he stay on the top and wait with you?'

'You were at work,' Nadine says. These suspicious questions are confusing her.

Work. Mum's job is looking after old people, which is why she takes us around to Father David's to get babysat. Just at the beginning of the year she used to take Nadine around there and let me stay at home by myself. But then, after I took the keys to the Gemini, she started making me go round there too. It'd be okay going around there if Father David wasn't there as well. Because not only does he have a pool, but he's also got a home cinema with fold-back chairs and full-on speakers and everything. If you ask me, the best sorts of movies are horrors, but because Nadine's always there, we have to watch kids' movies. Father David has tonnes of movies and pretty much every day we get there he's got a new one for us to watch. Nadine always wants to watch *The Little Mermaid*, which is probably the one I hate most. When we go out in the pool in the afternoon, Father David calls her Arial and she loves it.

Now, though, she is thinking very carefully.

'Do you remember, Neddi?'

'Um, went under?' "Neddi" asks.

'Did he? Or did he stay on top and talk to you while your sister swam under.'

'I think he stayed on top,' she changes her mind.

'Oh, that's total bull,' I argue. 'She's only agreeing with whatever you say, mum.'

Maybe Nadine wants to agree with me instead but doesn't want to upset mum. Mum's easy to upset. She gets upset by everything since her and dad split up, which is

why she became friends with Father David in the first place. I wouldn't make friends with a priest just because I split up with someone. Especially not a fart eater like Father David, who doesn't let you swim for a whole hour after lunch. He doesn't even let you put your feet in the water, and even though he's got his own home cinema, he doesn't let you go in there if you're at all wet or if you've got food with you. Half the time you're at his house he's just telling you all the things you aren't allowed to do. Nadine doesn't care; all she ever wants to do is watch *The Little Mermaid* and sit on the end of the slippery dip with not even her toes in the water.

'Okay,' mum says to Nadine. 'You were very good and very honest. My heart tells me that you remembered everything as best as you could. You may go and play in your room now while I talk to your sister for a minute. If you are hungry you may take a muesli bar with you.'

Nadine goes to her room without taking a muesli bar.

Mum and me are left in the kitchen together. 'I don't know what to do,' mum says. 'How can I believe your sister would lie to me? She's never lied to me about a thing.'

'You didn't ask her properly,' I try to argue my point. But it's a dumb argument because I know mum isn't going to believe me. And it isn't really true either, so she probably shouldn't believe me. Father Fart Eater did stay on top while I swam down under the water and got his rug for him. And when I came back up and handed his rug to him, he put it back on his head instead of kissing it and putting in the front of his swimmers like I told mum. I admit I told her those parts as a lie because I didn't want to tell her about him slapping me on the hand for laughing at him when it first fell off. If I told her about him slapping me, she'd probably want to slap me herself, for doing the wrong thing in the first place. Father David is going to be her husband when he gets out

of the priests. And then he'll be allowed to slap me and Nadine on the hands all he likes, and we won't be able to do anything about it. And even if my dad came back then, even he wouldn't be able to stop Father Fuck Eater because we'd be his kids as well. Probably more his kids than dad's. Dad's kids in Brisbane didn't even used to call him dad when he rang them on the phone; they called him Jack. And I don't know if he ever tickled them without stopping before he left them and came and had us with mum.

The Ghost of Electricity

In our family it was Johanna. She was the youngest and weakest and we expected her to go before us. After she went we convinced ourselves it was a blessing. It's a good thing Johanna isn't here having to deal with this, we'd say whenever something terrible happened.

Lots of terrible things happened too. At first only trivial things happened. Traffic lights stopped working, banks forgot how much money you owed them, NASA lost contact with all the satellites they'd put into space, and you couldn't buy fizzy drink from the vending machines. Soon afterwards, you couldn't buy fizzy drink at all. And then you couldn't buy anything. Not even a bag of organic potatoes. You could swap possessions with the people living next door: a tin full of 9-volt batteries you'd been saving, which individually didn't contain enough juice to give your tongue a sherbety buzz even, but collectively could be wired to power an electric drill or toaster for a few minutes; for what though? An empty fridge-freezer you might use as a coffin for whichever of your poor babies was to go next?

Johanna came three weeks before the final cut off, which qualified her for registration. Registration meant rations. They say a lot of people were abusing the system, falling pregnant simply to take advantage of the welfare rations. Four packets of double-A batteries, twenty-five litres of fuel and a week's supply of sugar staples. It seems we were living through rich times.

The last half-litre of Johanna's fuel was used to power our family's TV set on the afternoon of her third birthday. The appliance, bought in a time when governments still handed out cash awards for birth registration, had sat lifeless in the living room of our house for so long none of us kids could remember having ever seen it work. My

sister Aggie was ten and she was the oldest of us all and even she couldn't remember what it was like to watch TV. So with the generator coughing away outside and the neighbours amassing at the windows of the house, our family sat and watched videos on the TV set. Home videos first: mum kissing dad with electric beaters in her hand and icing mixture on her lips, me unwrapping a bicycle horn on Christmas day and bursting into tears, our old dog Toby standing with his front legs on the rungs of a stepladder. Then, because we quickly ran out of home movies, the propaganda videos sent by the government: the first hospital temporarily shutting off its power, the first hospital permanently shutting off its power, the first power plant closing its doors, people cheering, more people cheering. It seems a great waste now, to have used the last of Johanna's birth fuel on those dumb movies, but I remember it made us happy at the time in spite of the content. It made Johanna happy too, small and weak and sick as she was, Johanna who went that very same evening with the neighbours still standing at our windows praying for a miracle—praying the half-litre would go on forever.

After Johanna had gone and we'd put her in the ground mum said she wished we could all just go. Dad said he wished the politicians who'd done this to us would go. I was only six, and it was difficult to know what to wish for. I wished for a lightning storm.

Lightning storms used to excite us more than anything. Almost every backyard in our street had some kind of metal tower erected at its highest vantage point. The most effective ones were built from high tensile steel and had radio aerials for sceptres. Others were just bedframes and sheets of corrugated iron stacked on top of one another with mattress wire linking them back to household power boxes. Occasionally a fork of lightning would take one of these homemade lures and the house connected below would light up in a flash of harnessed energy and children's laughter. More often

though, the wiring job was shonky and the house would light up in flames and panic. Then it was just sad and terrible for everyone.

Dad wasn't the only one who hated the politicians for what they did to us. Cancelling out the power like that when they should have been the ones to know better, to have foresight. Over and over we listened to them explain how much carbon we were offsetting and how many hospital beds we were freeing up. 'Let's not forget, things were looking pretty bad there for a while,' they'd remind us in their little handwritten campaign notes, slipped beneath the doors of our houses while we slept. 'Population growth was out of control, don't you remember? And who do you think fixed all that, huh? Tell me it isn't easier to find a parking space with all those OAPs off the road. Keep that in mind when you're filling in your ballot paper this Saturday.'

In their defence, it must be said that the first shutdown, lasting four minutes and localised to major hospitals and nursing centres only, saved the economy more than one hundred and twelve million dollars. A figure which for a long time was hard to ignore. And one which made heroes of the national treasury too. Approval ratings climbed as high as ninety-seven per cent. Not to be left behind, opposition leaders quickly incorporated power-shortage policies into their own campaigns. If elected we promise bi-annual closures. No? Quarterly closures. The race led from hospitals and nursing homes to all publically-owned buildings then. Monthly. Twice-weekly. Such was the fear of falling out of favour with the polls, that no one member dared oppose the bills.

Before long private enterprise was cashing in. It would've been bad business not to. The more a company relied on electricity the more it had to gain by going without. They say the millions upon millions of dollars each outage cost fuel and mining companies hardly compared to the bad press and loss of revenue their rivals faced for leaving the meter running. It was a time when people were still optimistic and willing to

give this thing a go. Celebrities and sports personalities appeared in TV commercials urging people to make a conscious effort to support companies with no product and limited service to offer, on simple account of their ethical, green politics. On a global scale, countries like Tibet and Mongolia outgrew superconsumers like China and USA within five years. Philosophy graduates fast-tracked straight to the tops of Forbes 100 companies. Entrepreneurs invested their money in steam technology and bought discarded shopping malls for the thrill of watching them sit in the dark overgrowing with indoor climbers and rodent colonies.

After we put Johanna in the ground and dad said his piece about wishing it'd been those politicians instead, we left Chillingworks for good. Chillingworks had been our town since before I was born. Dad said there was no longer anything there for us but ghosts. Everybody was using the word *ghost* back then. It was a way of speaking about and naming all of the good things that no longer existed. Johanna was one of the best things that no longer existed. So, we left Chillingworks and moved inland over the mountains, where it was dry and easy. Which is just what we were looking for. Clear skies to help us forget.

I suppose a decade must have passed. And then another decade. And then mum was the next to go and dad almost immediately after her. When dad went, the tarnished silver wristwatch he'd worn all through his life was suddenly jolted back into action. Aggie and me took this as a sign that it was time to return home. We buried dad on top of mum with the ticking wristwatch fastened to his forearm still and returned to Chillingworks.

'You're back,' our old neighbour Tom said to us the day we arrived home.

‘Yes,’ we said to him. I went and shook his hand and Aggie did a little curtsy bow. Tom’s wife came out and stood next to Tom without saying anything.

‘Oh,’ Tom said. ‘We didn’t think you would ever be back. You know how it is? Not after what happened to Johanna. Did Hank and Molly come too?’

‘Mum and dad went recently,’ I said. Aggie’s eyes watered over and she did another little curtsy bow to show she was okay and didn’t need me to go and put a hand on her. ‘First mum, and then dad,’ I explained. ‘And when dad’s wristwatch started working again, Aggie and me took this as an omen that it was time to return home to Chillingworks. We’ve been walking for close to eight months, I reckon. Shared the old parking garage out on Jackson last night with a herd of deer. Things have sure changed a lot around here. Still, good to be home.’

Tom nodded and his wife smiled politely and held onto his arm. She might have given him a little nudge.

‘His wristwatch started working again, hey?’ Tom said. ‘Ha! Fancy that!’ He looked at his wife then and she stayed looking at his arm and didn’t let go. ‘Yeah, I heard of that sort of thing happening when a folk goes and passes. Body’s full of electric current, see? Surprise the government didn’t come in and shut the lot of us down too.’

Aggie made the sign of the cross, which was customary whenever someone mentioned the government or politicians. Kind of like knocking against wood when referencing bad luck.

‘Don’t suppose there’s too many of them government bastards left around these days?’ I said.

Aggie signed again.

‘Christ no,’ Tom laughed. He looked at his wife and she smiled awkwardly and looked downwards at his arm, which she had a strong hold of.

‘No. Good,’ I said. Good. ‘Dad would be happy about that.’

The four of us stood there then, saying nothing for a bit.

‘What you kids got planned?’ Tom eventually asked.

‘Nothing too much,’ I answered him. ‘Thought we’d move back into the old house. Tidy it up a bit and try to stay out of harm’s way. Been a long time.’

‘Oh,’ Tom said. ‘Thing is—’ He paused and his wife squeezed his arm. ‘Thing is, young David’s moved himself in there. You remember young David? Got himself set up sort of like permanent, you know?’

‘Oh,’ I said. I thought for a moment and Aggie looked at me to say something, to solve this unexpected problem. ‘Set himself up in our old place?’ I echoed.

Tom and his wife nodded their heads in unison. I tried to think. David was the youngest of their boys. Maybe a year or two older than Johanna would’ve been if she hadn’t been the first of us to go. The only real memory I could conjure up of him was turning around and seeing him sitting on Tom’s shoulders that afternoon Johanna went. Trying to look past our sad little family circle and at the TV, he was.

‘Well,’ I started, and looking at Aggie cleared my throat and started again. ‘Well, I guess it’s a pretty decent-sized house, big enough to have had five of us living in it once. I guess there’s no reason why he couldn’t keep living there too. Aggie and me certainly don’t take up much room. Imagine David’s much the same?’

‘Thing is—’ Tom went quiet again and waited for his wife to give him a squeeze. She did. ‘Thing is, you see, David’s not exactly living over there by himself, you know? Much like yourselves he’s grown up now and he don’t remember what it was like before there was no electricity. He’s gone and gotten himself a little family and

they're all living over there quite happy now. Such a long time passed, you know? And you lot, well— Boy's happy as Larry, I tell you.'

Aggie looked at me and I looked at her.

'No hard feelings, right?' Tom said.

I went and put my hand on Aggie's shoulder and shook my head at Tom. Aggie started crying. Tom must have felt bad to see us crying and embracing like that.

'Jeez, I mean, I'm sure he wouldn't mind you bunking down in one of the back rooms, just for a night or two. Right Marge? Since you come all this way and all.'

Tom's wife Marge looked up at him and very subtly shook her own head. To indicate it was a bad idea, I guess.

'Yeah. Second thoughts, you folk are probably best to see if there isn't something else around here which is available. I mean, I heard a couple of them Radford kids were looking pretty sick for a while. Dare say Mike and Shirley might be worth a try. Place they got there's damn near a mansion. Dare say that'd be your best bet. Least for tonight. You know how it is?'

I nodded and smiled politely and put my arm right across Aggie's shoulders. Like that we began walking off together down the street. At the bottom of the street I turned once and saw Tom and his wife still standing there watching us go. Tom's wife gave up her husband's arm and did a little curtsy bow, which from as far away as we were might just have been her bending down to pick something up off the ground, a clothespin maybe, or a fallen bird's egg.

Aggie and I didn't bother going to the Radford's to see whether they'd mind us spending the night in one of their hopefully-dead kids' bedrooms. Perhaps at some point the fuse which kept sentimentality alive in most people's heads had been pulled out. But for Aggie and me, who'd been living in virtual isolation for so many years, the sad

memory of what it was like to watch Johanna and mum and dad go had kept us polite and decent enough that we marched right past the big mansion home on the corner.

Without needing to discuss our options we returned to the parking garage where we'd spent the previous night. There were no deer or any other animals in it when we arrived. Or perhaps they were just grazing on another, higher level. Upset as we were, we managed to make camp and sleep quite soundly through the first few hours of darkness.

I guess it must have been about midnight then. I woke to see Aggie standing over by this large sort of window which was built into the concrete wall along the exit ramp. Standing beside her was a deer. A buck, by the horns and muscled flanks. He too was looking out through the window. I carried my sleeping bag across, covering my shoulders, and went and stood between the two of them.

'Look,' Aggie whispered.

Out through the window, maybe six or seven kilometres away, in the direction from which we'd come, I could see a faint light. The deer could see it too and he was standing proudly with his head slightly bowed toward the light and his antlers buzzing with static.

'What do you think it is?' I said.

Aggie shrugged.

'It might be coming from the Radfords',' I suggested.

Aggie shrugged again.

'Weird,' I said.

'Let's go take a look,' Aggie said to me.

'Okay, 'I said. 'I mean, it might take us a few hours to get there. But okay.'

I shuffled back over to where my shoes were. Aggie petted the deer on the nose and he shot a healthy stream of urine down against the ramp's concrete floor. Something for us to remember him by.

They say it'll be hundreds of years before the human body clock forgets its long-time partnership with the hour and minute. If this is true then the walk didn't take us much more than an hour and a half, by my clock's reckoning. Many times we lost sight of the glow, but we just kept moving in the direction we suspected to find it again. Maybe somewhere inside, each of us knew where we were headed anyway. Past the Radfords' big mansion and back to our old house with the decaying weatherboards and bullnose veranda.

How can I possibly describe the joy of seeing electric lighting again after such a long time? Across the dandelion front lawn the fluorescent colour intermingled with the colour of darkness and cast shadows on the ground like musical notation. Behind the curtains, silhouettes danced around like plump, Viking-horned sopranos.

'What do you think's going on in there?' Aggie asked me.

I shook my head. 'A party maybe?'

'I'm going to find out,' she said.

She left me standing on the crumbled footpath then and hopped the car-tyre fence into our old house yard. Part of me expected her to be zapped the minute her feet hit the ground. Or for the high-pitched squeal of an alarm, like the ones they used to sound before each manual shutdown, when electricity failures were still intermittent events like shark attacks. There was no high-voltage zap. There was no loud sound. Aggie tramped across the lawn.

'Wait a minute,' I said, scrambling over.

Together we climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. There was no answer. More loudly then. 'Hello? David?' Still no response. The silhouettes disappeared but not the light. We tried opening the door. It was locked. The windows were locked also.

'I'm going to get something to smash through the glass,' Aggie said.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?' I asked her.

'It's our house,' she said. 'Whether David's living in here with his new family or not. Rightfully it's still ours. Right? Who gave him permission to take it over? Can't you go on vacation even without somebody moving into your home while you're away? I hardly have to mention the issue of the light, right? Don't you want to see what he's got rigged up in there? In our house? Where's all that light coming from, hey? Power that belongs to us—that's what I say.'

Before Aggie had found something to smash in the window, Tom appeared on his side of the fence. He was dressed in his hessian nightgown.

'Hey, you kids. What's going on?' he said. 'Did you forget something? Ooh, what you got there, hey? Why don't you come inside and have a drink? Marge makes a puddle water that tastes just like tap water used to taste. You kids aren't too young to remember that, hey? Why don't you come on over and we'll talk about old times. Them Radford kids still alive, hey? That's no problem. Me and Marge got plenty of space in here. Don't know why it didn't occur when you folk was here earlier. Yeah, sure, come have a drink and spend the night at ours. Best to leave young David alone in their with the strife and kids, hey? Hey, what do you say?'

'What's all this light coming from inside our house?' Aggie said to Tom.

'Jeez, I don't like to go talking about other people's affairs, you know? Best just to let David do whatever he's doing in there and come over here for a cup and a bit of a

rest. No point concerning ourselves. You say old Hank's wristwatch just kicked off again like that, hey? How about that! Why don't you come tell Marge and me about what else happened while you kids were off and away all those years? Your house, I mean, you folk just up and left like that, so sudden and all. I mean, it's not like David moved himself in there on the same afternoon or nothing.'

'Mr Chisholm, why don't you just cut the crap and tell us what the crap is going on inside?'

In all the years we spent growing up together, I never once heard Aggie speak like this. Dad used to say crap all the time. In front of us too. But mum would quickly remind him them politicians weren't worth the bad blood pressure they brought with them. And then she'd remind us that nobody thought you big for using a word like crap. Nobody here to think them small neither, dad would sometimes quip back, when he was feeling particularly crappy.

'Mr Chisholm?' Aggie pressed.

'Well, I mean, you know, you arrive back here after all these years. And nobody's got a gun to your head or nothing. But hell, you know, what's David's business is David's business, right? And I ain't the kind of fella to go trespassing on nobody else's personal lives like that.'

Aggie took the scarifying point attached to the short, thin piece of wire she'd found lying in the old garden bed and hurled it through the front window panel beside the closed door.

'Jesus, girlie!'

Light beamed out through the broken window like images of the sacred heart you can still see painted in rundown city churches. Brighter than any Jesus heartstring though. This light might have been bright enough to set the whole street on fire.

‘You got to understand, you kids, there’s some things old folk like me and Margie just can’t understand. And David’s business is his business. I mean, you got to let them grow up someday, right? Boy got to decide what’s right for him and his, you understand?’

When Aggie began moving toward the broken glass an eye appeared. Peering out at us like a zoetrope turning the spectacle back on its viewer.

‘It’s a little girl,’ Aggie said. ‘Hello. What’s your name?’ she said to the girl.

The girl put her hand through the hole in the glass and Aggie took hold of it. Touching the hand made Aggie’s own hand become very bright. And then her whole body began to glow.

‘You got to understand,’ Tom was trying to explain. ‘I mean, David was just a little kid himself, and we thought he was just playing make believe and then he says he’s going to marry that girl one day, and me and Margie, you know, we’re old folk, and we just thought the boy’s got a wild imagination. Then when he takes us over to meet her and, hell, how many years had passed by that stage? And you folk, well, nobody thought you folk were ever coming back again. And seeing her like that, boy, twenty years and she didn’t look like she’d aged a day. And her and David, I mean, you can tell, you can just tell. But they was always running around together in them early days anyway. And she was still sweet as ever—I mean before she, you know? And I don’t mean to sound rude or nothing, but you folk just up and left without even a second thought for poor little, well you know? But hey, what’s done is done, right?’

Aggie let go of the girl’s hand and started pushing against the front door, trying to jar it open. When she could not budge it she stuck her arm in through the broken window and fumbled around for the lock. Everywhere she cut herself against the glass

more light streamed out. Like she was bleeding pure light. Eventually she managed to get the door open and standing in the old foyer was our beautiful Johanna.

She was almost too bright to look at. The four or five babies who were crawling around and playing at her feet didn't seem to mind the glare. They seemed accustomed to it. She picked one of them up, a little girl who didn't look much younger than her, and started breastfeeding her. Aggie laughed madly.

'I mean, she's looked like that since the day you folk left, I tell you,' Tom whispered to me. 'Certainly in all the time I known her since. Young David, he reckon she got a youthfulness about her and certainly there ain't no denying she got something about her. Them two's been playing and courting basically since the day you folk took off inland. Neither of them's aged much more than a day. You can tell that by looking at them. Margie and me we can't make sense of it much.'

Young David appeared in the doorway then. He had a cheerful little smile on his face and didn't appear upset with our intrusion or with the broken window. He didn't say anything, just kept smiling at us and waved to his father Tom, who waved back nervously. It was true, the boy still looked exactly as he'd looked sitting on his dad's shoulders twenty-odd years earlier.

Johanna stopped feeding her baby then and offered her to Aggie, who cuddled the little girl right in against her own adult-sized breasts and wept over her.

'Do you remember me?' Aggie said, after she had calmed herself.

Johanna nodded her head and David stood proudly with his arm around her little shoulders.

'How'd this happen?' I said to Tom.

'Hell, you know, you can only watch them for so many hours a day, and then, I don't know, I dare say young David snuck back over here trying to peek in on a bit

more TV, I dare say. You folk left so quickly, and nobody knew whether you were coming back or what you had planned. And your parents, I mean, old Hank, what you say his watch just started up again like that? After all them years? Who'd have guessed! Young David though, jeez, he never seen a TV in his life before that day, and I guess it got him all excited, and whether we was sleeping or what, me and Margie, well, he must have just crept back over here some time trying to catch another peek of that TV set you folk had going. Reckon when he couldn't get no picture out of that he must have gone down back and dug little Joey up out of that hole again. Strange thing for a boy that age to be thinking about digging people up like that, but whatever was going through his mind that day, them two's been close as thieves since and neither of them looks like they've aged a day, if you ask me. Happy as punch, they are. Good little parents too. Margie help out when she can. But little Joey, you wouldn't find a kinder soul.'

'Jesus, did you think to come looking for us?' I said.

'Well, now, hang on a minute, you folk were the ones who just up and left like that. And—'

Tom said a lot more after that, mostly making excuses for why nobody had come looking for our family, or for why he'd allowed his little boy David to spend all those years falling in love with Johanna. None of them were very persuasive and none seemed to change the magnitude of the situation. We were all very emotional. Aggie especially.

After that night, Aggie adjusted very quickly and spent most of her time around at our old house, looking after Johanna's and David's kids or doing a load of dirty laundry for them. Just helping out really. I found it much harder though and felt awkward to be left alone in a room with Johanna or David. It was very difficult not to talk at them like they were still just three years old. I'd go to say something like, Who's

seen my lucky coin? And before I could lean forward and pull it out from behind one of their ears, they'd stop me and explain that such behaviour really wasn't necessary. Just be yourself, Johanna would say to me. You're my older brother and I love you even after all these years of separation. I found the more she got to know a person and the more comfortable she felt, the brighter she'd glow. Sometimes when her and Aggie were together I could hardly stand to be in the same room.

Some months passed, and then one day David pulled me aside and said, 'Look, Sean, you're Johanna's brother, I know that. But things aren't really working out here. Let's be honest, you pop around unannounced and sit at the dining table with an anxious look on your face, making the rest of us feel anxious and on edge. You're worse than my father. I just think it might be best if we don't see you so often.'

'Aggie too?' I said.

'Aggie's great,' David said. 'You see her with the kids yourself. And with Joey, I mean, Joey just lights up. Well, you know what I mean. No hard feelings, right?'

I couldn't deny that me being there wasn't putting stress on his and Johanna's marriage. Much as I loved Johanna, and Aggie too, I had to admit that the best thing was probably for me to take off again for a little bit.

'Where will you go?' Aggie asked me.

'There's talk of them starting up work on the power grids again,' I told her, trying to sound enthusiastic about the prospect. Of course, there was always talk of them starting up work on the power grids. The truth, as everybody knew, was that the power grids were beyond repair. That to make electricity again you needed electricity. Aggie knew this as well as I did.

'Wow, that sounds…wow,' she said.

The night before my departure Johanna came into my room. She wasn't glowing like usual, but looked just as I remembered her looking when she was still alive properly. Just the same as in those early days, she came and tapped me on the shoulder to ask if she might get into my bed with me. 'Can I hop in?' she said, in this little kid voice, which wasn't at all how she'd been speaking since we'd arrived back. It was only a single bed but I shuffled over. It felt weird to have my baby sister who was really an adult snuggling up to me in bed, but nevertheless that's how we went to sleep again.

In the morning Johanna was gone. When I lifted the covers I could see there were drips of light leading from the bed out of the room and down the hall and down the stairs to the basement where she often went when she wanted to be alone for some reason, or when her light was becoming too much for everyone else. 'Joey's feeling a bit off colour,' David told me. I nodded and said goodbye to him and Aggie and kissed the kids and left without seeing Johanna again.

The last I heard, Tom, Marge and Aggie eventually all went just the same as mum and dad. I often wonder how the electricity must have leapt out of Tom's body at the time of his going, probably setting off some cuckoo clock nearby. As for me, I haven't aged a day since leaving Johanna. So much of the world has disappeared and they say in a thousand years there won't be any buildings or roads left. Strange to think. The only things that'll be left will be the ghosts, I guess. I might even return to see Johanna and David and the kids then. Just a quick visit, to check whether the house is still standing when all the neighbours' have fallen down and the letterboxes have been filled to the brim with pigeon crap and discarded campaign notes. It'd be nice to think one of the best things could keep on going like that.