

Parallax:
the novel 'After and Before Now'
and an accompanying exegesis
'Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary'

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Abstract

‘Parallax’ is a hybrid creative writing PhD thesis comprised of two interrelated parts – the novel ‘After and Before Now’, and its accompanying exegesis ‘Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary’. Both novel and exegesis are concerned with notions of multiplicity and simultaneity as they relate to acts of creation, transformation and to ideas of the self.

‘After and Before Now’ is an ekphrastic novel exploring connections between creativity and selfhood through the experiences of its central protagonist, young visual artist Lola Hayward. The three-part narrative centres on the opening night of an exhibition to which Lola has contributed three main works. The novel’s formal structure is circu-linear, with a kaleidoscopic approach to narrative point-of-view that utilises first, second and third person perspectives to examine and represent the idea of the multifaceted self. The imagined art objects function as temporal touchstones, entry points through which narrative burrows into the present moment, into the memories and projections of events and ideas formative and transformative, gateways to those shadow-selves that continue to underlie and inform Lola’s attempts to understand her own being and becoming.

‘Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary’ is a fictocritical essay investigating the processes of writing the novel, with a particular focus on its imagined art objects, and on the representation of creative praxis. Contemporary ekphrastic fiction and theory are surveyed within the context of the search for an appropriate framework and language for the exegetical discussion. Exploration of and experimentation with the temporal/spatial possibilities and constraints of the ekphrastic mode are described in the

context of the novel's treatment of the interconnected narrative spheres of structure, tense and perspective. The creation of the novel's structure is also explicated through a discussion of the relationship between literary theory and quantum theory. The notion of slippage – between author and narrator, truth and fiction, art and self – is linked to the concept of the transformative act of selfhood.

Both texts engage with and explore techniques of discontinuity, destabilisation, intertextuality and self-reflexivity in order to seek out strategies for and methods of representing the interdependent, indissoluble nature of the relationship between the creative process and the transformative self.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. In the case of 'After and Before Now' there will be a one year embargo.

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Chelsea Avard

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And to Tim, my one.

After and Before Now

a novel

for Christopher

The I expresses itself as *I, you, or he*.
All three persons are present in me. The
Trinity. One person says you to the I,
and the other treats the I as he.

Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

Concerning the life story, there are
no precise instructions. The
beginning can start at any point in
time, just as a first glance can alight
on any point within a painting; what
matters is that, gradually, the whole
picture reemerges.

Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*.

Prologue

Names

My name is ... This is how we all begin, isn't it? This person's name is Lola. She is me. This one is Mother. This one Father. They are not me. Not you. They have their own names.

Our names are given to us by others. People who don't yet know us. Who know only themselves. Tom, perhaps, they might name us Tom. A man and a woman might have a conversation late one night, lying in bed. His large, workworn hand, it might be a sculptor's hand, might lie covering the Everest of her belly.

Could we, he might ask, *could we name him after my brother?* The brother he has not seen since they were children, the brother from whom he was separated by their father's violence, their mother's death, an indifferent system.

He will father this son. He will not let him go. He knows this boy already, this boy moving beneath his hands, beneath the undulating skin of his wife's belly. His gentle hands, his loving hands, his safe hands. His hands that are not like his father's.

Thomas, his wife will sigh, her breath slowing as she falls asleep. *Tom*, he will say quietly, *Tom*. This will make him very happy on this night, lying in bed, his palm over her navel. He will dream that her deep sleep is a natural sleep. He will dream that she is happy. That she will not leave again. They will love each other well now, he will dream. There will be no pain, no loss. All will be well. She will be well. Tom and Grey. We will be her son and her husband and we will make her happy; she will stay.

Your name was given to you by others. The same man and another woman might lie in a years-later bed and have a different conversation about names and knowledge. This woman will not sigh and nod and fall asleep. This woman will have many opinions about names and their power, words of all kinds and their use. She will love words and hate them. She will make lists of names and their meanings, pressing hard into the paper with a fountain pen, thickening the callous on the middle finger of her right hand. She will circle her middle finger around her protruding navel and, having done much research into the matter, give him her opinion of the list of possible names he has offered her.

They're all the same name, she'll tell him. And not one of them is right. Not for my daughter. It is a daughter, she will know that. *Here, I looked them up.* She will pull a sheet of paper out from beneath her pillow, and pass it to him, pointing out the problem. She will have looked up Lola, since that is his favourite.

Lola, see Dolores: sorrowful

Lola, see Lolita: sorrowful

Lola, see Charlotte: little and womanly

These are not right, he will see that. Not for her daughter. It will help that she has underlined the words sorrowful, little, and womanly. *You see*, she will say. *Yes*, he will answer. And she will sigh, pointing to his surname.

Hayward: guardian of the hedged area

You see, she'll say. *You can't be a sorrowful, little, womanly guardian.*

Can't you? he'll wonder. He'll sigh. *You know*, he'll say, *it used to be Hayward.* *My grandmother told me that, once upon a time we were the Haywoods. It was on the crest that hung over the door in her sitting room. Hayward. Hedged. That's what reminded me, hedged.* He'll lean over and pick up the pen from her nightstand and write:

Haywood: hedged forest

You see? he'll ask. She'll raise an eyebrow. Pause long enough for him to work out that she is counting to ten. Point to the bottom of the page.

Lola, see Louise: famous warrior

Aah, he'll say. Her daughter already has a name. She has chosen. And he'll give in. Because she has already decided. Because he has remembered about nicknames.

Louise, he'll nod. Lola, he'll dream, LoLo, Lolly, LuLu, Lovely.

Lovely, he'll say. Happy, he'll turn over onto his side. He'll curl an arm around this woman he loves and fall asleep with his hand cradling her belly and dream that he carries three miniature women in his palm. They sit and weep, their tears trickling down and pooling in the lines worn deep into his skin.

Selves: Wall, Floor and Ceiling

The Two Way Street Studios artist-in-residence programme was developed to give emerging visual artists time and space to focus on their practice. Each year, the programme allows for three talented artists to work at Two Way Street for 12 months, each creating work for display in the annual group exhibition.

Please join 2005/2006 artists-in-residence, Terry Burns, Lola Hayward and Charlotte Temple at the opening of the third annual Look Around exhibition, a show that this year brings together sculpture, installation, video and photographic works in an exploration of self and other.

7 for 7.30pm March 3rd 2006

Two Way Street Studios

Cnr Rundle Street and Freend Lane

Adelaide, SA 5000

RSVP: February 15th

alloftheabove@twowaystreet.org.au or phone: 8000 2333

Part One

Optogram

‘You mustn’t confuse virtue and the truth. The two are very different.’
Siri Husvedt. *The Blindfold*.

8.45 am

The three of us enter the main room at Two Way Street, each bringing our own particular kind of silence through the door at the top of the stairs. We walk small paths, circular and weaving, careful not to pass too close, wary as animals stalked or stalking. We pause for short stretches of time. We stand and stare, at the floor, out the window, at the work, into the middle distance, not at one another, not openly. We take slow sips from the coffee mugs we have on permanent loan from the downstairs corner café.

A strange torpidity seems to have taken Terry over this morning. It is at odds with the exacting machine I always envisage whirring away behind that high smooth brow. At odds with the tall, taut elegance of his build. Where is that familiar meticulousness? Ah, there – his back straightens, he braces his shoulders, clears his throat, pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He takes neat sliding sideways steps. He narrows his eyes at each of his photographs one after another, tracing the precise path they make around three of this large room's walls, satisfying himself, once again, that the bottom edge of each fine, burnished-metal frame is level with the next.

Charlotte slouches and glides. Completely oblivious, as usual, to the seductive riddle of her appearance. Flawless skin. Unbrushed, horsetail hair. Beautifully cut designer cardigan – pilled all over with a hole under the right armpit. Kmart sneakers. A strong underbite. Sad eyes. That breathtaking smile. Stubby, oft-bitten nails. She reaches her expensive ergonomic chair and melts into its curved embrace. She kicks off the slippers she wore to get the coffee, pointing and flexing elegant toes. Black and red striped socks, the tops of which flirt with the hem of her skirt at mid-thigh, emphasise the length of her legs and this morning, not for the first time, the sight of her pushing off

from the floor with both feet to scoot across to the desk by the window causes me to imagine some fantastic scuttling insect, the chair her exoskeleton.

Not an insect. The triangle of skin I glimpse out of the corner of my eye each time she crosses her right leg over her left is eggshell-brown, it plays with the yellow stitching at the hem of her skirt where the denim presses into the curve of her thigh, reminding me of the very real, human pliancy of her flesh. She flicks open her silver laptop, punches at a button and waits, rubbing at her eyes with the back of one hand and I yawn in sympathy. Not only exhibition-eve nerves, keeping us awake last night.

From the centre of the room I watch her in my peripheral vision, trying to concentrate on the job at hand. My piece 'Gift', a group of figures wrapped around one another beneath a winding layer of stiffened fabric, stands in the north-easternmost corner. Its placing is wrong, somehow unsatisfying, but neither the reason for nor a solution to this problem is clear. And now Terry's strange bearing and Charlotte's unselfconscious way of inhabiting space distract me, make me uncomfortably aware of my own body language. I try out various stances until I find one that matches my mood. Arms crossed behind my back, elbows nesting in palms. Feet crossed too, right over left, the outside edges of my shoes bearing all the weight.

I have a doubled image of this standing self, one that collapses time; the painting hanging on the kitchen wall of my parents' house has me caught in exactly this pose. My brother Tom made that portrait when he was nineteen and I was seven, taking the sketches for it in my mother's bedroom. Tom sat on the old brass bed, eyes flicking up and down from my back to his page as I stood waiting, quickly exhausted by the effort not to sway, or scratch, or cough. Watching his reflection in the trifold dressing table mirror was too unnerving, he never once looked up into the glass, so I shifted my focus, concentrating on own reflection instead. I imagined the girl looking back at me from the

mirror was a stranger-self – older, other, from elsewhere. Switching focus from my right eye to my left and back again, checking the pattern of yellow flecks in one green iris against those in the other, I allowed myself to fall into the eerie feeling until I was convinced of its truth. This belief came suddenly; the eyes in the mirror moved, the girl behind the glass shooting a quick glance at Tom. My own focus, I felt, had shifted only in response, following hers. Shot through with adrenalin I opened my mouth to scream. A small, strangled, gurgle was all that managed to escape. Enough to make Tom look up and meet my gaze at last. ‘Stand still,’ he grumbled, though I hadn’t moved.

In the centre of the room, less than a metre away from me, ‘Optogram’, the mobile, hangs at eye level from the ceiling. My reflected image swells and stretches on its curved and glossy surface, warping as the large mirror lens slowly spins, alternately showing me its convex and concave sides. One moment my hair appears short and dark around a moon-shaped face and in the next it grows long, the pale streak at the front of my hairline widening to age me by decades before my face, pallid, sharp-featured, shrinks almost to nothing, a pinprick star at the centre of the pupil painted onto the glass. At the balance point of all those versions of me is the Lola I created myself.

I tell myself there is still a slight chance I have not failed. That there exists, still, a tiny possibility that the image I have been striving to create *is* somewhere to be found in the work. Perhaps, I comfort myself, I have simply been standing too close to be able to see it, too close, or at the wrong angle. My most secret dream, my most private desire, so innocuous, so banal, so unsexy, is this: that somewhere within the path of its revolution, the glass disc passes through a perfect point at which it reveals this likeness, this ideal, superlative, secret self. All that is left for me to do then is to find my way to a viewpoint from which it might be seen. An idea close enough to the original concept for

the work to thrill and trouble in equal measure. How, after all, does a person distinguish between coming full-circle and finding themselves back at square one?

—

make a portrait · make it all-encompassing · a whole · a self-portrait – *you*, hanging up there · revealing all of the secrets · telling all the tales · uncovering the truth beneath the lies, the lies amongst the truths

to render this dream visible, to justify the depth of desire that stands you at the mirror searching your reflection, you will need to believe that something real resides within, awaiting discovery · a subtle, supple centre, worthy of the search · hovering, floating, suspended somewhere between fading imprints of the past and faint projections of not-yet-impossible futures ·

stand, alone, and speak into the glass · know that your tears only partly account for the haze through which your double swims and blurs · say, *I can't see my self*, but take note: each time the words fall from your lips they take on a different quality: true, untrue, true, untrue · take note too, of the shapes you make with your features as you speak, the way your eyes narrow, the way the sides of your mouth stretch back towards your ears, the way you bare your teeth ·

you will need details like these, if you are going to make such murky notions manifest, to imagine the shape of this chimera, see your complete self · trace an outline around that shifting phantom, work shade into shadow, choose colours equivalent to life · bring forth what only hope allows you to suppose might pre-exist its representation · make an abstract idea concrete, in order that, finally, someone else will have seen what you have seen

—

The shape in the shadows is a dark surprise – the child freezes mid-step halfway across the back lawn, she takes a sharp breath in. She listens. Because the light has been switched on, because the broken brick has been placed carefully on the threshold to keep the shed door ajar, because she can hear breathing, ragged but recognisable, familiar even, she allows herself to exhale. Not a stranger. She takes small steps in his direction, careful and swift across the cool wet grass.

Up on the tips of her toes, fingers of both hands slipping and gripping at the damp curve of the splintered sill, little Lola only just manages to see in through the window. Forehead pressed against the chilled, slick surface, each careful breath pluming into the night, clouding the glass. The bitter cold doesn't matter, nor the darkness, the important thing is that she has found him, and that through the window she is able to watch him without his knowledge.

Her father's shed. She can just make out the details of the cramped interior: teetering lettuce-crate towers, packing cartons, sagging shelves strewn with empty tins, washed clean, labels removed, spools of wire, metal objects of all description. Grey's shed. Grey's tools and paraphernalia. Grey's world. But Lola knows the dark form she is just able to discern is not her father. Tom. That long curved neck. His hair: that thick corona. Those shoulders, lean and square, his frame that always seems too large for his skin. Those shoulders, shuddering. Because he is her brother, Lola watches him. Because he is crying, because he is a man, crying, she does not want him to see her.

The arches of her feet are beginning to cramp. She has been using her chin for extra leverage and tension gathers in the muscles above her molars and beneath the tender triangle of flesh framed by her delicate jaw – she grits her teeth, presses her chin

down more firmly onto the rough window-ledge. She will do whatever is necessary, as long as it means she can remain here, watching him.

As his breath slows so does her own and she tries to keep her exhalations soundless but it can't be done. He takes his head from his hands, lifts his face to the ceiling and sniffs twice, long and loud, wipes his face with the palms of both hands as if to render it smooth, featureless. Her eyes are adjusting to the dark. She can see the contours of his face now, acute cheekbones, crooked nose, the gleam of his eyes behind the glass. That sensation simmering in her belly, is it terror? Excitement? Some strange mixture. A sickening bubble of laughter is trying to force its way up and out, despite her fear.

Tom starts into action, his movements quick and deft despite the dim light. He has a backpack and, watching as he opens and closes cupboards and drawers, Lola tries to imagine where he is going, what he might need. She waits for him to fill the bag with things that are not his. He toys with a tin of baked beans from the emergency cupboard, a jar of instant coffee. He runs a hand over the smooth red surface of Grey's toolbox. His bag waits, empty, on the three-legged stool beside him.

He takes a notebook and spreads it open on the worn worksurface of Grey's sagging trestle-table. He stares at the book for a long time, using his chin to click the ballpoint on, his thumb to flick it off again. On, off, on, off. His rhythm falters, and the pen trips quickly over his bottom lip, the button hitting against his front teeth. He winces, swears, and without having made a single mark on the paper he holds his hand out in front of his chest and allows the pen to roll across his open palm and fall from his splayed fingers to settle in the stapled fold at the centre of the empty pages.

He ducks down beneath the desk, and when he stands again he is awkward with a weight of rope. Grey's trailer rope, the one he threads carefully through the metal eyes

of the blue tarpaulin when he goes out foraging for scrap metal. Exposure has darkened the thick rope's fibres. Lola remembers when it was still new, hay-coloured. She lowers her heels to the ground, takes two wary steps backwards. She traces the tips of two fingers along the creases in the centre of her palm, thinking of tug-of-war, of Chinese burns, of school and home and tender stinging skin. Her mother's voice: *Your lifeline and your heartline are entangled, you'll always stay close to home.* She shivers.

Grey keeps the rope in a neat coil. Each time he returns home he removes the tarpaulin immediately and before emptying the trailer he stands by the back wheel and runs the length of rope around elbow and wrist, elbow and wrist, making it into a tight figure eight, its two halves perfectly even. Tom hoists the rope up, shrugging an arm through one loop now, fitting the curve into the dip between his neck and shoulder. He shrugs a few more times to settle it in, tips his head left and right, stretching. Lola doesn't notice she is copying his movements until she hears the cricking and cracking of vertebrae snapping into place echo inside her head. She has never realised Tom looked so much like Grey. A man, she whispers to herself, as though this truth is a terrible secret.

She shivers again, daring herself to look out across the black expanse of paddock, allowing her fear to rise up and overwhelm her. She is so small, so very small and the universe stretches high above her, and far behind and in front, all around her, way out past the reaches of her vision. She is so very small, and he is so tall, a man. He will always be taller than her, always older too.

'Tom can find his own way home,' her father had said, sounding weary, 'let's leave him to it.'

'Go and have a look out the back will you,' her mother had snapped, not really asking.

Her big, tall, brave brother hadn't been afraid to come out here at night when the moonlight lends a dangerous shine to dew and fence nails and makes a million tiny eyes appear in the dark world of the swampland behind the shed. He had slammed the flyscreen door behind him. Lola had heard it crash and rebound and slam twice more against its jamb before it stopped silent.

He picks up Grey's silver Zippo and slips it into the back pocket of his cords, shoving the tin of lighter fluid into the backpack. As Lola lifts her foot to back away from the window she sees him pull a small, yellow, six-sided tool from the old coffee mug of pens, pencils and brushes. Not a pencil. It's a scalpel-knife, its precise little blade embedded in the centre of a dirty white rubber eraser. He slides it into a side-pocket of his bag. He stands on the stool to take a clear plastic bottle filled with pretty pink liquid from the highest shelf.

Lola looks back at the house, sees the yellow light glowing from the dining room, hears the clinking of cutlery and crockery, the dappled kitchen window. The shadows moving in there are safe shapes. Lola trembles though, watching those heads and shoulders gliding to and fro behind the old, warped glass – her father's shaggy silvery head, all hair and beard, and the small pale oval of her mother's face. They are just over there, so close, and they are doing such ordinary things, setting the table, serving up the dinner. And still she is overwhelmed by the sudden belief that when she stepped out of the back door she stepped out of the world. That she might not be able to reenter it. That they might not recognise her if she did. *Lola?* She can picture their bewildered faces. *Lola who? No Lola here.*

A loud crack shatters the deep still silence. Lola's fear bubbles over; while there is a part of her which knows, instantly, that the sound was just a twig on a fallen branch snapping beneath her heel as she stepped backwards into the dark, another, younger self

is too far gone into the fear and she screams. As she turns to run she knows that Tom has heard her scream, knows that he must be able to see her heading back to the house. The knowledge that he will not follow her causes her to scream a second time.

She runs, sobbing, up the back steps and in through the door. She runs inside, runs up to bury her head in her mother's soft middle, and let her mother's firm embrace hold her fragmenting self together, and allow the palm of her father's big gentle hand to cradle the side of her face. She cries and cries and all the while she is listening to the soothing sounds of her parents misunderstanding her.

'There there,' they murmur. 'It's alright. Everything's alright. Bit dark out there aye? Not such a big girl after all aye? D'you see a ghost? No? Hear a monster? No? There there, never mind. Stop crying now darling, you're safe now. Come and have some dinner. D'you find Tom? No? Oh *no*, don't start up again, it doesn't matter. He'll turn up when he's hungry. Don't you worry. Don't you worry. Come on. Deep breath. That's a girl. He'll turn up. He'll turn up.'

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8.55 am

‘What do you think you’re doing Lola?’ asks Charlotte, finally breaking our collective silence. There is a teasing lilt to her voice, the audible evidence of her efforts to fight a smile. She indicates ‘Gift’ with a nod and an accusatory finger. ‘Are you really going to move them again?’

‘I can’t figure out why I don’t like it sitting there. Is there too much shadow? Terry? What do you think?’ Two sets of eyes follow my gaze. Charlotte rises to her feet and the pair of them cross the room to flank me. Terry puts his hands on his hips and we stand huddled together, heads cocked on three different angles, deliberating.

‘They work as they are,’ says Charlotte. ‘But,’ she continues gleefully, ‘but, Lola, I think they would work just as well the other way around.’

Terry sighs, ‘At some point you have to decide you’re finished.’

All three of us nod.

‘Okay,’ I say, ‘you’re both right,’ and then, after a short pause: ‘Help me move it?’ There is delight in Charlotte’s laughter and even a measure of indulgence Terry’s rolling eyes. Between us he and I pick ‘Gift’ up by two of its elbows and carry it to the opposite side of the room where what sunlight enters through the window in the south-eastern corner during the daylight hours will glance off the flattened planes of the figures’ obscured limbs and facial features. It won’t make any difference tonight, the sun will have gone down by the time we open, but I am trying to believe in tonight as a kind of beginning rather than an ending.

‘Can you ...?’ I ask Terry, gesturing with a pointed toe towards the last of my three pieces, ‘*Wunderkammer*’. Bending from the waist, he pushes the large heavy box slowly and carefully across the newly polished floorboards. His movements are smooth

and economical, his arms stretching straight out from the shoulder, his head lower than his hips. It looks more like he is walking through a short piece of easy choreography than exerting the kind of effort I know it takes to move that box. His T-shirt, falling down his olive-skinned torso in the direction of his armpits, reveals the truth in the form of an intricate network of small hardworking muscles down the side of his ribs and abdomen to the hipbone just visible above his low-slung belt. When the two works are switched, Terry and I both return to stand on either side of Charlotte in the centre of the room. Again we nod.

From where I stand, without moving, I am able to reach out and take hold of 'Optogram' with my left hand. With one hand, I stop the disc turning, hold it steady. I am trying to think. To think, and to keep calm.

Charlotte returns to her desk, the fingers of her left hand skim the keyboard, her right hovering over the mouse, index finger twitching. She lets that finger fall, and the mouse-click echoes across the room. She flicks a switch on the projector next to the computer and it begins to whirl, the sole white wall we've left bare coming alive with light and shadow. We grow still, and quiet again too, as we watch her video footage of the three of us entering the room, silent, coffees in hands, newspapers tucked under arms. It could be yesterday, or three months ago, five. It barely seems to matter anymore.

Muffled rumble, far-off thunder, rolling ball-bearings – oh, key turning in keyhole. One after the other, the doors creak as they arc out and back. Thump, click, closed. Footsteps. And repeat. Six doors between the street below and the room at the top of the stairs. Open, shut, open, shut. The volume of the rhythm rises with each unlocking.

Until, finally, the high brass oval handle on the inside of the last door turns and we enter.

Other, internal doors, and windows to the outside are thrust open. Other sounds enter through them, mingling with the noises we make as we set down cardboard coffee cups, settle into the space. Blip blip blip, the sharp steady electronic voice of the pedestrian crossing lights downstairs on Rundle Street. The swishing tidal wash of peak hour traffic. Birdsong raining sweetly down. Streetsound rising like heat. They must meet somewhere in the middle. Perhaps this accounts for the haze in the room, the ponderous way we move? Or is it simply the fact that we are yet to speak that makes the air seem to hang so heavy around us, so thick between us?

Fast footfall, someone down there is late for work. Unseen strangers exchange public intimacies. Snatches of song escape from car windows at random. The infiltration of the room is instantaneous and complete, noiselessly, they reverberate in us. They lie in wait, to resurface later – is this how our own shared silence will eventually be broken, by humming, singing, a tapping foot?

A police siren starts up and is cut off before its whine can peak, but like the chance-chosen car radio samples, still somehow lives out its potential, ear and mind arguing over what is anticipation and what is experience and what memory. A thumping bass rises and rises chasing the rasp of a melancholy female voice dragging out the lyrics, You'd better be hooome soooooon The song is a sign our routine enables us to read – the girl with the waist-length red hair has pushed open the tri-fold doors of the boutique across the road.

That pedestrian crossing is unceasing, blip blip blip.

The three of us move in and out of the room. We circle each other. We stand and stare. Terry cleans his glasses. Charlotte inflates her cheeks and lets the air out again

and again, waiting as her laptop awakens. In the centre of the room, I reach out with one hand and stop the mobile turning.

Up there on the wall, yesterday, just like today, I am trying to slow time, to concentrate on tonight. I look again at 'Gift', and '*Wunderkammer*', trying to remember what I was thinking when I made them, trying without success to recall the person I must have mistakenly imagined myself to be.

The portrait my brother painted of me was an art school assignment. The last one he handed in. His teacher hadn't appreciated the intentions behind the finished project. The left hand side of the canvas was taken up with the rear view of me, brown wavy hair falling down past my backside, my mother's favourite evening gown, a maxi dress made of emerald green fabric draped in folds and bunches from my shoulders and spreading across the floor like spilled water. My head hangs forward, my hair covering my face, not a single one of my features depicted, even in his rendering of the reflection of my mother's dressing table mirror.

In place of himself he painted a small easel. It is the only trace of his presence in the room. My mother is everywhere, in the silver brush and mirror set, the fluffy-cushioned wrought iron makeup seat my hand rests on. On the floor next to my feet is a tiny, gnomelike figure. This miniature person, hunched and grey, is the bearer of the only face in the painting. It consists of no more than four or five almost negligible brushstrokes of black oil paint. To anyone else they might mean nothing, those strokes, might not be recognisable as a face at all. My father's eyes, nose, and mouth, the long angles of his cheekbones and that deep shadow, the cleft of his chin. Tom painted us all into that picture, giving it his father's face and name. Grey Family Portrait he called it, and for his troubles was failed, not having fulfilled the requirements of the portraiture

task set by his teacher. This is a story I have heard and repeated many times in the past, but it has been a long time since I thought of it.

Searching for my real image in the glass mobile I watch the twenty-one years that have passed since my brother painted me fall away. My arms fold up behind my back, fingers inching along my forearms towards my elbows, my toes turn in again, my feet creeping towards one another of their own accord and I am seven years old, afraid I am invisible, afraid of my own reflection.

Charlotte returns to her desk, and distracted, shuffling through a sheaf of papers, asks: 'Can either of you give me today's date?'

It is an absurd enough question to divert my attention, momentarily, from the swell of panic. This time it is my head swiveling on my neck in unison with Terry's, my turn to roll incredulous eyes.

I ask, 'Are you serious?'

'You're not serious. It's the third of March, Charlotte,' Terry sighs, flicking over the cover of his neat orange notepad, tiny mobile phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder.

Charlotte clamps a hand across her mouth, eyes widening above her muffled answer: 'I forgot.'

'You did not *forget*.'

'You did *not* forget!'

'No. I mean, not *really*.'

Charlotte is struggling with her poker face. Just managing to maintain it, she looks me straight in the eye. On the wall in the background time speeds up and overlaps, the warning from yesterday's traffic lights filling the spaces between the beats of today's: *blip/blip, blip/blip, blip/blip*. With a slow wink, Charlotte speaks, imitating

the recorded telephone message, that deep, familiar, male voice, perfectly. ‘At the third stroke,’ she says, ‘it will be seven o’clock precisely.’

Terry clears his throat loudly. ‘Hello,’ he says into the telephone, ‘Hello? Are you there?’ Charlotte finally breaks, clamping a hand over her laughter. When she catches her breath again, she catches my eye again and mouths the words, *I did forget*.

A shudder runs through me. At seven o’clock tonight everything goes on show. Less than twelve hours until we open the doors and people begin to arrive. I look back at Charlotte, holding her gaze, but am unable to laugh with her, or to find words to express the collision of emotions I am experiencing. The Town Hall clock rings out, and my gratitude for the way it covers my silence is as strong as my wish that its hands might stop turning.

I let go of ‘Optogram’ and watch it begin its slow circle again. It’s not my reflection I look at now but the image engraved on the surface, changing from light to dark and back again with each half turn. Who was I when I made these things?

Me? That person who spent days engraving strings of letters onto the surface of the large salvaged telescope lens, inscribing those stories from the past again and again, each version obscuring the words of the last until all were illegible, no longer even recognisable as words? Even the memory my muscles retain of that work, the tension between pressure and restraint necessary to mark the glass without breaking it, even the dull, chronic wrist-ache I have been left with, even these things are not enough to connect my mind and body to either the object hanging at eye level in front of me or the shadows flickering across its surface. Someone else’s hands surely, that twisted all that wire sheeting to make the form for ‘Gift’. Someone else’s hands spreading and smoothing layer after layer of glue and newsprint over the wire to make those papier maché figures. Someone with the patience to wait for each layer to dry, someone

capable of maintaining the belief that those hard, sharp angles could be sanded into shape, made into those inseparable entwined bodies. A stranger who sat and sorted through my old packing boxes of letters and photographs, notes and keepsakes, choosing the ephemera with which to decorate that big upside-down tea-chest. Tearing each item to pieces, arranging and re-arranging those pieces again and again until the pattern they made seemed to proclaim itself fixed. A lunatic stranger who believed this pattern held some kind of meaning, that these pieces were me. Who?

—

now and then you manage to catch a glimpse of yourself · glimpses · selves · little stars, they flit and glint at the edges of your sight · they dart and shoot and tease, they hold themselves at bay ·

a dizzying thought – the possibility does exist that you might coerce your mind into moving in ways swift and deft enough to catch them all, face them down, round them up, fence them in ·

a terrifying thought – it may prove too ambitious an objective to chase down even one ·

a certainty – to follow their peripheral shimmer across the surface of mirrors, along shop-front facades as you think your way out the front door, through the city, up the stairs, to race them word by word through theory and opinion inscribed or ephemeral, to hear the colour of these ideas bloom in the laughter of people who pass, to spy the glister of recognition as it rises to the surface of eyes that meet yours, to come close, to almost reach, to nearly know, to feel the tickling breath of realization but not its kiss, these approximations will never be enough ·

stand, in the midst of others then, speaking little, listening instead · listen, and watch, hoping against probability that you will find proof of yourself, proof that, despite yourself, you are being seen, and heard

—

Lola goes to the tree to be in the quiet. ‘A long walk for little legs,’ says Grey, every time, gently patting the top of her head. Lola likes the way her whole head fits inside her father’s hand. The big spongy pads of his fingertips, flattened out and polished smooth from years of wresting fruit from the trees in the orchard and from wielding tools for digging, hammering, chopping and building, come down over her forehead, crossing her eyebrows, sometimes straying in front of her eyes, blurring into their own doubles.

Polished too, those fingertips, by the wire. Years of wire, sought, straightened, rebent and reworked, given existences never imagined in the steelworks. Years of what Lola’s mother calls his art. *No, Lola, don’t disturb your father, he’s up in the shed, doing his art.* According to Merena, everyone has an art: Grey has his wire sculptures, she herself has her writing and Tom of course, has, well, capital A Art. His paintings are what Lola calls proper art, real art. She is careful not to say those words aloud though, *proper, real.* When it comes to subjects like art, and more and more when it comes to her mother and her brother, there are many ideas that can only be savoured in silence, that can’t be shared. Lots of reasons to search out quiet places.

She has been thinking about going to the tree since much earlier this morning. Since *before*, she thinks. Since she woke. All through breakfast. Throughout the brief period of time spent sitting at the big teak kitchen table watching Merena scrub the

breakfast dishes. Hunched over so that her shoulders met the edge of the table – *teak, teak, teak teak timber timber timber timber* – arms as straight as she could make them, hands stretching out as far as possible – *kitchen, kit-chen, stretch, streeeeeeetch* – sliding her hands across the beeswaxed surface in sweeping half-circles, following them with her gaze until the moment where it became impossible – *beeswax, beeswax, smooth, wood* – in an effort to fool her eyes into becoming suddenly able to operate independently from one another – *smoothwood smoothwood* – and allow her to clearly perceive her entire periphery. Although Lola believed in the possibility of such a feat, she could not envisage what it would make the world look like and this failure of the imagination created a physical reaction low in her belly, a clenching, nauseated, almost-pain.

She had been thinking of the tree then, in part because the tree was made of wood and the table was made of wood and had been a tree and the chair had been a tree and the floorboards had been trees and both the burgundy-skinned apple that was the subject of the miniature oil painting above the window over the sink and its small square wooden frame came in some way from the same place. She had been thinking of the tree while waiting for her mother to turn and look at the teatowel and then at the dishrack (full) and the second sink (almost full) and then at the teatowel again. In preparation for this moment, Lola repeated the words apple and frame over and over again in her mind, knowing she would want to come back to the thought, attempting to guard against the empty twinges of loss that might visit her later if she were to forget.

She had been thinking of the tree, imagining herself an hour into the future looking out through the branches and remembering the table and the apple and the frame and perhaps even the scorched handle on the cast-iron frypan sticking up between

the hot and cold water taps when the sound of her own voice had surprised her out of the spiralling force of this daydream.

‘What’s *my* art then?’ she had asked without knowing if she was addressing Merena or herself or the room, or the person, not present in the room, who had created the perfect loop of steel at the end of the handle by which the frypan could be hung but which Lola knew was also the exact size and shape of a twenty cent piece.

‘Pardon?’ Merena had said, but before Lola could answer ‘Nothing,’ her mother had taken an audible breath and exhaled the word ‘oh,’ and from the angle of her head Lola knew she was smiling. Perhaps she was not simply smiling but laughing because her voice, when she finally answered was gentle, breathy, a softer woman’s voice. The next thing that happened was just as strange. ‘I don’t know,’ Merena said. Lola could not remember a question for which her mother had not had an instant and detailed answer. Astonished, speechless, Lola looked down at the table she knew had been made by her father the year she was born. She had heard this fact of family history repeated so many times that it had become the kind of knowledge that is almost wordless, ever-present. Like who your parents are, like how many steps it takes to walk from your own bedroom door to theirs in the dark.

‘Moonlight.’ Her mother spoke the word suddenly into the quiet room, causing Lola to blink in confusion. Moonlight? Lola’s art was moonlight? How could that be?

‘Come on Lola, *Moonlight*.’ She gestured toward the window as though its sun-drenched glass offered some explanation.

Oh, Lola had thought then, *the spelling list*. And: *Oh*, she had thought, both disappointed and relieved that the strange half-conversation was over already. The weird hole she had accidentally torn in the fabric of the ordinary had mended itself. ‘Moonlight,’ she echoed, ‘M. O. O. N. L.I.G.H.T.’

‘Good,’ her mother nodded, ‘Come on.’ The sink was full. Lola slid off the end of the long pew behind the table and ran across the room to yank the teatowel from the high hook on the back of the pantry door. She and her mother finished the spelling list while they wiped the dishes dry. The bowls and spoons were Lola’s. Merena would attend to those things that were fragile or sharp. By the time Zucchini, Z.U.C.C.H.I.N.I. had come and gone, Lola’s mind had wandered back up the hill behind the house to the tree.

She asked Merena to take down the spelling list from its spot, blue-tacked onto the window. Lola would make another one up for herself now, carefully copying out the words from the huge, heavy shorthand dictionary. Both lists would then be slid carefully into the manila folder Merena had fashioned into a pocket taped to the book’s inside back cover, which would in turn be slid back into its home beneath the coffee table in the living room, with the scrabble board.

Merena pulled the list away from the glass and handed it to Lola. She rolled the blue-tack into a ball between her fingers, then rubbed it back and forward over the tiny blue traces left behind on the window to lift them, then pressed it onto the window sill; Lola watched the pale blue blob spread to cover the small patch in the white paintwork the size of her own thumbprint, where the blue-tack stayed while she wasn’t spelling, dulling the paint to a pale murky grey.

‘I’ll make you a list,’ said Merena, a strange note in her voice.

‘I can make my own list Mum. I always make my own list.’ Again Lola looked up in confusion; she’d been making her own list for the last year. The corners of her mother’s lips were twitching, the way they did when she was postponing the punchline of a joke. She lowered her eyes to the sink where she had begun to work on the pan,

lifting the blackened, bubbled, fried egg remnants off with the edge of the scrubbing brush. Lola watched the oil rainbow out and circle in the water.

‘Not a spelling list,’ Merena laughed, ‘You make the spelling list. I’ll make a list of your arts.’

You could have more than one?

‘Go on mate,’ said Merena, her voice breathy from the effort of scrubbing at the pan, and laughing to herself at the same time. ‘Put the list away and we’ll go for a walk down to the beach.’

Lola enjoys the practice of making the spelling lists. When she is older, much older, she will relish certain recognisable qualities in her memory of this pleasure. She will see them as signs of an aesthetic awareness and creative capability, the ability to see and to copy shapes with precision, the courage to allow the feeling of flow to carry you far from yourself. One example: the intensity with which she would visualise, carry out, and review the results of an attempt at the perfect rendering of a lower-case ‘q’, with its flawless circular head and long straight tail ending in the upward flick at the end which had to be almost straight, but looked somehow better, more *real*, when it curved a little, as though wanting to be the beginning of a circle. A second case in point: the desire for order, the perfection being demanded of herself, by herself, not only in the way each daily spelling list looked, but in the way that the greater list progressed. The collective list growing daily in the manila folder in the back of the dictionary.

A single word for each of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. A list for each day of the week. Lola had realised early on in the arrangement that there was a discrepancy between the number of words which began with the letter A and those which began with letters like X, Y and Z. Merena had been unsympathetic: ‘Oh well,’ she had said, bemused, ‘when you get to the end of the Zs, just begin them again.’ At

the time Lola made this compromise, since she could think of no other solution besides leaving the Xs and the Zs and then the Ys off the list when they had all been done once, and replacing them with an extra A or E to make up the numbers, which somehow seemed worse. Even this way still rankles, leaving her every time with a numb, tingling mind, a feeling she thinks of as the mental equivalent of pins and needles. The process has also had the result of her being able to spell *zucchini*, and *xanthorrhoea*, and *yarmulke* and *zygote*, before mastering the word *arbitrary*.

Until this morning, the lists had not yet led to the much simpler *art*.

art *a/t/ n.* **1.** the production or expression of what is beautiful (especially visually), appealing, or of more than ordinary significance. **2.** (*pl.*) a branch of learning or university study. **3.** skilled workmanship, execution, or agency (often opposed to *nature*). **4.** a skill or knack; a method of doing a thing, especially if it is difficult. **5.** craft; cunning. **6.** studied action; artificiality in behaviour. **7.** learning or science.

Lola let her eyes stray down the columns of print and across to the opposite page. She did not know what the *n*'s and *adj*'s meant, nor any of the other symbols which preceded and wove through the definitions. She did know that when a word appeared on a page, there would often be, further down the page, back a page or across a page, another word connected to the first. The meanings of those words could sometimes explain or expand the meanings of the first. And so, across the page, she located:

artist */'atəst/ n.* **1.** a person who practises one of the fine arts, especially a painter or sculptor. **2.** a person who practises one of the performing arts, as an actor or singer

and:

artistic */a'tɪstɪk. adj.* **1.** conformable to the standards of art; aesthetically excellent or admirable. **2.** stormy, emotional, and capricious, as temperament or behaviour popularly ascribed to artists.

For once, Lola was more concerned with getting down the words and their meanings than with the way they looked as the ink flowed from the pen. She scribbled the three definitions down, her handwriting turning from neat disconnected printing to rounded running-writing to a kind of stretched out shorthand scrawl as her hand moved across and down the page. She would regret this later, but for the time being all that mattered was that she had a copy of these words and their meanings, to take with her to the tree where she could study them and memorise them all by herself. The way she discovered them, all by herself.

Thinking of the tree, Lola garnered her will to approach the difficult task of turning back the pages of the dictionary, to find her place, to make the list for tomorrow. It took almost more patience than was hers to locate the twenty-six words. It was almost impossible to force herself to sit still and inscribe them neatly enough to be read by Merena, while her right hand, holding the pen, and her left, index finger stabbing at the dictionary just beneath each word, trembled so uncontrollably. She managed, proud of herself.

List ready for tomorrow morning, Lola ran to look for her thongs, hardly pausing to slide her feet into them, tripping with the very next step. The sound of plastic clattering against wooden floorboards as she dropped her spade and bucket brought her mother out of her parents' bedroom.

Lola looked up at Merena, standing over her in the hallway, rubbing at both temples with the tips of her fingers. 'Sorry,' she said, biting the inside of her lip. She had landed badly, the pain shooting up through her kneecap had brought bile to the back of her throat. She straightened her leg gingerly.

Her mother gave her a blank look. 'What?' she started to say, before interrupting herself: '*Shut up.*' She hissed suddenly. '*Listen,*' she continued, 'what's that?'

‘What’s what?’ Lola asked, her own voice a whisper now too.

‘I said shut up Lola. I’m trying to listen,’ her mother continued, looking out through the open front door. A large magpie stood on the verandah. The angle of its head, turned to one side, made it appear as if the dark gleam of its eye was focussed down the hallway into the house. Lola turned her own head, wondering what it might be able to see, what might have been attractive enough to bring it this close to people.

‘Don’t *move*.’ Her mother said angrily. ‘Do ... not ... move.’ And then, ‘Go away,’ she said, to the bird.

Somewhere in the background a beetle was clicking and singing. Merena startled. ‘Hear that?’ But Lola was not about to open her mouth to speak again. Merena took a deep breath in and Lola waited for the explanation that must surely come. ‘It’s just a game,’ perhaps, or, ‘Mummy’s being a bit silly,’ even ‘I thought I saw a burglar’ would be some sort of relief. Instead Lola watched a sudden rage flare in Merena’s eyes. ‘Not today,’ she said, and then she began to shout. ‘Get out,’ she yelled, again and again in the direction of the ceiling, at the clicking beetle, Lola thought. ‘*Shut up shut up shut up shut up SHUT UP!*’

‘Mmm ...’ Lola began to stutter, white hot fear burning her skin. But when Merena finally looked at her Lola found she was unable to finish the word or to imagine what she could possibly have been about to say.

‘Shut up,’ Merena said again. She clamped her hand over her own mouth and closed her eyes. She began to cry. Leaving the bucket and spade where they had fallen, Lola ran in the direction of the back door, thinking only of the tree.

Lola goes to the tree to be in the quiet. To be by herself. Grey pats her head as he passes her on his way down the hill to the back door. She has stopped at the shed to swap

things for gumboots, and he pauses just long enough to hold her hand for balance. He pats her head and says, ‘Long walk for little legs. A big climb. Don’t fall little one.’

Lola keeps her head down, letting her hair hide her face. The knowledge that he isn’t expecting a response is a relief. If she were to speak her voice would betray her tears and then he would cup his hand beneath her chin and lift it, brushing her hair away so that he could see her face. Then she would have to describe the thing that had just happened. This terrible, inexplicable shifting of the ground beneath her feet. Impossible. Any explanation she might be able to bring herself to speak aloud would need to be a lie.

So Lola keeps her head down until she feels Grey lift his hand away. She keeps it down until she has walked far and fast enough through the damp grass until it seems she has outpaced the tears and the heat in her cheeks is from exertion not shame and the tree appears above the horizon and reminds her why she comes here. To be in the quiet. To think about secret things that can’t be spoken aloud. She walks even more quickly toward the tree, breathing fast, but calmer. *Tree*, she thinks. And then, from nowhere – *apple. Apple. Frame. Apple. Frame*. She can’t recall why she wanted to remember the words but comforts herself by repeating them all the way to the tree. By remembering, too, that she had been thinking of her tree already. Before. Like the folded paper in her pocket, the tree had been there, waiting.

Notes towards new writing – Jan '06

Ekphrasis (definitions)

- *Practice of descriptive representation – mimesis/rhetoric (see Plato, Republic, Book X and Homer, Iliad, Book XVIII)*
 - *Vivid, illustrative description of a work of visual art*
 - *Description/representation/exploration of one art form through or by another (including visual, musical and literary arts) with special attention paid to essence of work*
 - *Verbal representation of a visual art object (see also Parmigianino/Ashbery – 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror') nb: find notebook from '96 – L's optogram idea*
-

5.55 pm

I know the downstairs doors are locked, that I am alone up here in the gallery. Perfectly safe.

I locked them myself. I followed Charlotte and Terry down to the street to say goodbye when they left for the printers. Three sets of footsteps padding softly through the silence of the small corridor arcade. We walked quietly, in single file.

I know I am alone. The hair at the back of my neck though, is not so sure, dancing despite me, believing the cool air whispering in through the wide open front window is an intruder, standing behind me, breathing on my nape. It's not even dark yet. Nothing to be afraid of.

I pulled the heavy glass door shut behind them, turned the deadlock, dropped the end of the chain into its slot.

Only Charlotte turned back. Smiling, she leant towards me. Those long thick lashes closed gently as she put her mouth to the glass door, full lips blooming against the pane, the pressure of the kiss draining them of their colour. Even as I watched her morph into that alien version of herself, an out-of-focus photograph, the plain cousin, flat-nosed and myopic, I felt my breath catch high in my chest, that familiar thrill, halfway between laugh and sigh. A flourish playing swift along the nerves below my navel. A sharp clitoral jolt to follow. The involuntariness of it all.

I leaned in quickly, as much to hide the colour I felt rise in my cheeks as in response to Charlotte's gesture. I touched my own lips briefly to the glass before tucking my chin down to my chest and carefully placing the centre of my forehead over the small foggy *oh* I had left behind. I rolled my forehead back and forward there for a moment, cooling my skin. One half of a pair of magnets, paper between, skimming

sideways back and forth across the surface of that barrier, all the while moving too in the direction of the other.

I lifted my head. Charlotte, pulling back from the door, trying not to laugh, stuck out her long tapered tongue. Palest pink, its deep fissures held a rich burgundy stain. Her teeth too, showed their porousness, retaining the dark residue of Terry's good shiraz. The bottle he had been saving for tonight, the bottle Charlotte had insisted we open early this afternoon.

You're a bad influence, I'd chided, but it was me who pulled the cork from that bottle.

Through the glass door, she grinned and laughed as I raised an eyebrow and grimaced, pointing to my own bared teeth. I watched the skin around her lips undulate as she ran her tongue beneath them. They stretched back out again into that wide grin and I shook my head, laughing too now, and mouthed the words: *No, still there*. She shrugged, giving up, and we each lifted an open palm up beside our face, holding them there, statues waving goodbye.

Behind her on the footpath stood Terry, his back to the traffic. Barely two feet further away from me than Charlotte, yet managing to give the impression of already having exited our tiny triangular world. Chest lifting towards chin, head held high, shoulders tightly squared, arms crossed and most tellingly that gaze, sliding smoothly from left to right and back again, towards the cab rank a few metres further on down the road, in the direction of the pedestrian mall and the train station, never coming to rest for a second.

It was as though, in the moment that he had stepped out through the door, everything, Two Way Street, all our exhibition pieces, had simply and completely ceased to exist. As if too, there were something up ahead that only he was able to see.

See you later, I said aloud, knowing that neither of them would be able to hear me through the door. Charlotte had her back to me, head tilted to one side, arms out, palms open in supplication for Terry. Across the short span of footpath, they mirrored each other, heads flicking left and right, scanning the dense, fast-moving crowd, searching for a break.

March, and still this heavy hot weather. Seven consecutive days so far with temperatures over forty. Having started early, summer is threatening to stretch far out before us still. Everything's a little off-kilter, a little heightened. At least the evenings have begun to be a bit easier. Breezes pick up and blow soft through side streets as the sun gets low, gently cooling the skin as the blood begins to thin and to flow a little faster.

Downstairs, the last of the after-work coffee drinkers, straggling their way towards the train station, the bus stops and the car parks, merged with the earliest dinner couples and pub punters, heading in the opposite direction. They wove through and around each other, formed an ever-moving barrier with their jostling, meshing bodies. I caught the bare, tanned elbow of one darkhaired girl nudge the deep curve above the hips of her companion, a blonde in a blue dress with a cinched in waist and full skirt. Their heads flicked around in unison to take one more look at Terry before their wide eyes locked onto one another's. The darkhaired one shaped her mouth into a silent *Wow*, and the one in the dress nodded, biting her lip. In a moment they would begin to giggle, when they thought they were out of earshot.

A gap opened up in the foot traffic just after they passed, and Charlotte swiftly ducked through it, hooking a happy elbow through Terry's and ruffling his hair with her other hand. She gestured in the direction the girls had gone just in time for their burst of laughter, and Terry looked back after them, eyebrows drawn low and tight. Not exactly

confusion, it is impossible to believe he might not know how affecting his beauty is, but still, the look troubling those faultless features was more one of consternation, the girls' excitement just one more possible hazard to be navigated, one more threat to his attempts to make sure everything runs smoothly tonight.

I felt a sudden, intense pang of empathy for the giggling pair, totally out of proportion with the situation. I imagined them later, each at home alone after too many drinks, each remembering this moment, the indifference of this beautiful stranger, his indifference to her, to the effort that had gone into that dress, that hair, that walk, to the strength and depth of her desire. I caught his eye and tried to make a small smile reach across the space between us. But it was a weak effort, I was just as preoccupied as Terry and I watched him react accordingly, lifting one corner of his mouth briefly, turning his face away, nodding at the shadow of a taxi driver through the nearest darkened window.

Charlotte turned back to throw me one last grin as they left, rolling her eyes, pretending Terry was dragging her off down the street against her will. The wind whipped at her hair and it tangled, a dark web across her face. My stomach clenched a little then, in reaction to the feeling of *déjà vu* that seemed to rise from that image, the face obscured beneath a shiny black cowl.

Charlotte calmly hooked the strands between her fingers, and with quick-moving hands, twisted them all together into a thick knot. In what was almost a single movement, she tucked the bunched hair through one strap of her singlet-top and pulled Terry into the thick of the crowd and I was left in the silent hallway, the lino surprisingly cool beneath the soles of my bare feet watching as they disappeared amongst all those other heads and bodies.

Not just the weather, this strange, strained atmosphere. Not just the memory of Charlotte's momentarily enshrouded face, or the draught coming in through the open

window. There was the other face too, appearing from nowhere in front of me as I stood staring out after them. A trick of the light, I suppose, the result of standing behind that tall pane of glass as dusk began to play.

If I had chosen to step outside after them onto the street, to my left would be *Cobblers*. Mac the shoe repair guy still there, visible through his bay window, sitting behind his counter, cleaning out his fingernails over today's newspaper. To the right of the arcade door the cramped and busy newsagency, filled with people buying cigarettes and chewing gum, bottled water, newspapers and glossy magazines. The unfriendly newsagent and his wife, run off their feet until the pre-dinner rush was over and they could go back to their perpetual argument.

Just inside the arcade, to my left, the angled doorway of a long skinny shoebox room, Tina's place. Painted in an arc across the frosted glass, in a fancy red font, the words *Zelda's Unisex Hair Salon*. Straight across beneath this, in plain earnest black lettering: *For Women and Men*. I've been laughing at that disclaimer all year, imagining the commissioner of the sign who thought the word *unisex* ambiguous enough to require definition. This evening I just stared at the words, unsettled, filled with a dragging guilt at having laughed so easily and so often at someone else's desire not to be misunderstood.

I stood there in the hallway, watching the people and the cars moving past outside as if the world out there was a faraway place. Those few people who glanced briefly in my direction didn't appear to notice me behind the glass at all, eyes busy with their own reflection, necks jerking as they flicked errant fringes back off foreheads, canines flashing as they grinned and grimaced at the state of their hair, their teeth.

I let my forehead fall down onto the glass door again and closed my eyes, breathing in and out slowly, trying to fight back the panic that threatened to overwhelm.

While Charlotte had still been here, I had felt like everything was going to be all right, as though nothing could touch me. Now she was gone.

I drew my face back from the glass, told myself to stop being ridiculous, in half an hour they would be back from the printers with the catalogues. I took one last deep breath and opened my eyes. And screamed.

On the other side of the glass, lips stretched wide, unblinking eyes staring straight into mine, cheekbones sharp and glinting under the fluorescent street lighting just flickering into life above her head was a face I haven't seen for ten years.

The first thought, her name, *Remy*. The second: *No*.

I took a step back, and another, and only then, standing far enough back to make out my own work clothes, the worn, denim three quarter length shorts and the red T-shirt with that small hole where the shoulder seam is coming apart, only then, when the sharp lines of those cheekbones were revealed to be the lengths of both sides of my fringe, curling in and down towards my mouth, did I realise that the face in the glass had been my own reflection.

It was not as much of a relief as it might have been. Coming on top of my general anxiety about the opening, the anticipation of the kind of nakedness that any show, no matter how humble, brings and the feeling of being somehow separate, cut off from the world on the other side of the door, the adrenalin that had banked up and been released in that moment was not about to be so easily stemmed.

Every follicle stood on end, my entire body flushed with heat, my hands trembled and my vision began to cloud. I could not fight the belief that I could actually feel the air thickening around me, that I could hear breathing behind me, and I was, in that instant, utterly convinced that if I were to try, I would find myself unable to open that front door again, unable to step outside, unable to raise the attention of a passerby

to help. Déjà vu turned on its head. Jamais vu? Not so much, I have been here before, more, am I even here now?

That extra sense, some enigmatic quality of atmosphere that caused me to hold my breath, and to jump when a noise did come from behind me: the centre door of the arcade, the one dividing the hairdressers' space from ours, shifting just a little with the hall's perpetual draughts, creaking just a little. This intense, absurd fear finally sent me quickly back through that door. I paused only long enough to push the droplock down into its home with my heel, to rattle the back doorhandle as I passed, checking the lock, to slam the stairwell door behind me and slide its bolt across before I ran up the stairs, two at a time and tried to take the landing in one stride.

I tripped on the rug that always slides on the polished floorboards and I fell. Just a twisted ankle, a bit of a sprain, hardly hurts at all now, unless I prod it, there will be no limp to explain. No one will ever have to know how frightened I was, standing alone in a hallway, two paces from the safety of the Thursday-night, centre-of-the-city, early-evening crowd. The suddenness of that fear, that strong sense of accidental trespass, the overwhelming desire to run.

I am alone. Safe from questions. From the temptation to explain.

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once you begin, it is difficult to stop · speed ahead of yourself, afraid of slowing down · afraid that one misstep might mean that you disappear out of view of yourself completely · afraid that your belief in these ideas of yourself will turn out to have been a mirage, that you might not exist at all, anywhere ·

direct your gaze towards the middle distance · surrender, fall, and swim in nebulous thought, afraid of the undertow, of black holes, exploding stars · sift through seeding ideas · feel the quickening when one joins with another · desperate for it to take; stand on your head for some time · eventually, you will right yourself · you will stand, and work · stand and sketch and sit down when at last your legs give way and sleep only when your eyelids fall shut too heavily to reopen and dream only to let your subconscious work so that you can wake, stand and work again, without rest, until you have reconstructed the missing evidence ·

eat when you remember you are human, try to remember to taste the food · try not to drink without checking what is in your glass · work · work at learning how to court flow and focus unbidden thoughts · stand, working, feeling your fingers grow new skin to web out over and around the pencil and your feet melding with the floorboards, turning to wood · stand there until they petrify, if need be ·

in the mirror, hear yourself say, *I can't see the whole of me* · listen · listen to yourself speak · know that these words *are* true · know that this *is* the truth · the truth of yourself, you realize, the truth *of* yourself · the truth you need to tell · *I can't see the whole of me* ·

pay careful attention to this moment, as you bite your bottom lip, tilt your head to one side, as your eyes glaze over and you become a statue of yourself · being · imagining · remembering ·

inhale · exhale · begin, again

—

The story goes like this: Remy knows all there is to know about Lola. It goes like this: Lola and Remy are closer than sisters, no secrets between these two. They exist, after

all, in that state of constant conversation, the kind of elastic, timebending conversation on which two young women poised on the edge of adulthood, poised on the threshold of all sorts of possibilities, can sustain themselves. The kind new lovers and old friends feed off. The kind that runs long into the night and carries over into the next day. The past confessed, gifted.

Morsels of fear, shame, desire, dug up and handed over and accepted and reciprocated. Secrets spun into silken threads. Back and forward, back and forward they are passed, bridges of trust are built from them. Silken ropes. Secrets spoken aloud and heard and repeated. Repeated, remembered and repeated like songs, like sayings, like stories of strange things that might once have happened to someone else one or the other used to know.

Lola's mother used to say: I can always tell when you are lying. You open your eyes far too wide. You hold them open for too long. You forget to blink, that's what it is. That's what gives you away.

Remy says: Lola's a hopeless liar. She doesn't look you in the eye. She pulls at the end of her nose. She blushes, and gives herself away.

Lola says: I'm not lying. I don't lie. I'm not lying. Why would I lie?

Notes towards ekphrastic novel. 'Selves' exhibition (Two Way Street Studios, Adelaide) 3rd

March, 2006. White room / Imagining space.

- *White room. High and silent. Sealed tower. Calm, still, hollowed-out space, waiting to be filled, waiting, still. An absence of sound. Doors and windows, all shut, locked. Enclosed emptiness rendered visible – the contradiction prods at instinct and memory – coinciding questions arise of time (a limitless expanse of) held still, and air (a finite volume of) held in. Our presentimental fear precedes us: despite being as yet absent – our breath fogging the windowpane only from the outside – we arrive already anticipating stagnation, suffocation, inertia.*
- *There is little light to see by. Out here, things are changing. Afternoon shifts to evening, sun and moon communicate through light and shadow, the silent language of pre-dusk flux, discernable only through trace, what is touched, what is not. In there, the light changes in increments too minute to be a useful measure of moments as they pass. Our only assistance comes from the soft movement of a large disc, a glass mobile, hanging in the centre of the room. Spinning, it becomes a kind of timepiece, the only promise of life, after and before now.*
- *Somewhere in this old structure, there must be an opening. Somewhere, a deep crack meanders up a wall. Between once-red bricks mortar trickles out as sand, becoming its beginnings once again. Or, the shrink and swell of a wooden window frame has fallen out of sync with that of its sill, they do not quite kiss. We sense a hidden breach, we sense a breath, a stealthy, whispering trespass, and we want to search it out, imagining our gaze intangible as air, as light.*

6.30 pm

It's a good thing it has stayed so warm tonight, and we can leave everything open to the fresh air. The smell of paint is lingering and Terry is concerned about the impact it will have on people's experience of the work. The crisp white walls will make a difference, their beautiful blankness directing the eye to the fine differentiation of light and shade in his photographs, providing a smooth and perfect projection surface for Charlotte's films, and creating the illusion of space. Space to circle and weave through my pieces, hanging from the ceiling here, growing up out of the floor there, and the books lying scattered amongst the chairs and other furniture we used for the collaborative installation in each of the two 'Sitting Room' installations off the main hallway.

The new paint will reward us in this way, but there is an attached risk, the danger of that new-paint smell remaining so strong that it will draw attention to itself, rather than the work, or influence people's experience of it, lend it a too-new, production line quality, an unfinished, or perhaps even over-finished, air. We have strived so hard to avoid too heavy an association with newness, and with the idea of façade.

'So what we're saying is' – it was a long time ago now, when Charlotte first tried to sum it all up but I have heard the playback of this conversation so many times as she worked that I can quote her verbatim – 'we want to take people somewhere they might not have been before, to show them pictures of strangers, us, *and* for them to feel at home there, in this new place, to feel as though it's themselves they are looking at.'

'Versions of themselves,' Terry agreed.

'Themselves,' I couldn't help but correct them.

'Selves,' they echoed, in unison, nodding.

Not a very tricky, or particularly original title for an exhibition, *Selves*, but it was so difficult, trying to find something that all three of us liked, that felt right for each of us and all of us, that would succeed in representing the parts and the whole. In the end we gave up, went with the obvious.

We sent out over three hundred invitations. Gallery owners, collectors, agents, ex-teachers and mentors, newspaper and magazine critics, old art school friends of Charlotte and Terry. 'Where's your list Lola?' Terry asked me when he was ordering the stationary. 'Friends, family? That list.'

'Oh, just put me down for six,' I replied. 'I'm still thinking about it.'

'You're sure, six?'

'Oh, yeah, I don't really know a lot of people in Adelaide.'

Charlotte tried to intervene: 'But your family? And what about ...'

'It's fine,' I said in a firmer voice, not looking at her. 'Just give me six,' I repeated to Terry.

The invitations arrived by courier six weeks ago, two tidy boxes of them, delivered in the morning while Charlotte was in her studio room back near the kitchen and Terry was out at an Arts Board interview, securing the funding for his next project. The courier barely bothered to glance around the room as he held the electronic device steady for me to sign. I squashed my signature into the too-small rectangle on its tiny crowded screen. 'Artshowisit?' The man asked, his curiosity ending with my nod. 'Gottagetgoin', vansnotlockedup. Ereyagomate.'

He tipped the boxes off the edge of his sack truck, thumping down the stairs and out through the arcade. Grabbing a Stanley knife, I sliced quickly through the masking tape that held the flaps of one of the small cardboard boxes together, and took a bundle of invitations from the top of the pile, counting aloud. 'One, two, four, six,' I said,

pronouncing each number clearly, aware of Charlotte's microphones all around me, the cameras watching from the corners, before calling out to let her know the courier had been.

I waited until the last minute before I handed my filled-out invitations over to be posted. I arranged the envelopes in a neat pile with the one for my mother and father on the top. Beneath it was one for my third year art teacher from Melbourne. I knew she wouldn't come but I felt obligated to send the invite. What better recompense could I make for the disappearing act I pulled three weeks before graduation than the chance to turn me down now? Beneath that, in no particular order, were four addressed to colleagues from the local senior secondary school where I'd been working as artist-in-residence to satisfy the Two Way Street requirement for community participation. A pair from the Art department, one from English, and one from History. In the centre of that pile of six envelopes was hidden a seventh. I was careful not to let them slip as I put them in the large bag Terry was about to take to the post office.

That invitation, the secret seventh one, was for Remy, but like my third year tutor, she won't be coming. I still can't properly explain what possessed me when I sent it, apart from a childish desire to prove that I am all grown up now: *Look at me. I can play with the big girls and boys.* Or maybe that I hadn't failed this time, hadn't given up. Not like art school. *Look at me. A proper artist now. Despite everything. Despite you. Despite myself.*

Why would she come? Ten years. She's sent no RSVP. The only message from her was a short email that turned up a fortnight after the snail mail invites went out. Ten years since we'd spoken and she sent a single sentence. The subject line read simply, Re: Selves?

Oh well, she wrote, it might not be a fancy title but at least it's honest.

And then, on a separate line, all to itself, that surprising semi-colon and right bracket. A wink, two keystrokes that said more than the words they came after. In the weeks that followed I had not found the courage to reply, but I had allowed myself to believe that wink was a door, a long-shut door, being gently, warily nudged open.

The invitation itself was the thing. Enough. I never expected her to come, and she won't.

I *am* expecting my father to arrive any minute, his plane will have landed just before six and it's not a long taxi ride from the airport to the centre of town. I know that I should be hoping he will arrive before anyone else, but I can't manage to picture that scene in my mind. I am struggling to remember a time when my father and I were alone, together, for longer than it took to say hello, or goodbye.

Even though I am alone up here, I still shut the door to change out of my work clothes into my outfit for the opening. After weeks of looking for the perfect dress, I gave up and let Charlotte go through my wardrobe last night to choose something for me. White shirt, barely buttoned up, maroon leather bootleg trousers, thin vintage men's necktie, knotted lower than the V of my neckline. All my own clothes, but not a combination I would have put together on my own. 'You're insane,' I said to her.

'What?' she asked. 'You're hot, you should wear a hot outfit. Why not?'

'I'm not hot,' I said, lowering my brows. 'I'll *be* hot – I'll boil in these pants if the heat hangs around.'

'*Lola,*' she groaned, 'Take a look in the fucking mirror once in a while will you.'

There is no mirror here in my studio anymore. We've already packed everything up back here in these rooms. I'm grateful. This way, I can go out there with Charlotte's image of myself in my mind, rather than my own.

Out into that big front room that will soon be packed and busy with noise. Images are already beginning to crowd me, all those people with their white photocopied pamphlets, checking them dutifully at each artwork, each title and number in the catalogue peered at and compared with its counterpart on the small thick cards secured to the wall, or floor beside each piece.

I can see all the ways in which the pamphlets will be held while people circulate and converse, eating and drinking their way towards the end of the evening: some will end up scrunched beneath sweaty armpits, shoved haphazardly into the depths of oversized handbags, folded into thirds to stick, uncomfortable and ungainly, out of the back pocket of already too-tight jeans. If it doesn't cool down a bit more, they might add to the noise in the place, waved in front of reddening faces, poor flapping substitutes for the old building's non-existent air-conditioning.

Most of them will end up in the recycling by the end of the weekend, but it isn't this that bothers me. There will be a handful of people, I am only now really beginning to believe, who will actually read what I have written for the little catalogue. I picture the faces of those I know are definitely coming. I try to imagine how they will react to what I have written. Not an essay, not a description. Something else. After we sent the copy off to the printers, too late for inclusion as a kind of title or abstract, I came up with the idea that what I'd written was really a set of instructions – a 'how to' of transformation. I try to imagine Grey's face as he reads them but can't. It is more difficult than imagining his reaction to the work itself. Even to 'Optogram', with everything it says and doesn't say.

pull the studio door shut behind you, locking yourself in, ensuring your privacy · unzip the small yellow backpack and from it slide the old school atlas · be careful · time has softened the corners of the book's cardboard cover, they swell and spread · the brick-red faux leather is well-worn, impossible now to tell crease from grain · the atlas itself is out of date and many of the nations depicted on the maps within its covers no longer exist, this is of no consequence here, now · they are not what you are looking for · pushing less important books and papers to one side, make space for this one on your workdesk · gently blow the dust from the surface of the table before you put the atlas down · after you open it, inside the front cover, read:

Lola Hayward
Bangalow Road
Byron Bay
New South Wales
Australia
The Earth
The Milky Way
The Universe

the cursive handwriting strives so hard for perfection but the amount of space needed to inscribe the address has been underestimated and the letters grow thinner, the words cramping in together and growing crooked as they reach the bottom of the page · feel the pain of this failure, empathise if you cannot remember · smile at the beautiful, mundane absurdity of the attempt · the intensity of that desire to create something flawless, to be flawless ·

a small stick-figure girl runs across the bottom of the page, trailing a ribbon-tailed kite, red, blue, yellow and white · there is a little cottage, with two windows, each a perfect square dissected horizontally and vertically into four smaller ones · a door with a curved top and an oval handle · a chimney made of bricks, with smoke billowing up

into the sky · the sun smiles down on the path that leads from the door to the neat little picket fence ·

to the left of the house, a little higher on the page to show that it is further away, stands a lone image · a thick vertical brown line and a clump of lumpy green on top, all a person needs to be given in order to know that they are looking at a tree

—

Lola goes to the tree every day now, to be in the quiet, to read in the quiet. She takes long moonsteps, fighting her way through the overgrown grass of the paddock behind the house, up the hill, the cuffs of her denim overalls soaking up the muddy groundwater, turning a dull dirty green with each step. At first, there is pleasure to be taken in the feeling of the water seeping slowly up her shins, her stride shifting the material back and forward so that it never lies cool against any patch of skin too long. Eventually though, the material grows chill and stiff and begins to rub against her skin in a way that portends pain. By the time she has reached the top of the ridge that runs along the back of the property, just inside the snaking fence that marks the border and keeps Merena's vegetable garden safe from next door's cow, the damp has already inched its way up past her ankles.

Today she sings softly to herself as she walks: '*Tom, Tom, the piper's son.*' She stops to bend down and roll up the cuffs of her overalls. Today she notices that it is *always* in this exact spot, at the top of the ridge, that she stops to roll up her cuffs. Notices too that she *always* tells herself that next time she will remember to roll them before she starts out, and that she *always* forgets. At this point in the journey she would actually be better off to leave them down, unrolled, to protect her shins from the bark as

she climbs, but it is too late. They are heavy and clammy and remind her too much of the wet-concrete-heavy feeling in tired legs at the end of a hard sprint.

‘*Tom, Tom, the piper’s son,*’ Lola repeats, a little louder, finding courage as she scans up and down the trunk of the old Moreton Bay Fig. She takes one look back at the house, revelling in the distance she has put between it and herself, between the ears of its inhabitants and her tongue. ‘Half-brother,’ she exhales, half-faint with the word’s release. But is it the right word? Whose son is he? Grey’s son, right? And Grey is her father, so, yes, half-brother, that seems right. But what about Merena? There’s no such thing as a half-son is there?

The piper’s son. Grey smokes a pipe made of deep chestnut-red wood. It curves out like a back-to-front S from beneath his thin black moustache and draws a line down through the centre of his goatee. Only, the straggly beard curls around at the end and up to the left and pokes out from behind the stem of the pipe, like the S has two tails, or the pipe has another stem just in reach, perhaps, of an invisible tobacco-smoking pixie that might be sitting on Lola’s father’s shoulder. Lola has been reading Enid Blyton; evidence of pixies presenting itself everywhere she looks.

She knows of course that the pipe in the rhyme is not the kind you smoke, but the musical kind, but she likes the coincidence of it, the doubling, the way the image can change the meaning of the words. ‘*Tom, Tom, the piper’s son.*’ Grey and Merena never call Tom her half-brother, but Kirsty Simmons from school has been repeating information she has overheard her own parents discussing, demanding its verification loudly at little-lunch. Tom, it seems, might not belong to Lola as thoroughly as she has always imagined.

It’s not as though it has ever been a secret that there was once another mother, a woman who was Tom’s mother as Merena is Lola’s, one who died when he was small.

It's just that Lola had never heard of that word before yesterday afternoon. Half-brother. Two words really, jammed together, hyphenated like his name, Hayward-Harris. Half-brother. There is a transformative quality to it, a power, like a spell, like a curse.

A curse is what the words had looked like in Kirsty Simmons' handwriting today at school. Lola, not wanting to look as stupid as she felt, as young as she felt, had not responded to the note Kirsty had thrust at her across the aisle between their desks. Lola had unfolded Kirsty's elaborate origami and read the accusatory words written alternately in the green, black, red and blue ink of the four-coloured pens Kirsty's mother kept her well supplied with: *You are a liar Lola. My mother says he is not real, only your half-brother.*

Cheeks burning, tears pooling in her lashes, Lola refolded the note carefully, already knowing she would need to conserve this evidence, if she was going to make any sense of it later on. Later, when she was at home, away from the danger of Kirsty, and her twin brother Carl who sat behind Lola in class and was now kicking rhythmically at the back of her chair, both of them trying to force her to give them an answer she couldn't bring herself to admit she didn't have. Later, she could look it up, that term, half-brother, discover its exact definition, and decide for herself whether it was the truth. Not now, now she needed to focus all her powers of concentration on not crying. On staring straight ahead at the blackboard. On fitting each number perfectly within its own tiny grid-square on the page of her open maths book. Until the bell rang, she would be safe as long as she didn't look Kirsty in the eye.

She bends her knees, she jumps straight up in the air, grabbing hold of the lowest branch on the way back down. She pumps her legs, swinging herself back and forward, back and forward until she has the right momentum to shoot her feet straight out in front of her, and then through the loop made by her arms and torso and the tree,

folding herself in half and throwing her head back out of the way so that she can hook her knees over the branch. She lets go, lets her hands fall past down below her head and hangs there, still swinging gently, watching an inverted version of the thick cluster of eucalypts that marks the boundary between Merena's old family land, and the small acreage Lola's family lives on now. She hangs upside down marvelling that real people once lived in the huge condemned manse at the top of the hill, that her own grandmother was born there, had died there. Lola has never been inside the house; it was sold before she was born. Lola hangs upside down, trying to imagine what the house might look like inside, until her cheeks grow fat and heavy with blood and dizziness forces her to extricate one leg from between her arms, haul herself upright to a seated position.

She climbs through a fork at the point where the tree trunk splits off in all directions. And though, in the past, she has made this step too many times to count, it is this time that will alter the course of her future. As she pulls her left leg through the branches, thinking, as always, that this hidden part of the tree, is *exactly* like the hand of a giant, its open palm large enough to cradle her curled in its centre on the bed of fallen leaves that collect there, she catches her leg on a rough patch of bark, taking a large patch of skin off her kneecap. She yelps in surprise, and pain, and falls awkwardly, the shock of the hard wood against the side of her leg hurting her as much emotionally as physically.

As she falls, a thought springs up from a sudden conjunction of comforting images – it might somehow be possible that Tom *is* her brother in the same way that Grey is the piper and Tom is the piper's son, the way that the top of this old tree is also a giant's hand. That all these doubled things might be as true as any single word, or a pair of hyphenated words. As she trips she knows that this has all already happened.

She has caught her leg on this branch before. She has fallen here before. She has scraped a thick layer of skin from her shin before.

Just like the last time, Lola's rolled up cuffs are icy now against the backs of her knees. Just like then, she turns them up one more time, trying not to let any of the blood from her shin touch the denim. To put a barrier too, between the dampness and her skin. How long will it take to soak through again? How many times can she roll up the legs of the overalls before they get too tight around her thighs? How long until dinner? As always, she looks up through the dense foliage above her head, trying to see where the sun is, if the moon is up yet. It is her favourite thing, when the moon comes up before the sun has gone down, but there are too many branches and she can't find either of them.

Will someone come and get her when it's teatime? Who will come? Before, it would have been Tom.

Lola shivers, gingerly pulling a piece of white lined paper, folded in half twice, well-worn at the creases, from the pocket over her smarting hip. Not Kirsty's note, there is not a single stupid love heart dotting a single I here.

She settles down into the tree's leaf-filled basin, to read and reread the page. She reads it silently, turning the words into pictures in her mind. She reads it aloud, over and over without thinking, to learn it off by heart, to be able to repeat it, *what is that word Merena uses again, oh yeah, verbatim*. She will be able to say, verbatim, what art is, what an artist is, what it means to be artistic.

Every time her mind circles back to the memory of Kirsty's words Lola raises her voice, repeating the definition louder and louder.

When she recalls the dryness of her mouth as the classroom clock ticked towards three pm, her throat constricting as the afternoon bell began to ring, her voice shatters

into tiny falling pieces and she is left to mouth the words silently until they gather themselves together again.

There comes a point in time when the words she is repeating lose all original, logical meaning or open up each into strings of infinite meaning-making, and then a long moment in which the only meaning is their sound, the melody of the sensate song they have become. And then Lola slides into the spaces between the moments, weaving in and out of the gaps between the sounds and the silences. She closes her eyes, feeling time fold back on itself. She has been here before. She has skinned her shin. Her skin. Her shin. She has been here before. She fell then and she has fallen again.

‘Lo-La. Al-lo Al-lay Lola.’

He is here. He is gone and he is here. He has come to take her home.

‘Lo-Lo-Lo-Lo-Lola.’ It’s Tom, not Grey, coming to get her for tea, singing for her. Lola slides further down into her nook at the top of the tree, curling herself into a ball. She tries to breathe without making a sound. She lies very still. The longer it takes him to find her the longer he’ll sing for her.

There are no other noises: he’s at the foot of the tree, he’s standing very still, Lola shivers as she slowly exhales.

‘Lo-La? Oh where are you Lola? Oh where is my Lola?’ This is what she has been waiting for, what she kept so silent for. He has begun to make up new lyrics. He has begun to climb the tree.

‘Oh I’m not the world’s most cleverest guy, but I looked on the ground and I looked in the sky, and there’s no Lola. Oh no no no Lola. In-vis-i-ble Lola.’

There is no-one else as funny as Tom. *He looked in the sky*, he’s crazy. The laughter bursts out of her with the breath she has been holding for too long, and the energy his attention gives her. She hears his climbing speed up, his ragged breath chops

up the words of his next verse. She remembers, at the last minute, the blood on her leg, dried now, and scrambles to roll the cuffs of her trousers back down. She only has time to get one done but it's enough, it will hide the fact that she has hurt herself; it will stop anyone getting upset.

'Ah well a fi fie foe a fi fie fum, oh-oh-oh I smell the blood of an Eng-lish-munn, Oh, no it's Lola. HELLO HELLO LO-LA ...'

He screams this last part as he reaches the top of the trunk and pulls himself up, launching his torso towards Lola, through the widest fork. Lola screams too, with laughter and the same kind of exciting fear that bubbles up from deep in the pit of her stomach at those times that he gestures at her across the room, his hands turned to pincers, threatening a tickle attack, or steps out unexpectedly from behind a doorway – *Boo* – to see her jump. She always jumps, even when she knows he is coming. She tries not to but it is like trying to bang on a drum without blinking.

She kicks her legs, scrabbling backwards up one of the branches. She is not fast enough though and Tom catches her right leg with one hand. His hand is large enough to wrap around her whole bare calf muscle. Lola screams again, this scream turning into that hard, racking laugh that takes your breath and leaves you almost paralysed and feels like it will never stop. The game is almost over, he has her now.

Her brother heaves himself up next to her in the hand of the tree, without letting his grasp on her leg loosen and, breathing heavily, breaks into that soft chuckle Lola loves. It's almost a pant really, with a little throaty break: 'K-eeeh, keh keh keh, k-eeeh, keh keh keh. Wooh. Did I scare ya? Aye? Aye?' he laughs, pulling her into a bear hug that squeezes the last of the air from her lungs. 'Did I scare ya? *Ah scared Lit-tle Lo-la.*'

When he sings for her, Tom screws up his features like a rock star. He looks like a rock star. That's what Kirsty Simmons *used* to say about Tom, before yesterday. But

Lola pushes thoughts of Kirsty from her mind. What was written in that note would make him sad, Lola knows it would. It's awful when Tom is sad. He belongs in the adult world really, only visiting Lola in her world for fun. These visits have been becoming fewer and farther between lately. Tom and Merena have been arguing more and more and every few weeks the arguments increase in intensity until finally the front door slams and Tom is gone again. He comes and goes and Lola never knows when he will do either. No one ever talks about it, where he has gone, when he might return, *that* he is gone, that he might *not* return.

It's a terrible thing, when an adult is sad, when they cry. Crying is a bit like breaking, the tears like little parts of a person falling away.

'No,' says Lola, smiling for him, so that he will keep smiling at her. 'You never scare me. I'm never scared.' It's her favourite lie. Tom laughs again, and lifts his right eyebrow, facing her. Lola echoes his laughter and his expression, her left eyebrow is the one she can lift. 'We're like a mirror,' she says. The arch of Tom's eyebrow softens and the corners of his smile tighten almost imperceptibly. 'You'd better hope not LoLo.' Lola tilts her head, frowns: *What do you mean?*

'Never mind,' he answers her, although she hasn't spoken. 'I'm a dickhead. Ignore me.' A strange shot of fear tightens Lola's belly at the change in his tone and she realises she must have let it show on her face because an expression of pain briefly crosses his. He shakes his head and smacks his forehead with the heel of his hand, and his smile returns. Like whacking the side of the telly when the picture starts to slip, Lola thinks. Suddenly everything is back to normal. 'Hey,' he says, 'Come on, tea's getting cold.'

He moves so quickly Lola has no time to argue. He swoops, throws her up and over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carries her to the ground as he climbs down the

tree with his one free arm. Lola laughs all the way, her head jouncing on her neck. When they reach the ground, he shifts his hands to her waist as if to lift her back over his shoulder and set her down. He lets her feet brush the ground. He lifts her back up, swinging her in a large arc against the indigo night sky and tips her upside down again. Lola feels the rush of air on her face, and then as he walks along, the tight grip of one strong arm encircling her legs, her head tapping against his knee, she yells up at him.

‘You’re the slowest climber in the world.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Oh *yeah.*’

‘Really?’ His voice is rising up again. Lola, who can only see his feet, the grass, and the upside down back verandah, is beginning to feel nauseated. His arm is pressing on the spot where she scraped her knee, and her hip is knocking against a hard metal stud on his belt. She knows though, that the return of the lilt in his voice means that the corners of his mouth are turning up again, she can hear his grin returning. It is a more important thing to her than a little sick in the back of her throat, a tiny moment of pain.

‘Really!’ she continues, feeling her cheeks grow heavy as they fill with blood, imagining them swelling so much that they obscure her eyes. ‘I am so much faster than you!’

They have reached the back verandah. He sets her back on her feet. ‘Well then, little Lo, you’re just going to have to show me how to be quick like you, aye?’ He tousles her hair gently but she is lightheaded from being upside down and loses her balance.

‘Hey! You ‘right? You’re alright,’ he says, quickly kneeling down in front of her, brushing her hair from her face, taking hold of her by the upper arms. Her equilibrium is beginning to return. *Keep him smiling.*

‘I’m alright,’ she answers, nodding. ‘You alright?’ She tilts her head to one side and lifts her eyebrow again.

‘I’m alright,’ he says in a soft voice. His eyebrow does not lift, but his eyes widen. ‘You sharp little bugger. I’m alright.’ He says it slowly, like he’s still thinking his answer through. ‘C’mon Lo, its teatime.’ All of a sudden he envelops her in an enormous hug. Just as quickly, he stands again, brushing at his eyes with his forearm and leads her by the hand, up the back steps, into the house.

The moon is high, visible between two pale branches. Almost full, brilliant, clear-edged – white paper plate, pasted onto the blue-black painted-cardboard diorama background. As Lola lifts her head up out of the leaves, and pushes herself slowly up onto her elbows, the colour of the sky changes, moving through ever-lightening shades of blue, almost to white, then into yellow, red, orange and pink as her gaze lowers and the horizon rises until they are level with one another. The sun is a tiny glint above the dark roof of the old house. No one is coming to get her for dinner, and if she doesn’t start back now it will be dark before she gets there.

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Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Circular, circling, centrepiece. At the end of a lengthy, heavy chain hanging from a rusty hook embedded in an ornate ceiling rose that would once have borne the weight of a chandelier (displaced, does the sharp glitter of its pendant branches haunt? this single piece of glass a smooth ghost?) It spins on the spot, slowly turning anti-clockwise until each link in the chain*

reaches its particular limit and rebounds against the next, setting the curved disc turning in the opposite direction. A brief release of energy before momentum slows.

- *A fine, flowerless vine grows up (or down?) the chain, thin tendrils thread through its links, curl around their pressed-metal twins and seem to gently grip the rounded edge of the disc at its top. Disc? Dish? Convex (not-mirror). Giant dinnerplate, turned on its side, suspended in midair, balanced on that thin edge, on nothing-at-all. Such a tight circle it makes. That motion so gentle and endless. Great disembodied eye, surveying the room.*

—

7.15 pm

Did they come in that quietly, or have I really been that preoccupied? My stomach tightens, thrilling at the sound of her voice echoing down the hallway. It lifts and lowers and whoops and purrs, shifting through the widest possible range of moods in the shortest possible time, and still, listening, I can follow its path like it's the way home.

Charlotte.

I leave my studio smiling, shutting the door carefully behind me, my grin widening as I step into the hallway and hear a second voice rumbling beneath hers. *Grey.* I walk down the hallway in the direction of Charlotte's voice, treading quietly, trying to make out the shape of their conversation, but it seems like nonsense, how could it be possible that he would talk over her in that way, why would she carry on as though he had not interrupted? They can't be that comfortable already, Grey is so naturally reserved, and it is the first time they've met one another. Or worse, arguing? It can't be. Please, let it not be.

It's only when I reach the door to the main room and can more clearly make out what Charlotte is saying that I realise my mistake. When I push open the door, her words reverberate, filling every corner of the space. Neither she nor my father is in here. There is only Terry, fiddling with the volume controls on the sound system.

'Terry, this is Lola,' booms Charlotte's voice, Terry's following swiftly after, almost too quiet to hear over even my careful footsteps: 'So, Lola, are you in or out?'

Clever, Charlotte, that's clever. It cuts through all the small talk, I think. It is exactly how our first meeting might have gone if Charlotte had had her way, how all conversations might go if they were run by her rules. Minimal preliminaries. Little small talk. No barriers.

On the side wall, the colours and the shadows flicker. The shapes, our shapes, shift and change. Charlotte's hands drop down from Terry's shoulders and she shrugs. Her mouth moves, and I watch her lips shape themselves around words that are not the same ones ringing out from the corner speakers now.

This morning, from the shower, I called out to tell her I believe I've become immune to that strange effect of hearing your own recorded voice, the shock of it, the way it shatters all your illusions by being unrecognisable, the voice of a stranger.

'It's like listening to the voice of someone I know really well now,' I called over the water, 'like when you hear a song on the radio and are able to instantly name the singer, the way your friends don't need to introduce themselves when they phone you. You know already, from one word. *Hello*, they say, or *hi*, just *hi*. *Hi*, and you know who they are.' Just from hearing it in the background while she took apart our recorded conversations, playing and replaying single words, sharp phrases, convoluted sentences. Multiple versions of this first meeting, of arguments, flirtations, frustrations, triumphs.

'What?' she yelled from the lounge, 'I can't hear you. Did you wear my pink sneakers?'

'It doesn't matter,' I yelled back, trusting the rhythm of the phrase to carry its meaning. 'No,' I called, and then: 'Look under the couch. *Under the couch.*'

Instead of music, as well as music, like music, our voices have played in the background every day as we worked. They would change throughout the day, with Charlotte's effort and mood, as she freed them from their beginnings, tearing apart arguments and splicing them back together into romantic duets, bringing together a hundred versions of the same pronoun and linking them to form an undulating chain, youYOUyouyeeeeeewyewyouyou. Our own voices, our own words, divorced from

us, wrested free of us, hanging in the air long after we normally would have forgotten them.

Watching the projected film as those conversations play over the stereo I am surprised at how difficult it actually is to concentrate on the difference between the two recordings, how easy to assume that what I am hearing is what those figures up there are saying. This, despite the fact that Terry has found the perfect volume now, not too loud that people won't be able to talk, loud enough that people will be able to stand near the speakers and listen. Despite the fact that I have known what Charlotte has been doing for months now, despite the fact that one of those figures, one of those voices up there is me, saying things I never said.

If I concentrate very hard, lipreading, I can make out a phrase every now and then. *Terry this is Lola. Studio space. Through here. Al-lo, al-lay, Lo-la. Lola this is Terry. I'm Char, short for Charlotte.* I don't really trust myself though, no matter how hard I try, it is not long before the phrases turn into sentences, the sentences into whole conversations and I know that I am filling in the gaps, from the words buzzing and swooping around me in the air, from my own memory of that first day.

I wonder what people will make of Charlotte's work, people without the same context of these shared memories. People who don't know her the way I do. But then, I think, as a shout rings out from the street, what about all those people coming who have known her much longer than I have? Before I can succumb to panic, I hear her, Charlotte, talking to Grey. I hear him. I hear them laughing together. My father is here, and he is *laughing*. I want to see what he looks like, making those happy noises. The shape his mouth makes. Does he squint, or do his eyes widen when he smiles? I can't remember the last time I heard that sound.

I can picture him tired, brushing at his forehead with the back of one hand, a burning stub of a rollie grazing silver curls. I can picture him with tears in the corners of his eyes, whistling ‘Sit Down Young Stranger’. That gruff growl of his, rare and always immediately followed by an apology, equally infrequent moments of satisfaction, leaning back in his chair after a second serve of pie, holding a pair of shining boots at arm’s length, clapping a hardcover book shut with a pleased yawn. These images rise easy, they remained his even after Tom left. But not laughter.

—

allow your eyes to linger, tracing the lines and loops of the letters of the name inscribed in the top left hand corner of the inside cover, the name belonging to the original owner of the atlas, a different name, a different address ·

Thomas James Hayward

Paddington Public Primary School

Class 3C

in the top right hand corner, above the drawing of the house, is a second square, divided into four equal parts · in each smaller square is a letter, try not to assume that you know what these letters are · even if the letters echo in your mind before you read them, L.O.L.A., take a closer look · after all these years of half-seeing, half-remembering, really read them for once, see that they actually spell out L.O.V.E. · as if they were written by another person, not just by your younger self · as if you are watching a magic trick · as if a whole person has just disappeared in front of your eyes

—

‘Lola Hayward! What are you playing at?’ Mrs Smith has been standing behind little Lola at her desk for a few long breaths now. The tops of Lola’s ears, her cheeks and neck are hot and she is worried that her embarrassment is visible to both the teacher and Carl Simmons sitting behind her. Her hair prickles at the follicle with the effort of trying to discern the direction of Mrs Smith’s gaze. She has been biting old scar tissue on the inside of her bottom lip.

If the teacher has been using Lola as a kind of shield, looking out across the top of her head to scan the room for trouble, everything will be ok and Lola can remain on the usual lowgrade alert. If she has, and Lola already believes she has, been standing there so silently for so long in order to get a good look at the list Lola has been making since the beginning of class, then Mrs Smith has found the trouble she desires right there under her frighteningly long, sharp-looking nose.

‘Give me that.’ As Lola turns her head to look up at the teacher, Mrs Smith leans down, reaching quickly across the tiny hunched shoulder to snatch the exercise book out from under the protective curl of Lola’s skinny pale arm. Impatient by nature, she moves too swiftly for care and her elbow connects with the little girl’s sharp chin. Lola feels as though the heat of her embarrassment makes her welling tears burn more than usual. She is too surprised to cry out, too distracted by the taste of blood and the knowledge that the loose tooth she has been satisfyingly wiggling with her tongue all week has been knocked free of her bottom jaw and now presses on the underside of her tongue. ‘Sorry,’ the teacher says, too quickly to fool anyone, let alone a child like Lola, attuned to untrustworthiness, the lack of connection between words and meaning.

The teacher is not sorry enough to look up from the page in the exercise book, held open with thumbs and forefingers, held away from her body, like dirty underwear. Her chin juts like a turtle, the loose skin beneath it wobbling as her irritation turns to

something more sinister. She is not sorry at all. It hadn't occurred to her to restrain her own movement, hadn't occurred to her that a child was a whole other person who might also move, hasn't occurred to her now that the girl may have been hurt, that it might pay to check. Lola watches, waiting, as the teacher retracts her chin, the corners of her thin mouth turning down, her eyebrows lowering, knitting.

The blood is pooling around Lola's lower gums. It doesn't hurt but her saliva is thickening and the harder she tries to hold back her tears the more her nose runs and she is very aware that the noise of the classroom has been replaced by the silence of anticipation. Her peripheral vision blurs despite all attempts to blink the tears away, but she can tell from the curving twisting shapes their bodies make that the others have all turned in their seats to see what will happen next. She doesn't blame them; she can't take her eyes off Mrs Smith herself.

She is not yet sure of the extent of the trouble she's in, but she knows she has done a shameful thing. She knows because of the look on Mrs Smith's face, the rage in her eyes. Knows too, because even as she began to write down the first idea at the top of the list, long before Mrs Smith walked up behind her, she had felt that peculiar thrill, low in the belly, that slightly sick feeling, the same tingling energy that came with the decision to steal a piece of Merena's cooking chocolate from the back of the top shelf of the pantry. The shame she feels now also has the quality of disappointment that comes with the tang of salt and the dry pasty aftertaste of that same chocolate.

She watches Mrs Smith's mouth move as she reads her way down the page. Her ears are filled with the *thubthubthub* of her own heartbeat, but somewhere behind that she can hear the susurrus of her teacher's disdain as she mutters and moues her way to the bottom of the page. Lola knows these inscribed thoughts by heart, knows the order in which she committed them to the paper, she can follow along by watching the

zigzagging movements of Mrs Smith's eyes, across and back, across and back, can think her way through the inventory of horrors with the teacher, knows which terrible act of self-obliteration on what line sends the woman's pencilled eyebrows skyward, which causes that sharp intake of breath, which the low, almost indiscernible moan. Lola drops her chin to her chest, and tries to force the thick mix of mucous and blood to the back of her throat, tries to swallow it without gagging.

'This is *not* your adding up, is it Miss Hayward?' asks Mrs Smith, loud enough for all her audience to hear. 'Well?' she repeats, 'is it? Is this your maths book Louise? Is it?' As Lola lifts her head, she is aware of how heavy it feels, how inadequate her neck seems to the job of holding it up. How ugly such a big head on such a skinny neck must look to Carl Simmons sniggering behind her. 'No,' she mumbles, barely parting her lips.

'I beg your pardon?' sniffs the seething teacher, flicking at the bright blue cover of the exercise book with her middle finger. 'What was that?' There is a long moment as Lola stares at that cover, memorising the picture on the back, a line drawing of a fat happy pencil with six flat sides and long skinny arms and legs jumping up into the air shouting *Learning is Fun*, the thick black lettering of his words contained perfectly in the tidy oval speech bubble. There is no other option, she must speak.

'*NO*,' she says, and she lifts her chin high but it is no use, the blood spills out over the curled-in dam of her lower lip, she sniffs at the end of the word but still the snot drips from both nostrils and her tears, which seem to have gone cold with waiting, spill out over her round red cheeks. Mrs Smith finally looks at her, and the expression on her face is one of disbelief, and surprise, she has forgotten their collision, Lola can see that.

‘Oh for God’s sake, *Louise*,’ she snaps, not about to let a show of empathy undermine the power the discovery of Lola’s list has given her. She slaps the exercise book down on the desk. Lola, wiping her mouth and nose on her sleeve, conditioned to expect danger, quickly snaps her head back out of harm’s way with a sharp inhalation, and breathes the tooth down into her throat. Between the tooth, and the blood and the mucous and the shock of it, she begins to panic, and to choke, and her vision swims and blurs and as she closes her eyes she can hear the excitement in Carl’s voice circling around the back of her neck, ‘She’s dying, she’s dyyyyying.’

Everything is turning black and, wheezing, Lola lets her head drop back as her shoulders lift and, despite its having felt so heavy just a moment ago, her head grows light and lifts her up towards the buzzing fluorescent and yellowed paint of the classroom ceiling. She feels an arm on her shoulder and with it a deep sadness that somebody is trying to keep her down on the ground. She fights against it for a moment before another hand thumps into the tightness between her shoulder blades and there is a space in time where all is still and silent before her vision clears, and the clamour of the excited classroom floods her head and her breath returns to her body in one frighteningly huge exhalation.

A safe breath; the tooth has been dislodged by Mrs Smith’s violent aid. Lola felt it leave her lips, but she didn’t see it fly across the aisle and land on Kirsty Simmons’ desk. She knows, though, that this is what has happened, because screeching over the rest of the noise in the room is the piercing shrill of Kirsty’s anger and disgust. She can imagine the wet tooth landing in that long dark shiny hair. Kirsty goes to drama lessons on Friday afternoons, she has a practised scream.

‘THAT. IS. ENOUGH! Kirsty stop that stupid noise.’ Mrs Smith is moving on. Kirsty stops screaming immediately, but her mouth remains open as she turns to scowl

at Lola. 'Be quiet everybody.' But everybody already is. Lola is quietest of all, not even sniffing any more. She has stopped crying. She is cold but does dare move to retrieve her cardigan from the back of the chair. 'Right,' the teacher continues, swiping a tissue from the box on her desk and crossing the room in two strides to pick up the tooth from where it lies in the pencil groove along the top edge of Kirsty's desk. 'Carly, take Louise to the sick bay, tell Mrs Alderson I said to call her mother and tell her there's been an ... incident, and to put the tooth in a glass of milk,' almost absentmindedly she adds 'the dentist might be able to replace it.'

As the two girls walk across the empty playground to the sick bay Lola works to swallow the last of the blood that at least seems to have stopped flowing and tests the soft ragged skin around the hole in her gum. A pleasing kind of wound. One that no longer hurts, but allows her to taste her own blood and in this way focus, in a secret way, on her own body. Discover the truth of gums, their shape and feel, and the reality of the hole left in that soft tissue where the tooth lay before it was lost. She opens her fist and examines the tooth in her palm.

From the top it looks just like the pictures of teeth she has seen at the dentist, although there is a dark dot in the centre fissure that Lola understands is a cavity she hadn't known was there. When she turns it over, it looks old, fragile, almost empty, like a shell, or the husk of a cicada. She presses her tongue into the indent in her gum, and then her finger, the hole seeming a different size and shape to each, torn and ragged-edged to her fingertip, smooth and bowl-like to her tongue. That area of flesh seems to hold both the idea of the tooth that fell free of it and that of the replacement secreted beneath it, at once. It reminds Lola of the top of the climbing tree. The tooth in her hand however, is like a broken thing, a lonely thing, a small bird fallen to the ground, cold and still.

Lola knows that Mrs Smith didn't understand that the tooth was already loose, she knows the tooth isn't going back in, knows she isn't going to the dentist. She knows too though, that this is the beginning of trouble not the end of it. The trouble will really begin when Merena has to get up out of bed and answer Mrs Alderson's phonecall.

She knows that Merena having to leave the house empty, leave the telephone unattended in order to drive into town to pick Lola up will only make it worse. Knows that while the teacher and her stray elbow will bear the brunt of the early raging part of the storm, it will be Lola who will have to suffer in the quiet humming eye of it in the car on the way home, Lola listening to the reprisal that makes up its second half when they get home and Grey has to be told. Worst of all, if she doesn't act now to stop any discussion of the exercise book and its contents, it will be Lola aching through the sound of Merena crying during the night, Lola creeping around the house tomorrow, walking through the silent devastation, the aftermath of disaster.

'Carly,' she says quickly, 'you don't have to say anything, I'll ask Mrs. Alderson if she'll let me call my mum myself. She's pretty nice, I think she will.' Carly, who it seems was chosen by Mrs Smith to speak on Lola's behalf precisely *because* everyone knows she is the shyest girl in the class, seems overwhelmed with relief and gratitude at Lola's suggestion and actually begins to skip, her pigtails bouncing now as her fear subsides, as does Lola's. There is some residual tension, about whether she can pull this trick off, and an underlying understanding of the tenuousness of any relief, of her own happiness as compared to Carly's skipping kind of joy, but the further they get from Mrs. Smith's classroom, the less real it all feels, both what has just happened, and anything that might happen next.

For the moment she pushes these thoughts aside, just to one side of her mind, in order to spend the last few moments before they reach the small building that holds the

school office and the sickbay tonguing the new hole in her gum and thinking about the tooth in her hand. How her gum speaks of how it cupped the old tooth before it was lost, and calls to the new one, buried beneath the raw pink flesh. How the tooth is silent, and empty, with no memory of where it has come from, no ability to, but worse, no wish to, return.

And that is when Lola decides to slow down, just enough so that Carly will reach the office ahead of her. Far enough ahead that by the time Carly gets to Mrs. Alderson's door, Lola will have been able to make it back across the playground and out the gates. It is a dead thing that tooth, and at the last minute, as Carly, who has run on ahead, positively weightless with her liberation from the responsibility of speech, hops up the steps to the school office door, Lola stops at the water bubblers, and under the guise of rinsing her mouth, opens her fist and lets the tooth drop, pushing it down the grate with her toe.

Alakazam, gone, just like that. Just like Tom, her brother the Invisible Man.

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Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *We read (from the title card): "the lens used in this piece was recovered from a discarded astronomical telescope". There is a precision to these words: "recovered" (not recycled), "discarded" (not disused). A doubleness there too: "astronomical", space/size.*
- *This lens is for looking at something far away. For something far away. Faraway, we think, beyond. To search, we imagine. It was made to bring the far away close, to magnify, to study. To*

see. See what? Space? Stars? Suns dying or dead? The past? The future? Is it really this word-choice giving rise to our questions about intention in the choice of object?

- What about the unspoken words that attach themselves? Eye/I. Iris. Pupil. Surface – painted onto and etched into. The alterations making the eye at once more itself (through emphasis) and other than itself (by exaggeration). The impossibility of it all. Eye, and not eye. I/Not I. Both true and false.

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7.18 pm

Again, something about Terry's posture makes me pause as I turn to go back down the hall to greet my father. He stands at the tall front window with his back to me, looking down on Rundle Street. The angle of his shoulders is all wrong, slumped and heavy, his head is sitting at an awkward angle back on his neck, and even the way his hands are placed on his hips speaks more of defeat than his usual aura of confidence. For a moment I think he has hurt himself. It seems the only logical explanation. He has been lifting things, he has hurt his back.

'Terry,' I say, 'are you alright?' and he turns his head. His mouth is half-open, as though he has been breathing hard, reinforcing my belief that he is injured.

On the wall, Charlotte smiles and pouts and gesticulates. I don't remember her looking so unsure of herself. I thought she was so in control that day when we met, they were both so cool, so above it all. Now, watching the playback, I can see her nerves bouncing her around. Now that I have seen her attempt to impress others, I can see how hard she was working to impress me that day.

One Terry, onscreen, gestures towards the corridor, offscreen, and the tape slows, the focus zooming in on his mouth. The recorded voice of a second Terry speeds up, repeating in or out, in or out, in or out inorout inoroutinoroutinoroutinoroutinorout until it changes from a question to a mantra to a nonsense, an unknown language. His slow mouth moves and it is necessary to concentrate, almost to the point of meditation, in order to read the words. *Shall we go through?* he asks. This Terry strides across the room, blocking us from view for a moment and then he disappears through a darkened, open doorway. This Terry, strident, efficient, in control, is the one that imprinted on me

that day, the idea of him I draw on whenever I have cause to attempt to interpret a stray comment, a mood, a look.

The third Terry, one I have never met before today, stands framed by the window and says to me now, 'I keep thinking nobody will turn up.' He has his glasses pushed up on top of his head. All his barriers are down, his eyes are wide, and pale, and long-lashed, his features softened, naked. He blinks: 'It's past seven,' he says, both hands making tiny futile circles at hip level. 'Where is everyone?' I am so taken aback that I look stupidly around the empty room with him, as though the entire crowd, three hundred or so guests might be hiding in wait, behind two sculptures and a desk, ready at any moment to spring out and yell, *Surprise!* as one.

'It feels like a dream,' he continues, 'like a nightmare. Like turning up to school with no pants on.'

This Terry alters the way I view that other one, up there on the wall. He still moves smoothly, still seems to glide along a breath above the floor, but he does fiddle a little too often with the hem of his T-shirt, he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, up on to the top of his head, pulls them down again, takes them off, breathes on them, cleans them, puts them back on. He watches everything Charlotte does. I can see now, he's waiting for his cues, waiting for the familiar pauses in which to speak well-practiced phrases. She nods, exaggeratedly, reassuring him, when I had assumed it was the other way around. *Okay then*, that arm around his waist seems to be saying, *we don't have to go down to the crowded pub to talk. We can stay here, just the three of us.*

'I used to dream I was at a party,' I say with a quiet laugh that bubbles up out of the strange mixture of relief and groundlessness this new insight brings, 'and when I looked around the room I would suddenly realise everyone there was someone I'd written love letters to. I would spend the whole dream terrified that they had been

comparing them, that they'd realise it was always the same words. I'd wake up and have to unplug my telephone, terrified it was true and I was about to be assailed by angry ex-es.'

Terry doesn't laugh. A bead of sweat pops out through a pore at his hairline, defies gravity for a breath, and begins to slide down his temple. He sniffs and shakes his head, flicking his hair back off his forehead.

I'm sorry Terry, I want to say. I have been wrong about you. Have imagined you were someone else. All this year you've been talking to me, and I've been responding to you as though you were someone else. 'Hey,' I say, 'it's going to be great.'

When he looks down at his shoes, I take a deep breath.

'I used to dream that people were falling,' I begin, not laughing anymore, only letting the sound of a small rueful smile shape the words, 'falling, all around me. All the time, all these people, falling. Only, I could *feel* the fall, that lurch, in the pit of my own stomach. I used to believe that thing they say about falling dreams.'

He shakes his head again, and in case he is telling me he doesn't know what I mean I explain. 'That if you hit the ground in your dream you have a heart attack, you die of shock. I learned to wake myself from my dreams. How to put markers in to give it away, that it was a dream. How to concentrate my will enough to break through the paralysis of sleep and scream. Loud enough to wake myself. To wake someone else who could wake me in turn. I used to be so relieved to be able to open my eyes and look around and see for myself that no one really had fallen.'

I felt responsible, you know. Because I had dreamed them, had dreamed up their fall. What happened to them, while I was watching them? What would happen if I saw them hit the ground?'

Reaching out to Terry, I put my hands on his shoulders, they feel slighter beneath his cotton shirt than I could have ever imagined. I turn him around to face the window again. He lets me steer him back to the glass, and when we both face it, he allows his weight to fall back just a little, enough to feel me there, standing behind him, enough that I am supporting his weight just a little, that if I stepped away he would stumble. *That must feel nice*, I think. I wrap my arms around his waist and duck my head under his right arm. He places his hand, large and warm, on my lower back, and I am shot through with memories of Remy.

Lying in bed with her describing the tree I once wanted so badly to have tattooed in just that spot in the curve of my spine. Lying on a couch, my head across her thighs, willing her not to keep her hand on my back just a moment longer. Looking her straight in the eye and attempting to tell long and complicated lies. Turning my face away so that I didn't have to see the simple, awful truth of the contempt in her eyes.

Terry and I watch the slow, busy Rundle Street traffic stop and start, stop and start. We watch the cyclists and the pedestrians duck and weave. The sun is starting to go down, the sky beginning to change colour, the brightness lowering to street level. The warmth is collecting there, hanging around with the people drinking and eating at the tables on the footpath across the road.

‘Did it ever happen?’ he asks. ‘Did anyone ever hit the ground in one of your dreams?’

‘You know what I think,’ I answer, turning him around again to face me. ‘I think there is no ground.’

This is Lola, Terry.

So, Lola, are you in or out?

‘Both?’ I say now, taking Terry’s cheek between my thumb and forefinger.
‘Neither?’

He takes his glasses off, breathes on them, and cleans them with the fine fabric of his shirt. Just before he puts them back on he says, ‘All of the above.’

On the wall, Charlotte takes a step back to let him pass before following him to an open doorway at the other end of the large room. She pauses there for a second, turning to beckon to me to follow as Terry strides on through to the next room. She places her hand on the opaque etched glass of one panel of the sliding doors, suddenly serious. I watch her give me the details. She is facing the camera front on now and it is easy to match the shapes her mouth makes with my memory of her words. *This room is the exhibition space. Will be, the exhibition space. When we’re finished.* I catch up with her and we walk towards the door.

‘Everything’s going to be fine, people will come,’ I tell Terry.

‘I don’t believe in fine,’ he says. ‘Everything’s great or it’s shit.’ I kiss the air beside his face. He is transforming into a thing too fragile for touching, a thing I might break, despite my best intentions. ‘Grey’s here,’ I tell him. ‘I have to go.’ He blinks and nods, without looking at me. As I turn to leave, he reaches out and gives my hand a squeeze. Too afraid to return the pressure, too afraid to let go, I just stand there and let him hold my hand the way you let newborn babies grasp onto your finger, as tight as they want, as long as they need.

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turn to the back of the atlas · stuck to the inside of the cover with ancient brittle Sellotape is a pocket that has been fashioned from the cardboard backing of an old

school exercise book · the names of your family, arranged into small lists and groups, cover its grainy grey surface ·

beneath each name is a tiny circle · the circles are connected to one another by short straight lines that create a series of shapes – triangles, squares · it is a secret code, a message from yourself to yourself, from long ago · there is the obvious, of course, the child telling herself about herself, her place in the world, cementing in it words · it is an odd kind of thrill to be faced with evidence of that desire to find the shape and pattern of things, to forge one out of them, or force one onto them, if no innate design can be discerned, even then, all those years ago ·

but there is something else · even without remembering the act of writing the names, drawing the symbols, look at them now and know the deep significance this secret symbolic language once held, feel it resonate through you · an eerie feeling · a sort of loss, too emptied of meaning for grief · deeper, even more difficult to describe · think: the person you were yesterday is just a dream · you forget · a dream: even if you wake laughing, screaming, crying, the details slip away, swift as light and all you're left with is the feeling ·

a dangerous situation really, the mind doesn't like renegade emotions, it needs details to attach them to, details, situations, people

—

‘Adrift. Orphans all. Lonely children.’

Remy's mother and father are both dead. A car accident. They give her neither trouble nor support, lying quiet in Melbourne's central cemetery, alongside their own parents, and theirs, not too long a walk from the sweeping curve of a road that takes you

to the National Gallery. Remy sits, Sam on her left, Lola on her right, on one of the long black leather benches just inside the front entrance of the gallery, watching Swanston Street through the huge front window, the road busy with the typical Saturday morning Melbourne traffic – trams, taxis and tourists. They sit close enough together that when Remy opens the newspaper it spreads across all three of their laps.

Sam's parents are not dead. There are phonecalls from his mother every Sunday at eleven. Every Sunday at eleven Lola hears him stumble down the hall and groan through his hangover. 'No Ma. I was awake.'

Once or twice Remy has called out from her bed, 'Well I fucking wasn't,' but it makes no difference. Every Sunday at eleven. Sam's parents, alive and well in Adelaide.

'Not alive,' he shivers, 'undead.'

The phonecalls from his mother are brief but have long-lasting impact. Once, after slamming the receiver down into its cradle, Sam stared at it for a lengthy moment, before picking it back up again and smashing it through a small square panel of the stained glass front door.

He and his father communicate via the postal system, Sam forwarding a steady stream of bills, invoices and receipts, thin business envelopes arriving in response. Sam's name printed in large black type visible through the cellophane window, his father's in a smaller font, just below the signature on each generous cheque.

Information filters down from Sam's strange, distant parents, to Sam, guarded and private, to loyal, protective Remy, and finally down to Lola, the newcomer. Lola likes to believe the process is one of distillation rather than dilution. By the time they reach her, she reasons, all facts can be considered cleansed of extraneous details, existing now in a pure, crystallised form. It is the kind of thing that has begun to make

sense, now, like Remy's explanation of how the death of an unborn child, the little sister Sam had already made space for in his six-year-old heart, is the event from his past that can be considered to have 'orphaned' him.

Lola is beginning to forget that such things exist: family, birthplaces. In the past, this would have been impossible, but she has left all of that behind. She is living a different life now, here with Sam and Remy. She is a new person, about to begin a new decade of her life. Her parents, Grey and Merena, exist, but in some other present, distant, lacking a certain, vital dimension. She writes no letters home. Goes as long as she can between phonecalls. Speaks about them only when asked. 'My mother is crazy,' she will say. 'She's obsessed with my dead brother. All she does is write all those stories that don't make any sense. My father lives in a dream. In his own world, in his shed, making his little people out of wire.'

She is hard, now. She is becoming, if not exactly a wall, then perhaps a cliff face. Brutal, unforgiving. Speaking aloud the kind of thing people might expect her to keep silent, secret. Slipping intimate information into casual conversation. 'One brother,' she answers queries about her background, 'Tom. He disappeared when I was seven.' Further questions do not bother her. 'Killed himself, I think. He must have.' All the dirty details always given, no one spared: 'Oh yeah, half-brother. Same father, different mothers. My father's first wife was a singer. And a drunk. She ended up a prostitute down The Cross.' As though the truth is in the facts, in the minutiae, as though honesty comes down to how explicit a person can be.

Almost all the details – later in her life, she will look back and think that in comparison to those questions answered, perhaps even courted, those avoided must have seemed tame, trivial. Her parents, Grey and Merena, live a long way north. If pressed, she will admit to the coast, the NSW border, but the name of the town itself

tends to stick in her throat. It's better, she has found, that it remains unnamed. There are ... connotations. Expectations. This is obvious from the reactions of those she does choose to tell. Most people do seem to realise that it would be rude to actually *comment* on the incongruence between the image conjured by the words Byron Bay and her appearance, her torn, fraying jeans, red flannelette shirt ugly against pale, freckled skin, her short, short, home haircut, more westie-feral than hippie-feral.

Only raised eyebrows and stolen glances give away the idea that the name of her hometown might mean one thing within its perimeters and another down south. After only one short year in Melbourne, with its indecisive weather, its old buildings and new trams, even she is beginning to think of the Bay as a faraway place, across one border and on the edge of another. A dreamworld, a place where belief in ghosts was not unusual.

‘How can they not know that he’s dead?’ she says, often, shaking her head in incredulity. ‘After all this time, how can they still refuse to believe that he is dead?’

‘Orphans,’ Remy announces again. It might not be the strict truth, but somehow her dead parents give her licence to say it. When Remy says orphans, the word becomes another kind of truth, imperfectly perfect.

‘*Homeless* orphans,’ she continues, stretching the truth further towards breaking point now. They are not homeless. Yet. Their landlord though, was left unimpressed by an attempt to replace the square of shattered glass from the door with a section of cardboard excised from the side of a banana box. The question mark Sam painted in its centre did not help. Their lease will not be renewed.

It is a cold morning, still early, and the lobby of the gallery is only a marginal improvement on the chilly air outside. The front window, that immense rectangle of glass covered by a constantly flowing wall of falling water seems to make it feel even

colder, creating the illusion that is still raining outside, that the cars and people out there are moving through a deluge. The gallery had not been their first choice, but the grass in the gardens across the road had been frosty and wet, seeping through the classified section of *The Age* as Sam and Lola watched Remy search for possibilities, and of course, to sit in the lobby is a free privilege.

‘Here,’ she says now, circling an advertisement in red texta. ‘Two bedrooms. Orrong Road. Close to the shops and transport. The tram would go right past there. We only really need two rooms right? *Lovebirds?*’ Lola wishes for a tram to go past right now, rattling and screeching and filling the silence. She had not answered, believing that Sam would say something. Her surprise that he had not had taken so long to process that the window of opportunity seemed to have passed. The idea of speaking now, so late, so obvious, somehow worse than holding her breath a little longer, waiting out the awkwardness of the pause.

As it is, it is Remy who tries to cover it over. Reaching out, she wraps an arm around each of the others, her elbows hooking beneath their chins. She leans backwards, tipping their faces upward. ‘Look,’ she says with a low laugh. ‘Over there. If we get really desperate we can always sleep up there. Those trees out there, they’re like great big hands. We could have one each. Two each if we wanted.’ She pulls their faces close, Sam’s right cheek squashed up against her left, her high, sharp right cheekbone pressing into Lola’s. Lola shivers, frost melting through the fabric of her jeans, numbing her skin as she watches the dark crooked branches of the row of fig trees melt and morph in the streams of water, appearing and disappearing through three thin clouds of steaming breath.

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *The iris is blue. Or is it brown? Or green? Amber? Hazel? Hazel is the easiest word to settle on but still unsatisfying – is this just an approximate? A true, straightforward, description, or simply the closest one to hand?*
 - *A multitude of variables: the angle at which the light hits the glass; where a shadow falls; at what point on its rotation the lens might be when that light hits, when that shadow falls; the perspective from where it is we stand. It is difficult for us to discern/decide.*
 - *Also, many colours have been layered onto the glass, the application of each altering (highlighting, obscuring, deepening, lifting) the appearance of its antecedent, and, of course, itself.*
 - *In the effort to pin down a name for the resultant shade, to identify the memory it tickles, the mind begins to free associate: amber, hazel, eye, cat, marble, lampwork, glass, molten, amber, circle. Back to the beginning again.*
-

7.25 pm

The brass handle sits high on the door and loose in its fitting. Up on the wall, silent-movie-Charlotte jiggles it about, mugging for the camera: *There's a knack. There.* Remembering now, I rattle it. Remembering it all, I find the point where it catches, and turn it, and swing it open.

Remembering passing through what appeared to be the kitchen – there were teatowels and a sink, but also a single bed with a purple bedspread, and a musty looking Turkish rug, and next to that, a moped, rusty but holding onto its cool, sitting on a grease-splattered piece of cardboard. Feeling like the rooms were just going to keep on going forever, door after door after door. As if to prove me right, Terry was waiting in yet another doorway, in the far left hand corner of what was definitely a kitchen. Making our way across the rug, as he pulled open a fridge door and looked inside, and apparently finding nothing, turned back to shoot Charlotte a quick but intense disapproving frown.

Her saying, *Oops*, again, shrugging again, a degree less happily than before. Terry shrugging with her, *Red then*, and pulling a labelless bottle and three ugly random wine glasses down from the top tier of a tall oak bookshelf. Next to the shelves, a pair of louvered saloon doors: Terry shunting one open with one hip, waiting for us to pass through before entering the small windowless hallway, ducking through and letting the doors swing shut behind him. Charlotte shivering, *Eerrgh*, and quickly opening another door in the wall to her right. The hallway – claustrophobic, dark and damp and eerie.

The rabbit warren feel of the studios growing as we passed through another hallway, slightly wider and lined with four more doors, two to each side of the hall. Charlotte turning to explain again, without stopping this time. The need to walk quite

quickly to keep up with Terry, even though he didn't really seem to be hurrying. Thinking: *Long legs*. Charlotte puffing, plum coloured circles blooming on each high pale cheekbone, saying, *These are the studio spaces*. Gesturing with a wild sweep of her whole arm across the hall and back, pointing out three of the rooms.

All the doors ajar, the institutional orange carpet squares we were now walking on spreading out into each room, reminding me of primary school. That the thought must have shown up on my face before I could censor it because there was Charlotte giggling, all earlier signs of sulkiness disappearing with a wink: *I know the carpet's revolting, but the rooms have these great long windows and they're bigger than you'd think too*.

The whole place turning out to be bigger than it ought to be. Implausible, that all these rooms could fit into a space defined from the outside by that red-rendered single-front façade above the old fashioned shoe repair store with its ancient shoe repairer. Losing all sense of where I stood in the world. How many turns had we made since walking away from that west-facing window? Where was the sun now? The train station? The town hall?

And the storage room, Charlotte nodding toward the last of the four doors as we reach the end of the hall. There was no door, only a wide low window which Terry, smiling for the first time since his arrival, had jammed open with a long pole that looked like a broom handle before turning to face us. Deadpanning: *Ladies first*, taking Charlotte's hand to help her through the window. The lack of windows along the way meaning that I hadn't noticed the swift setting of the sun, and only realised it must be after six as I watched Charlotte step through the gap. She only had to bend a little to get through. Her black silhouette melting into the oily purple darkness of the glass above her and all I could focus on was the fuzzy reflection of the chandelier light fitting that

hung from the ceiling rose high above my own head. My breath stopping in my chest on an inhalation as she disappears and only starting up again with a conscious effort after I heard the tinny bang and echoing creak of heels hitting corrugated iron.

Come on, said Terry, *it's perfectly safe...ish*. And his wink took me by as much surprise as the warmth of his hand did as he took hold of my forearm. Once, years ago, on a forty degree day, I made myself sick at the Royal Show, waiting in line to ride the Gravitron twelve times in a row, all to impress Remy. After throwing up in a toilet stall, I walked back out into the muggy afternoon heat and apologised. *Why did you keep getting on if you were feeling sick?* she asked, as if she hadn't known, as if it had been nothing to do with her. The memory of that day adding to my reluctance to go through the window, but fading too quickly for clarity, leaving me with only the recognition of that same feeling – where you want to go I'll go, what you want to do I'll do. All grown up, twenty-eight years old this year, and still.

Still, wrapping my hand around Terry's forearm, mirroring his own gesture. Getting a good grip before stooping over, stretching one leg out over the ledge and feeling for my footing. Swinging my head down and under the window frame, its white paint an almost fluorescent counterpoint to the dark of the evening sky, grown black now and cold enough to make me shiver. Pushing my face out into the night air.

Here, Charlotte's voice, somewhere to my left. Both eyes shut tight. Opening one and looking in her direction. Shutting it again. The memory of a pale hand hovering near my left shoulder, grabbing on to her as Terry lets go of my other arm. Getting myself all the way through the window, both feet planted firmly on the rippled corrugated iron surface beneath them, before opening my eyes.

Footsteps behind me bring me back into the present, and I turn to see a trio of catering staff in their black and whites stopped in a short tidy line behind me in the hallway looking lost. 'Through that door,' I say, pointing.

As one of the waitstaff pushes it open with a careful hip Charlotte's voice floats out: 'The problem is that you get to the end, you get the thing finished, and then when you take it back to the beginning you realise that you would make different choices now. Now that you've got all the way through it.'

'And can you not go back to the original?' my father asks her. That gentle voice.

'You could,' she answers, and I'm so proud of the ease with which she answers the question, the way her voice never wavers, the way she is unapologetic about her process, 'you could. But each choice has lead to the next choice and I know I'd lose the good, maybe even things I haven't yet noticed, along with the bad.'

'So you push on then, you keep going.'

'Yeah,' she says, a quiet calm I am not used to hearing in her voice. An assuredness. 'You get to the end and you start again, but it's a new beginning. Over and over.'

'Like a circle,' I say, breaking into the conversation from the doorway. Grey takes a step forward and then seems to stop himself, as though his legs had moved ahead of his mind, and he pauses, trying to decide if that step was the right thing to do.

'Like a circle,' Charlotte nods, as if in encouragement to him. As one, my father and I step towards each other. My arms are held wide, but his stretch wider and envelop me. He squeezes tight around my shoulders, until I cough and he realises my face is caught in his armpit. He pulls back with a grin, takes hold of my face with both hands and plants a kiss on my nose. He pulls me back into his chest with one hand covering my ear and the side of my face. His other hand caps my skull.

That sparkle in the corner of his eye. Who put that there? Who is this man, this laughing, demonstrative, nose-kissing man? Where has he been cocooned all these quiet, solemn years? Where is the father I have been holding in my imagination?

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try not to break the stiff, yellowed tape when you slide your hand, held carefully flat, into the cardboard pocket · then forget, in your excitement, be a little too hasty as you pull your hand back out, and watch the tape crack and split, feel the exercise book cover coming free from that of the atlas · a stab of sadness, but it will fade quickly ·

listen to the noise the paper that was hidden in the pocket makes as you unfold it with hands that have begun to shake · spread it flat on your worktable, gently stroking the soft surface of the well-worn paper with both hands · work cautiously, knowing that the paper has been folded more times than you can count · aware that a single careless caress meant to flatten out one of those creases might cause it to rupture, tearing through the drawing ·

blink away the tears that prick at your eyes as you imagine the drawing being destroyed · know that the time will come when it will be necessary to sacrifice it · not yet, though · not yet · now is the time for looking, for remembering what was and imagining what might be

—

‘A long walk for little legs,’ says Grey, each time Lola sets off to climb the old fig tree. ‘You be careful wee one. Don’t let yourself fall now.’ He pats her head gently as she pulls her gumboots on outside the front door.

His hand, like a giant’s spoon, caps her skull with each pat: one, two, three. After the third pat he lets it lie there a moment, the muscles of his upper arm tense with the struggle to let her go. His heart fights against this, while his hand fights gravity. The silent father’s struggle: let the hand’s touch be enough to communicate everything. But hold back, hold back, because I know the strength in this hand, its potential to frighten us both. I would crush, in this fist, the one who dared to hurt you. But to let you know this feels like it would be its own kind of damage.

So he keeps that power secret, drawing it into himself, hiding it in his palm even as it tries to imprint itself on her tiny crown, an invisible mark of blessing, of protection. ‘Careful,’ Grey murmurs, ‘don’t trip, little Lola, don’t fall.’

He lifts his hand from the white-blond mop of hair, which, from the perspective of his height, is all he can see of her, most of the time. Seven, he thinks, the surprise of it widening his eyes. Years passing like seconds. Since her birth. Since he himself was seven. Seven, he muses, his hand hovering in the air just above his daughter’s head now, surely his own hair had begun to darken by then. He concentrates on the dates, does the arithmetic. Yes, it had darkened, and ...

1957. The year his mother died and his hair, white blond and silken at birth, just like his little girl’s, darkening to jet as he grew, turned a silvery grey overnight. His name, which had already begun its metamorphosis from Timmy to Tim, changed again that year, mad Uncle Gerald renaming him the Old Grey Man. He remembers more than he had thought about being seven. Remembers his new name shortening to Old Grey,

and then, because of his country's instinct towards fewer words and fewer syllables, just Grey.

1957. The Year of the Fire Rooster. It was Merena who gifted him those words, in 1979. The words, and with them a new way of imagining the world. Of telling himself about himself. Grey regards his hearing this phrase, The Year of the Fire Rooster, and Merena's explanation of its meaning, as a key moment in his life. He has never mentioned it to her or to anyone else; between Grey and Merena communication is so often an intangible, silent thing.

She knows his thoughts as they come, a lucky thing, since communication for Grey involves a kind of code, as though he lives in a world perpetually at war, where direct speech is dangerous. The very opposite of Merena, whose strength seems to be bound up in her words, her ability to look any situation, no matter how complicated or frightening, straight in the eye, and speak its name aloud.

'The Year of the Fire Rooster,' she had said, that first night, cradling his head in her lap, in his bed in the gloomy little flat in Paddington. She had agreed to move in with him, and in return he had told her about his mother's death, the hand his father had had in it. She had asked about his name, that was the beginning of it. She was interested in names. He had been Grey for so long it felt strange to say his other name out loud. As though he was speaking about a stranger. Perhaps that was what made it possible to tell her the truth, being able to speak about it all as though he were describing strangers. She hadn't judged him, and even better than that, he had seen no pity in her eyes as he spoke his deepest secret to her, sympathy, but no pity.

They had been lying in silence, holding each other, trying to rise above the ugly poverty of the tiny bedroom, its yellowing, peeling wallpaper, the floor that sunk in places beneath the most careful tread, the wires dangling from the ceiling where there

should have been a lightbulb, if not a shade. Merena had taken one look at his sad room and humiliated eyes and lifted the stubborn little chin he had fallen in love with so instantly so recently.

‘Candles,’ she said, taking her handbag from the crooked doorknob it hung on. Kissing Grey quickly, to one side of his nose, she continued: ‘I won’t be a minute. Open the wine, and find me as many glasses and jam jars as you can.’

She was gone longer than a minute, but less than five, and by the time she returned Grey had emptied the cupboards, pulling out five mismatched glasses and four jam jars (before we moved up here, he thinks standing by the front door of a house on a hill, watching his daughter pass his workshed, partly fashioned from earth and recycled wine bottles, did I really just throw so much away, how many jam jars in a year in Paddington? Twenty? Thirty? How many sandwiches and slices of toast eaten, between one hungry young man and his hungrier son in a year?). He crept into Tom’s room and pulled the curtain open just an inch to let the light from a streetlamp in. Three more glasses around and under the skinny bed, along with one jar.

The jar held a collection of cicada shells and Grey, enraptured as he was by this woman, this surprising new force in his life, held true to an older, more powerful love for his son. He smiled and touched the half-filled jar only to push it a little further under the bed, tucking it into the corner where the bed-leg met the wall where it would be safe from sleepwalking feet or carelessly kicked off school shoes.

For the first time, thirteen years later, Grey wonders where the boy had found the cicadas. At the time he had simply smiled, taking a moment to watch Tom breathe in his sleep. Mouth open, head thrown back, long neck exposed to the night air. Grey reached out a hand thinking to pull the sheet up around the boy’s shoulders but stopped himself. No, he thought, he might have been too hot when he fell asleep, he might have

wanted it that way. If it grew cooler he could always come back in and draw it up. He picked up the three glasses and took them to the kitchen to scrub at the crust of hardened Milo and milk.

He was working furiously when Merena came back in. He twisted his head around to greet her, arms still pumping, and nodded at the collection of glass on the small kitchen table. Merena set down the paper bag she was carrying and scanned the table, counting aloud: ‘One, two, four, six, nine ...how many have you got in the sink – three? So, twelve. Well done.’

Grey rinsed the sudsy glasses under the tap and picked up a teatowel. Drying them carefully, thoroughly, he watched her watch his hands. And then, as they both surveyed the motley arrangement of glassware on the table, she smiled, tilted her head, and bit her lip, and that was that.

This is how it goes, the story of how Grey and Merena became Lola’s parents.

Except that the story goes like this: Merena is the one who tells the tale right, the one who gets the details correct. This is the point, always, where she takes over the telling.

‘It goes like this,’ she says, to friends, after dinner, with drinks, at the big table. ‘So, he’s forgotten to open the wine. Then he’s realised he doesn’t have a corkscrew. Then he’s thrown the teatowel like this,’ she says, demonstrating Grey’s clumsy panic. She raises a laugh and Grey joins in, he doesn’t mind having a laugh at himself, Merena taught him that, ‘not to take himself so seriously,’ she tells them, and he nods. ‘And it’s slapped me in the face,’ she continues.

Grey wouldn’t say it *slapped* her. Landed on her, he would say, if he was going to say anything. *No, no*, she would counter, *it slapped me*. ‘Splat, right in the face. Sopping wet.’ He wouldn’t argue anyway, storytelling is Merena’s thing, after all, she

loves it. It's how she sustains herself, how she maintains her world. A little exaggeration here, a little schadenfreude there. A different way of looking at things, of describing events, interpreting intention and meaning.

'So, he doesn't have a bottle opener in the flat see? He rushes out to bang on a neighbour's door, then leaves him confused in the doorway to run back to me again to apologise and explain where it was he'd gone. All of two metres away you understand!'

Well, she had looked so surprised when he opened the door to leave.

'Hurries back again to the neighbour who is waiting with a bottle opener – and a grin and a wink – in the hallway.'

Not really someone you thought of as a grinner, Old Gary from the flats, not a lot of winking going on there. Serious bloke, shy, nervy. As likely as Grey himself to be rushing around clumsy and nervous. But that's not really her point is it? And it's not a dangerous kind of lie is it, not really an important detail.

'So, he picks up the bottle ... tries to pull the cork without cutting the foil.'

'No!' the friends say, laughing.

'Yes, he does. Apologising and swearing and apologising for swearing all the time.'

The same phrasing every time, the same pause for effect, the same laughter from her audience, every time.

'So he takes it out, cuts the foil and goes at it again, only by now he's so wound up that he gets too violent with it and half the bloody cork comes out on the end of the screw and the other half stays lodged in the bottle!'

Grey reminds himself that Merena's concept of violence and his differ for large and important reasons, and forces the fact that she has used this word, *violent*, whilst

talking about him from his mind. This is like an extra sense he has, not-hearing, a skill he has honed.

‘Noooo,’ the cry goes up, palms smacking against foreheads creased with amusement. ‘Good lord,’ they continue, ‘so what did you do?’ they ask her. This is the point of the story after all, they realise that. They have been given time and hints enough to discover their role in this routine, she makes it easy to improvise the right lines.

Ending the story, Merena nods, and sets and lifts her chin, just so, and tells them: ‘I walked across the room’ she says, ‘kissed the worry from his lips, took the bottle and the corkscrew from him, and showed him a little corkscrew trick I knew.’

The wink she adds dissolves the group of friends into happy dirty laughter, and brings on a round of smutty jokes. Lola is always allowed to stay up to hear the story, but this is always the time of an evening when she is sent off to bed. Grey and Merena though, take a moment here to talk with their eyes across the table and one of them will get up from their seat – under the pretence of clearing plates, or refilling glasses, shepherding Lola around the room to bestow a round of goodnight hugs – only to sidle up to the other and nuzzle into a warm neck, kiss a hot spot just beside a nose, and remember that night a little longer, in a different way, for different reasons.

Grey remembers the way she rescued the cork from the bottle, the way she kissed him, the way she pulled two wine glasses from her handbag and two fistfuls of wax candles from the shopping bag. Then there is the way she drew him into the arrangement of the candles on the spindly-legged table beside his bed. The way she explained why they should only use eleven of them, even though there were glasses enough for twelve. These things lead him towards the memories he cherishes most.

There is the colour of her skin in the candlelight of course, and the silken feel of it beneath his hands and against his body. There is the heat, and the fervour that somehow seemed to alternate and run concurrent with the tenderness. The looking into each other's eyes that seemed like something new, invented by the two of them, just for the two of them. There is all of that and more, of course.

And then. And then there is the memory of the words spilling out of him, the story coming out, perfectly ordered and calm, un-stumbling, but unceasing as well, despite it being the first time he had told it. He had never expected to tell it.

And yet. And yet there he was in that dingy little flat, explaining to her, not just how he had come to be there at this moment, how he had come to be there with a seven year old son at twenty three, but how he had come to be there in the greater scheme of things, the way he saw it, the story that began with his mother's death in 1957.

'The Year of the Fire Rooster,' she had said, when he had finished, and when a silence had passed in which she stroked his silver hair, her soft warm palm touching the skin at his hairline at the gentle beginning of each stroke. 'Drama. Aggression. Clairvoyance. Recklessness. Your father could see into the future. He thought that meant that he could control it.'

Grey remembers. Of course he remembers. They had no formal marriage, he and Merena, for many good reasons, but that night when she spoke about his father a fusing took place. Grey lay still for a moment, then rolled over to look up at her. Merena didn't pause in her stroking of his hair for even a breath. Grey, on his back, his head in her lap, looked up into his lover's eyes. Merena, seated with her back curved against the wall, looked down into his eyes. Her long black hair fell forward across her shoulders, curtaining their faces. There was no world outside Merena's hair, outside Grey and Merena's eyes.

‘There is no need to fear a thing that can be named,’ she said, ‘and everything, everything can be named.’

But with his children it is different again. He named *them*, or helped to, and he doesn’t fear them, only *for* them, or for himself if harm comes to them. Not quite true: he is afraid of seeing fear *of* him in their eyes. So Merena shouts, when there is shouting to be done, and Grey retreats. He shapes his creased and calloused, spoonlike palms around the hurt, or the joyful, innocent heads of his children and wishes he could still cradle their whole bodies, their entire tiny selves in his hands, the way he could when they were born.

Carry them around, keep them safe.

Instead, he pats their heads carefully, as though the bones of their skulls have never fused, as though there are still soft spots to watch out for, and prays.

‘Careful,’ he murmurs, ‘Don’t fall, little one. Don’t fall.’

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Facing the eye front-on disturbs. It sees us. When it comes to the art object, if we anticipate intersubjectivity at all we still expect that other subject to be human. The artist. The encoder. Human, and situated in the past. Safely on the other side of a substantial wall of time. Seeing us only in fantasies of the work’s future reception.*
- *It is difficult, being looked at. We face the eye and view it as we view the eyes of others always – through our own unreliable, untrustworthy pair, from the outside, obscured by our own shadowy reflection stretched across that glossy surface.*

- *A central contradiction – the image of the eye is photoreal (the white is viscous, eggy, the pupil dark and deep as a well) its form impossible (un-spherical, naked, partial, lidless, spinning, solid, fixed).*
 - *The title card fixed to the floor at our feet encourages us to step forward, take hold of an edge, hold it still, look more deeply, and the closer we come to the eye, the less unsettling the experience. The ultrafine blue-red rivers and tributaries that earlier led us to ponder the causes and effects of sleepless nights lose their bloodiness, their humanity, and act instead as purple echo to the creeping vine above.*
-

8.06 pm

Outside, snatches of conversation, laughter and arguments float in the breezy air. It lifts them up and pushes them into the room. The feeling that follows them in resonates, that decision you make, when you leave the house for a big night out, to surrender yourself to this collective ventriloquism. Mostly young voices, they rise high and sharp above the slow tidal rhythm of the cars cruising Rundle. Beneath them the metronome of the beeping pedestrian crossing lights.

We've worked to that beep all week, making our own crossings, of the exhibition space's floor, of each other's inward-focused paths as we paced and thought, making our way through and around tomorrow's imaginary space, deciding on the perfect placement of each piece, directing the tradesmen, our efforts to be polite sabotaged by the frustrated desire to do it all ourselves, to have complete control.

It was Charlotte who noticed that whenever we came to an impasse, two or all of us wanting different pieces to be placed in the same spot, or a place seeming at first as though it would be perfect turning out to have the wrong light, or less room than first imagined, whenever we seemed frozen, stuck for a solution, those pedestrian lights would change, the slow regular beep escalating into the fast tick of the crossing signal, and we would all begin to move again, triggered somehow into a quick decision.

Of course, Charlotte explained, as soon as she drew our attention to it, our hyperawareness changed everything, ended it all. She believed it too, I could hear it in her voice. What I think is that Charlotte noticed us all move, or one of us move, once or twice, at the same time as it went off, coincidentally, and saw in that coincidence the potential for something more, something mysterious, an occurrence that would reaffirm

her understanding of the world, give her a story to tell so beautiful, so perfectly synchronistic it just had to be the truth. A bigger truth.

This afternoon, I loved her for that, for believing that. Half an hour ago, if someone had asked me, I would still have said that I loved her because of that kind of thinking. And now, suddenly, I don't know what I think. If I stand near the window I can hear the pedestrian lights beeping, and every now and then Charlotte's soundtrack comes out with a louder version, sometimes sounding like a censoring bleep in the middle of a sentence, sometimes sounding like electronic music, like a computer game or a piece of medical equipment, depending on the context of the surrounding conversation.

If I move through the crowd, already large and growing, getting louder and louder since the first tentative arrivals carefully paced and whispered, getting louder still since the waitstaff began circulating with trays of red and white wine, beer, and those appetisers, as tiny and as unrecognisable as usual, the beeping gets a little lost beneath all the chatter. Charlotte is enjoying herself, mingling, laughing, hugging people as they arrive. 'Thank you so much for coming. Thanks so much. It's so good to see you. Oh, thanks, yeah we've had a lot of fun getting this together. Hi, can I get you a drink? Have you got a drink? Good. Have a look around and I'll see you in a bit. Have you found a waiter yet? Good. God, how long has it been? Too long. Well, come in, come on, come and have a look.'

She's introduced my father to one of her old teachers, a tall thin woman with frizzy black hair and a missing front tooth. They've been standing in that corner, engrossed in serious conversation for half an hour or so. I've been walking around the room for at least that long without stopping once for longer than it takes to tidy a pile of catalogues, pick up a couple of the wine glasses people keep putting down on the table a

bit too near Charlotte's expensive computer hardware. I have been to check the 'Sitting Room' installations twice, hidden in my studio for almost ten minutes. I have been to the toilet three times for no good reason other than to be alone for another moment or two.

I keep catching myself in the middle of imaginary arguments. I am being silently unkind, and unfair, to Charlotte, angry at her because it is easier than being angry at myself for being so self-conscious. *Go on Char, give another hug, another air-kiss, there you go.* Feeling guilty about it only makes it worse. Knowing what I am doing makes no difference. I am even having silent arguments with strangers. The ones who I overhear as I walk around: 'Ooh I don't think it's about death at all. Look at those colours, so rich, so vibrant, that eye is *alive!*'

So, what, lady? Black for death, green for life? Remember that from school then? Well done. What about mould? Bacteria?

Even people who aren't saying anything are getting the treatment.

Yeah, nice, dude in the corner. Excellent teaming of black jeans and black t-shirt. Everyone will know you're a real artist now. What? Forget your beret?

It's awful, and I know it's awful, and I can't seem to stop. So I don't stop walking either, don't stop to actually talk to anyone, too afraid of what I might say aloud.

'So, do you think the tree is sort of about hanging then, didn't you say her brother killed himself? Did he hang himself? Is that what happened? *Oh*, they don't *know* what happened to him. Well, he couldn't be alive, surely, not after, how long did you say? She doesn't know, or she's not telling?'

No one is saying *these* things of course, not within earshot of me, anyway. I'm rehearsing an answer anyway. 'Why not? Why couldn't he be alive? Who are you to pronounce him dead? Don't know, not telling? What if I said, a bit of both?'

I'm imagining confrontations with strangers. *Yes*, I'm spitting silently to myself, *Yes. I am her daughter*. I'm arguing with my girlfriend, all by myself, even as she looks across the room at me and winks. I'm imagining explanations for the silent father I knew as a child, *he was afraid*, I think, *he was communicating all along, secretly, in code*. I'm inventing his past, the details of his unhappy childhood, the dynamics of his relationship with Merena. The conversation I am not having in my mind is the one where Grey asks me about 'Optogram' the one where he asks me what it means about what I know. What I have never confessed to knowing. The one where he might then ask me what it is that I *don't* know, what he might tell me, if I were not too frightened too ask.

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under the shower direct the spray to sections of yourself, left shoulder, right, front, back, back of head · one armpit, the other · twist and turn and cradle the falling water in hands upturned in front of your chest · keep your eyes open, your gaze toward the middle distance ·

droplets will pattern themselves on the thick oily perspex shower screen · if the water is warm enough and the air around you is not too cold to reach an arm out, use the tip of one finger to search out shapes shadowed in the drops and the fog · join these together to bring the image out · a profile, male, angular, with a long hooked nose and no hair · a silhouette, female, curving away up and down from a pinched waist, the hair

mermaiding up and out at the top of the figure · a tree, there's always a tree to be found, long, deep roots mirroring gnarled branches ·

manage, somehow, never to remember that the trees frighten you until it is too late · draw them, pulling the beads of rapidly cooling water together like slithering mercury and it is no different than drawing in class or at the kitchen table, the feeling of fugue is there, the turning of your face away from the world that is readily visible, the hiding of the clock beneath the pillow · the feeling that you are somehow both following and leading at once · that following and leading are one and the same ·

draw a tree, again, and become so completely lost in the world of its branches and roots, the dimensions of its knots and hollows that you will only remember where you are in this world when the hot water begins to run out · shivering, blink and step out of the tepid stream · reach out to turn the cold tap down and the hot one up · attempt to be a person of willpower, and goodness, the kind who would get out now · fail · accept that you are choosing this failure · justify staying in with the thought that there is only a minute or so of hot water left, not long enough even for another to shower anyway ·

blinking again, see the tree as something you are no longer a part of · a whole, separate thing, in and of itself, the water-picture sits on the surface of the screen · believe, in the stretched out second that passes, that you can hear cicadas · that a dark shape flashes behind the opaque screen · shiver as the water runs cold and at the same time a rush of hot fear shoots through your system, travelling faster than blood, just beneath your skin · gasp and reach out for the showerhead, turning it on the screen, erasing the tree, washing the perspex clear · the sound of the water, as it pelts and pounds the screen and the tiles and the gritty surface of the old metal bathtub, echoing around the empty room, will have a quality of violence to it

—

‘Hello?’

‘Lola?’ Grey always sounds a little fearful at the beginning of a phone conversation. A small voice for such a broad-shouldered man. Is it cold up there yet, Byron Bay’s version of cold anyway, has he pulled out the khaki cable-knit, the one with the holes in the patches of its elbows?

‘Dad?’

‘Lola. It’s Dad.’

‘Hi Dad. How’re you doing?’

‘Hi sweetbeet. Hi Lolo.’ He sounds as though he has been drinking, but it’s what, midday? That delay and overlap of their words as if it was an overseas call. Lola wondered if it is psychological, that delay. Generational. Her father finally getting to be as old as he has always looked and beginning to play the role.

‘Hi Dad.’

‘Are you at home? Of course you’re at home, I’ve just called you at home haven’t I?’ She can just see him, standing next to the big kauri dresser by the window, holding the phone away from his hearing aid. He’s never worn a hearing aid, but still.

‘Dad? You’re all muffled. I can’t –’

‘Sorry. Sorry. That better?’

‘Better. What’s going on?’

‘_’

‘Dad? Is something wrong? What’s wrong?’

‘No, no. Nothing’s wrong. How are you?’

‘Yeah, I’m good. I’m alright. Been working a lot.’

‘How’s school?’

‘School’s ok. Getting there. How’s the shop? How’s everything?’

How's everything, means: What is going on? I know there’s something going on, do you? It means: Am I supposed to ask you again what’s going on or wait for you to tell me? Am I supposed to pretend nothing’s going on? Do you want to tell me, or is it a secret? Do I want to talk to you about what Merena said on the phone this morning or do I want to remain silent? If I don’t mention it and you don’t mention it, will that keep it from being real, from being true, just a little longer?

‘Shop’s good. Quiet. You know. August. Just locals.’

‘Yeah. Good. Oh well, not long and you’ll be too busy for yourselves.’

‘Yep ... Not long.’ This is the point at which Lola and Grey usually fall silent. The moment just before he asks her if she is okay for money, and she decides what kind of truth to tell him, depending on her pride, her cupboards, the rent situation. Ordinarily, she would say yes, she was fine, even when some extra cash might have helped. Every now and then she surprises herself by saying no when she doesn’t really need anything. She has already decided she will say no today. She will need some extra money for supplies for her graduation piece, the mobile, she’s gotten to the point of it, she’s made the big decisions on it, the sculpture, and it isn’t going to be cheap.

Because it is how their conversations always go, and because her father’s silence on the other end of the line is now becoming unbearable, the weight of Lola’s earlier conversation with Merena – those terrible words spewing forth in her mother’s voice, almost unrecognisable, and the noises Merena had made when her ability to form words had been overcome by her rage – Lola feels her mind begin to slide away. Away from her parents, away from the hallway where she stands next to the vintage telephone table, out through the door and across town into the studio room at the school where she plans

to head this afternoon. They have been given keys, the students in their final year, and a few of them go in on a Sunday, for the mind-shift of labour on the weekend, to work together in near-silence for a few hours, to feel like they are getting on with things, getting ahead, to feel as though they have earned an early afternoon drink.

So, she lets the roaring pressure of Grey's silence dull down to background noise, and begins instead to imagine herself at the upcoming graduation exhibition. She concentrates very hard, creating first an image of herself, positioned behind the giant suspended eye, as the doors open and the first invitees begin to arrive. Lola almost says yes to an offer of money her father hasn't actually made. She catches herself just in time, filing away the image of her fellow students and their own work seen the way each visitor will see it as they arrive, through the filter of the glass, through the layered images painted on it.

There will be the first thin layer of fine white, diluted until it hardly exists at all. Maybe. Lola is still not sure about the white; after all you don't see the whites of your own eyes do you? But she wants it visible from the other side. It doesn't matter too much yet, just a technical problem, one more thing to be worked out on the scale models. Next will be the iris and then the pupil, again diluted, and yes, yes, she will use the white and the green, and even the black, she'll just have to find a way to make it really transparent.

There but not, she thinks. *There, but not something you really notice*, she thinks, *like sight itself. Like any of the senses.* And then the image, the tree, a big old Moreton Bay Fig, the complicated lines and fine details of its sprawling roots and branches, the final layer of painting. Although, she supposes she should put a lacquer. For the sheen. Anyway, it isn't going to be cheap. But there, Grey hasn't mentioned money after all, he is silent still, and Lola feels a jolt of panic.

‘Dad,’ she says, a sudden shock of premonition, beyond the tension she had already been feeling, shaking her defences. ‘Dad, is there something wrong?’

He takes longer than she expects to answer.

‘Ohhh.’ Grey pronounces the word slowly, drawing it out as if to put off what is coming next. ‘Not... *well* ... not...’ The odd twist of accent is what gives him away. *Don’t believe me*, it begs, *I’m not the truth*. But he has waited too long. He has missed his chance. His pauses have given Lola time to gather herself back up, change ears on the telephone, remind herself that she has work to do, that if he says, aloud, the words she thinks he is going to say then she will not be able to do that work. If she is right about his secret, then she thinks she might not be able to do anything, ever again. Not even breathe. Maybe not even breathe.

So, even though the shape of his next intake of breath lets her know that he is about to speak, to really speak, Lola cuts him off. ‘Dad,’ she says, her hand half over her mouth. ‘I’m really sorry, I’ve got to go. I ... the washing machine is flooding. There’s water going everywhere. I’ve got to get towels down to save the carpet.’ She holds her breath, trying to disguise its shakiness.

‘Oh. Okay then. Alright love, you go. That’s alright, I’ll ring you later.’

There is a long pause in which the thing Lola desires most in the world is that he, having noticed the catch in her voice, will ask her if she is alright, and that she might find it within herself to tell the truth.

‘Lola? You still there?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry Dad.’

‘No need to be sorry cabbage, you better go. Sort out that carpet. We can talk later.’

‘Yeah. I better go.’

‘Go love, bye.’

‘Bye.’ *Sorry.*

—

Notes, contd: optogram.

- *The pupil is oversized, dilated. Drugs, the obvious conclusion to draw, but why, really? Because these are the times? Age? Birthplace? Background? Biography? Orientation? Ours or hers?*
- *A dangerous decision to make: like any external sign of an internal condition it risks all manner of assumption and misinterpretation. Condescension, disregard, disdain. How many other explanations are obscured by that first impression? Concussion. Seizure. Allergic reaction. Disease. Disorder. Poison. Death. Withdrawal.*
- *What about darkness? This is what we do in the dark – instinctively, involuntarily – we widen our eyes. Even when we know it is impossible, we want to see, we try. It is perhaps easier to imagine this possibility of intention when viewing the work at dusk, as the last of the natural light fades, before the introduction of painstakingly arranged artificial illumination.*

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8.15 pm

We've each been witness to each other's work throughout the entire process. Always so kind and careful when we speak about the other's work. And yet, somehow, managing to be each other's harshest critic. We've talked about it a lot. We think we've got it figured out.

With Char it all comes down to facial expression. Whatever she thinks, or feels, is obvious, writ large across those articulate features, no matter how hard or how fast she attempts to pull them back into line. Even if she were able to catch them in time, the effect of the ever-moving drama of her face made suddenly inanimate would be so unsettling as to render her efforts useless.

'With you,' she says, 'it comes down to silences. Remember when we first met,' she says, 'and I asked you if your parents used to say: If you don't have anything nice to say then don't say anything at all? It's like that,' she says, 'not just with me, you do the same thing with Terry, with everyone. If something's really good, you'll say so. If it's just okay, you'll say: You *could* try this, or that, or, this *bit* works, you'll say. But if it's bad, if it doesn't work, I always know. Because you just stop speaking altogether. You might pretend to be busy with something else. But you do it silently. It's like you're literally rendered speechless by other people's failures. I don't know why you bother,' she says, 'it's just as telling, you're not protecting my feelings by staying silent.' She laughs and I am silent. And I am thinking: It's not you I'm trying to protect.

It's not the failure itself that silences. It's the effort not to give in to the temptation to tell a pretty lie, I think, not attempting to explain.

'It's like an acid trip,' says a girl dressed in black vintage lace and gothic eye-makeup, 'like being inside your own eye.' There is a small spiderweb tattooed next to

her left eye. No spider, just the web. She's walking around and around 'Optogram', arms straight down at each side, shuffling in boots that must be far too big for her. She has pulled the cuffs of her black crocheted cardigan down over her hands and it makes her look like a child. The boy she is talking to (they're surely still in high-school) is whip-thin with the kind of curve at the top of the spine that tells you a person has been tall since childhood. He doesn't say anything, just nods, his mouth turning down at the sides, his eyelids drooping to the extent that he almost looks as if he is sleepwalking. He shuffles around behind the mobile and a shiver runs through me, thinking that he is about to kiss the glass, that she is about to kiss the other side. Instead, he lifts his right hand, and places it on the surface, stretching and spreading his fingers out over the five largest branches.

The girl giggles, clamping a hand over her mouth. She hunches her shoulders and whispers, 'I don't think you're allowed to do that.' She looks around to see if anyone has noticed, and blanches when she sees me watching them.

'Oh, sorry.'

'No. No, I mean, it's fine. He can touch it, I don't mind.'

'Is it yours?' she asks, straightening her shoulders.

'It's hers,' the voice at my ear answers before I even open my mouth. 'This is Lola Hayward you're talking to here, sculptor, painter, artiste-extraordinaire.'

The girl shoots a nervous look over my shoulder at the person standing behind me, unsure if she is being teased. 'It's beautiful,' she says, ducking her head in a bowing kind of smile and moving around behind 'Optogram', as if it is a shield.

A hand grips my shoulder, gives it a squeeze, as the voice of its owner agrees,

'Yes. It is. Very beautiful.'

‘Thanks,’ I say, smiling apologetically at the nervous Goth couple before taking a deep breath, steeling myself to turn around.

‘Hello.’

‘Hello yourself,’ says Remy, raising both eyebrows and rocking back on her heels.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *As though the vine grows into the eye at each point of contact. As though a great stillness has been. And yet, growth. And pain. And death. Growth. As though, once beneath the surface of that tissue, vine and stem become vein and vessel. Not decomposition, rather, incorporation. A growing-inward, a heading towards-centre.*
- *Beyond our own reflection, beneath our own dancing shadow, another silhouette graces the glass. A tree. The outline of that trunk enough of a confusion of whorl and knot and elbow and hollow to remind us that trees are no more “thing” than we.*
- *Branches numerous and gnarled. They curve and wander, out and up. Split off from one another, doubling in number and decreasing in size until they are too many to tell apart and too small to remain visible. They disappear at the edge of that darkness, the pupil, only to rematerialize in the suggestion of their shape in the green and yellow flecks and swirls of that shade-shifting iris. The roots a perfect mirror.*
- *A pair of hands, strong, old, crooked, cupped. One, an empty cradle holding nothing but a measure of an implied sky, one digging, like a set of claws, into the impossible, invisible ground.*

—

hear his voice at your ear: *it's beautiful* · voice your surprise: *didn't hear you come in* · he will counter: *you always jump like that*, before asking, *what's it for?* gesturing towards the drawing · before you can answer he will call out to her through the doorway: *come see this* ·

when he asks, *did you draw this?* answer him honestly · say: *no*, slowly, quietly · you might continue: *my brother drew it, when I was a little girl*, but remember, that is all the explanation you need offer ·

enjoy the way her mouth falls open as he moves aside to let her see · revel in the idea that she is impressed, that you are connected somehow to the thing that has created that expression on her face · *it's beautiful*, she will breathe · *the detail is incredible* ·

his new question: *is it a fig tree?* · take notice of the fact that she begins nodding even before you do · a repetition of his earlier question: *what's it for?* ·

it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise that you almost reply, *well, it's going to be an eye · a giant eye*, but it is very important that you catch yourself just in time · tell him only, *a stencil* · say no more than: *for glass · you're going to etch that?* · *yes · phew, good luck · do you want me to take a photograph?* · *ohhh*, see how, when she is excited, she begins to move even before she has articulated her idea · *I can print it right onto contact for you · you can cut out the stencil without having to do all that tracing · quick, get the camera, let's do it* · try not to be afraid of her speed, her decisiveness ·

notice the way he waits, looking at you over his glasses · when you don't reply he will repeat the question, his voice somehow softer and more direct at once · *do you want me to take one?*

too fast, too fast · everything is moving too fast, you will want to say · *no*, you will want to say · *no* · *fuck off with your camera and your printer* · you have been planning this for so long · anticipating this work, the moment when you will finally let go of your fears of ruining the only drawing of your brother you have ever owned, tape its corners down to the lightbox, pick up the black ink pen and begin to trace those lines · it is entirely natural to feel frightened

—

It is going to be a giant eye, the sculpture. ‘Like, I mean *giant*,’ Lola tells Remy while they drink their Sunday morning coffee. ‘Like, big enough to stand behind and look out through.’ Remy says very little, and Lola convinces herself that this is a good thing. It allows her to keep talking, for a start, to keep her own morale up. The belief that you can create what you can imagine is liable to slip away so easily, she knows. A person might wake up from a dream and realise that they’d got it all wrong, that the idea was untenable, or worse, that the image had lagged behind thought, reading, practice, and would no longer be worth creating. Invention and intention might have been carefully planned, thoroughly thought through, might be described earnestly and in loving detail, and still, a single twitch of the listener’s eyebrow, or perhaps a quick glance away, a short cough before they start to speak, any of these things might doom a project to failure.

So Lola sticks to the big, plain facts. A giant eye. Made of glass. An image of seeing painted onto an eye painted onto glass. Big enough to stand inside and look out

at the rest of the exhibition. A stark image of her brother taking his own life. What method he is using she has not decided yet.

‘An optogram you see,’ she says, letting her excitement take over, ‘that old idea, you know, the picture of the murderer on the dead man’s pupil.’

When that strange look crosses Remy’s features, Lola interprets it as confusion; Remy is about to ask her the question she has been hoping to avoid. Namely, how exactly was this project going to fit the criteria of self-portraiture set for the graduation exhibition by consensus between the art school faculty and the students. She tries to change the subject. This is the dangerous part. The secret part that can’t be told. Not yet anyway, and Lola is trying to ignore the fact that, at some point, when it comes time for the final justification to her fellow students, to her teachers at least, she will have to explain where she has hidden herself.

‘I have to get someone to blow the glass for me,’ she says, sweeping the toast crumbs off the table with the side of her hand. They fall to the lino, sprinkling themselves across the kitchen floor. Remy sighs and rolls her eyes, ‘*Lola*. I just swept that.’

Lola stands up, pleased with the diversion she’s created. She opens up the side door of the row cottage’s tiny kitchen, and, collecting up the crumbs with the outside edge of her foot, brushes them out the door where they fall into a deep empty gap between two bricks of the buckling path. A bottlebrush tree from next door’s backyard is taking over the skinny pathway that leads out the back to the small square of concrete pretending to be a backyard, the weeds growing up in the seams between the buckling pavers the closest thing to lawn, the rusty hills hoist trying its hardest to appear treelike.

The bottlebrush branches hang low over the corrugated iron fence so that you have to duck down when you’re on the path, the red dressmaking-pin flowers seem

never to stop moulting, falling down to rot in the gaps between the bricks pushed up by its roots. She thinks of them, the roots and branches, and suddenly she knows, the shiver of excitement tells her that this is it, and enervated, afraid of diluting the power of the imagery by thinking too deeply about it, she forces herself to drag her eyes and imagination away from the tree.

Suddenly she doesn't want to talk about it all. She needs to be by herself, needs Remy to go so that she can open up the packing carton which holds all of her childhood treasures, find the drawing she knows is in there somewhere, and begin making new sketches. Hearing Remy turn on the hot tap, she turns back to the kitchen, quickly offering to wash the dishes herself.

'You go and get ready to meet John,' she says, noticing that look of concern lingering on Remy's face. Her new decision has had the affect of erasing her earlier unease about the subject of self-portraiture though and she interrupts Remy's complaint that Lola is only offering to wash so that she can get out of drying and putting the dishes away.

'No,' said Lola, even though there is some truth to what Remy has said. 'I like washing. The water. I always have my best ideas when I've got my hands in the water.'

Don't worry,' she continues blithely, 'it *will* be a self-portrait of a kind, the eye, the image will be *my* eye, see? Even if the body won't be.'

'I would already be ready to meet John, if someone had left me enough water for a shower,' says Remy, with a pointed sigh.

'Sorry.'

'It's alright. I'm just going to be late now.'

'Sorry.'

‘I said it’s alright...I just wish you’d think about someone other than yourself once in a while.’

‘I’m really sorry Remy, really really sorry. I don’t know what happened.’

‘I said it’s fine. Stop apologising. Just don’t do it next time. I really didn’t want to be late *again*.’

How am I supposed to stop apologising when you keep telling me how much I’ve messed up your morning, Lola thinks, biting her bottom lip, trying not to say the word sorry again, trying to imagine what might be the right thing to say instead.

‘Have you spoken to Sam?’ is not the right thing to say, but she blurts it out anyway, surprising herself, immediately wishing she hadn’t.

‘Yes,’ Remy says after a pause, ‘a couple of times.’

‘So he’s alright?’

‘No. Not really. He’s pretty pissed off actually. Pretty hurt. Pretty sad. Pretty fucked up all round.’ There is a trick Remy can do with her voice, with the look on her face, with her sheer force of will, that can make anything Lola’s fault, Even this, the effect their relationship, their betrayal of Sam, is having on him. It is almost awe-inspiring, the ease with which she manages such manoeuvres. Lola watches it happen as though it is a movie she is seeing only after someone has told her the plot. The details are the only surprise left. Like Sam still talking to Remy but not Lola.

‘He hasn’t been coming to class.’

‘No.’

‘Is he going to?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Yep.’

‘But what about graduating? What’s he going to do?’

‘Lola, I don’t know. He might be talking to me again, but he’s still being pretty cagey. He might not come back at all.’

‘What do you mean come back?’

‘He’s gone home, to Adelaide. To his parents.’

‘Oh shit. When were you going to tell me that?’

‘I thought you knew?’

‘Remy! How would I know? He’s not speaking to me at all.’

‘Well, that’s where he is.’ Remy hands her back a bowl that hasn’t been washed properly, pointing to the ring of cereal stuck to its sides. She sighs again, and it is almost as though she is the one who has been betrayed in the situation. As though all of it is Lola’s fault. As though she had nothing to do with the implosion of their household.

Well it wasn’t myself I was fucking when Sam walked in that night, thinks Lola. Was it?

Out loud she says, ‘Well, I guess I’m glad you guys are talking again anyway. I was really sad about that. I can’t imagine what it would be like to break up with a friend you’ve known your whole life.’

‘What are you talking about? You don’t speak to any of your friends from home anymore.’

‘Yeah, I guess. I don’t think it’s quite the same ...’

‘Lola,’ Remy interrupts, narrowing her eyes. ‘I have to say this.’

Lola’s stomach lurches. *This is it, she thinks, it’s over.*

‘He didn’t kill you, Lola. You’re not dead.’

What? ‘What?’

‘Tom. He didn’t kill you. You can’t make your brother’s picture into the image of a murderer.’

Shit. ‘No. I’m not ...that’s not what I’m ...’

‘It is though. It is what you’re saying if you use that idea.’

‘It’s the idea of imprinting I want to use.’ Lola is cold, close to numb. What just happened? How did they get here? ‘And tunnel vision, and that other idea I told you about, that neurological thing I read about, where people get stuck in another time, in their own minds, and ... and ...’

‘And ... and ...and ...*and*, it’ll still be connected to that idea, the killer captured on the lens of the eye. What’ll that do to your parents Lola, did you think about that?’

Parents are Remy’s territory. Whether they are hers or not. Whether they are to be cursed, praised, criticised or protected, it is up to Remy to do it. Because everyone else should be grateful they still have theirs. Because to complain is to be both ungracious and unthinking. Because she can never complain about hers ever again. Because they died before she was really old enough to have the chance to complain.

Lola has known that these are the rules since before she and Remy became a couple. She learned from watching the way Sam deftly navigated their conversations, never giving an honest response to Remy’s sniping about his mother and father, only nodding as she told him how he ought to handle them. She had not, until now, realised that Remy’s territory covered not only parents but also the wider category of the dead in general. As she watches Remy coldly and casually fold the teatowel in half and hang it over the oven handle, Lola knows two things – the boundaries of what can be spoken and what cannot have shifted again, and also, somehow she is going to have to stop her parents from coming down to Melbourne for her graduation.

She runs the cold tap on her hands, red from the dishwater. She brings her hands to her face, splashing at her hot cheeks, trying to camouflage her tears amongst droplets of cold water. She hears Remy sigh again, and walk out of the kitchen. She hears the bedroom door being carefully, quietly pulled shut.

—

8.17 pm

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Not long.’

What do I say next? How do I begin to imagine how to talk to this stranger standing in front of me, in her navy pantsuit and viciously high heels? Not a kilogram heavier than she ever was. Just as perfectly groomed, as effortlessly beautiful. This sweet-faced bomb, ticking away. This walking time capsule. This tombstone rolling open.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *The pupil is where the interest lies.*
- *When looking into the eye of the person we are facing, what is visible on the surface of the pupil is a self, miniaturised, upended, distorted. Here, in this enlarged version, we are still given our reflection, but it is lifesized. Warped, distended, funhouse-strange, but lifesized.*
- *Rather than dwarfing us, the giant eye reflects us our adult shape, it causes us to remember that we have grown into ourselves.*

—

no, repeat it in your mind · no · over and over, to yourself, say no · no photographs · no shortcuts · because your wrist aches with the desire to move in those particular patterns,

to create those lines, that shape, anew · let your eyes return to the folds in that fragile paper, though, let them find the initials in the bottom left hand corner of the page, tucked into the hollowed arch of a meandering tree root: TJH, '84. Tom's drawing, not yours, and no matter how much work you might put in, nothing will ever change that · think, *no* ·

say, *yes* · *yes* · thank you · *yes* ·

sometimes, dreams relinquished are burdens set down

—

Even as she picks up the handset, hears her father say hello, and replies in kind, the sentence sits just at the front of her mouth ready to fall softly out. The whole conversation playing out in her mind.

How are you going for money, he will ask, are you making enough to get by after fees and rent?

Not really, she will answer, *I could do with a little.* At the same time, she thinks of the sketches she's just made for the final piece. She can't wait to get in to the studio, had been on her way out when the telephone rang again, and knowing it would be him, had felt too guilty not to answer it.

'Washing machine sorted?' he asks.

'What?' she says, and then quickly, 'oh yeah, it's fine. Sam fixed it,' the lie tripping off her tongue so easily it takes her by surprise.

And then her father speaks: 'Well,' he begins, 'I didn't want to tell you over the telephone. But. Well. I don't really have any choice.'

It is then that it happens – like a great kaleidoscope, Lola’s world is picked up and turned around. Everything rotating around her still, fragile statue self, even as she is mid-blink. All the pieces of her life rearranging themselves. Nothing broken, nothing missing, but everything altered irrevocably. Lola finds herself fighting the urge to flick her head around to check if anyone is behind her.

‘Love ... Love, I’m sorry.’

It is nothing complicated. A simple matter of economics. She just doesn’t have the money. Grey doesn’t. She can’t ask him for it. She will never have it. The piece is impossible. This knowledge must have been there all along, hiding behind her malingering daydreams.

‘Tell me what over the phone. Exactly?’ And this stilted sentence marks the last moment of a certain truth. Thirty seconds after she has spoken these impatient words and Grey has taken a deep breath before replying in his own broken voice, Lola has become someone new.

‘We can’t come down in November Lo, for your graduation. It’s ... it’s just not possible.’ And then he speaks her mother’s name. And then, for a long moment he says nothing. Lola wonders how much he knows, if he knows that there is almost no need for him to say anymore at all, now that he has said her mother’s name in that way, as though the word itself describes a small, swift, fatal wound.

An incongruous memory rises: the day she walked out of the optometrist with her first pair of glasses. Suddenly, she’d found herself recoiling from people passing by in the too-close crowd, from the colours of signs, all too bright and neat. The world all of a sudden filled with sharp edges and corners.

This is immeasurably more intense. How can this have happened? Is this how it works for everyone, growing up? Is one single earthquake of a realisation all it takes to

bring down two decades worth of dream-building? Do other people move through the world on a perfect arc of experience and understanding the way they appear to? She is compassless in this strange place that is a new self thrust upon herself, undesired, unbidden. She can think of no way of explaining how it has happened, all she knows is that it has. A sudden blooming of knowledge she cannot un-experience.

The worst part is that she has split in two, and the self that is proving strongest so far is the selfish one, the one who had been thinking of money when the phone rang, the one who had been thinking about glass. This Lola thinks: *How can I ever have thought I could do this?* She would never have been able to ask him for the amount of money she needed for the materials to create the mobile. He wouldn't have it to give her even if she did.

How could I ever have thought I could do it? Tell that story. Have them come and stand in a room and be faced with that image?

Her major project is an impossibility. And she really hadn't realised it until now. What kind of person does that make her? What kind of imbecile lives in such a dreamworld? She has managed to delude herself through three years of art school, somehow fooling her teachers and fellow students, Sam, Remy, everyone. What kind of person does these things?

The other Lola, the weak one, hears Grey begin to speak again. Hears him say her mother's name once more. Her brother's too. Hears him say, 'I know Lola, I know about Merena.'

Her father continues, the handset buzzing as he gathers speed. Now that he has managed to work that first unbelievable phrase free, it seems as though he will never stop, but Lola says nothing more to him. She can just make out the murmur of his voice coming from the handset, held straight out in front of her, away from her body. For a

moment, Lola puts it back to her ear, cradling it there with her shoulder. She rubs the side of her face against its smooth surface, feeling the difference in the way it moves against the skin of her cheek before and after the tears make it slippery. She holds it there long enough to hear him tell her what it was that he knows.

‘I know that she has been calling you, Love,’ he says gently. ‘I heard her this morning. I heard what she was saying to you.’ Lola can barely hear him now. ‘I know she has been ringing you, what she has been saying about speaking to Tom,’ he says, ‘about him being alive. I’m sorry, I thought she only said those things to me,’ he says, ‘I never dreamed ...’ And then he is talking about doctors and diagnoses and using words phrases that sound strange mostly because his voice doesn’t break when he speaks them. *Hallucination. Therapy. Belief. Paranoia.*

You would think it would be the weak self that would sink down to the floor in the spot where she had been standing in the middle of the hallway. It is a strange thing to know about herself, that it’s the strong part of herself, ordering her to fall to her knees, let her weight drop down onto one hip, as her father asks, ‘Why didn’t you tell me Lola, why didn’t you tell me?’

The weak part wants to whisper: *Because sometimes I was able to let myself believe it. Because sometimes it wasn’t such a terrible thing to pretend with her. Because, after all these years, she had begun to tell me stories again. Because maybe, if I pretended to believe what she was saying, she might tell me the truth.*

The strong part has already begun preparing the details that would bolster the story she would tell later. She will have to remember to apologise to Grey, to say that she had burst into tears, been struck dumb, that in her shock, she had dropped and forgotten the telephone. A shameful lie by reason of being only a partial truth, but incomparable to those that are coming. For a long while she will pretend, even to

herself, that none of what comes next is premeditated, that it comes from nowhere, taking her over. But right now she knows the truth of what she is doing, saving herself.

She places the receiver gently down on the dusty carpet. Picks it up again, holds it a moment until she feels confident that she knows how to drop it correctly in order that Grey will hear the muffled thump of it landing on the carpet. Even better, she aims it carefully in order that the heavy earpiece just grazes the skirting board as it falls. A tiny clatter, audible enough for authenticity.

Her nostrils fill with dust as her head sinks to the floor. The carpet is an ugly, dirty grey, with a swirling pattern of faded crimson. She has never paid much attention to it before, but it has made its sneaky way into her subconscious, she knows the pattern – an Art Nouveau motif, long, even strands of creeping vine tendrils, hooks and curls replicating all the way to the front door. Dark oversized roses growing off either side of the vines every foot or so, their shape and colour blurred and mutated by footfall and spills, and ash and dust. She knows the vines and roses are still just barely distinguishable as themselves, if you are standing in the hallway, looking down.

From this new perspective though, one side of her face pressing into the floor, her eyes so close to the pattern that it warps and changes, no longer roses and vines. Hearts, fat with blood, overfull, bursting with it. And veins, jagged, torn and dripping, she thinks. The carpet is ugly and it smells of old things, of death.

No, she thinks, no. No.

8.18 pm

What would Charlotte say? ‘Thanks for coming.’

‘Thanks for the invite.’

‘I didn’t ... I didn’t know if you were coming ... or not.’

‘Are you kidding,’ she says, blinking thickly lacquered lashes, her eyes sliding left and right, taking in the room. ‘I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.’ As if she had sent an RSVP, as if I had replied to the email she sent. As if it is as nothing to stand and have a conversation with a person she has not spoken to in ten years, a person to whom her last words had been, *You’re a fake and a failure Lola Hayward. You’re a liar Lola.*

‘So.’

‘So?’

‘Do you have a drink? No? Do you want one? I mean, do you want me to find you one?’

‘No, I’m alright. Somebody’s already getting me a wine thanks. Looks like there’s a bit of a line up there,’ she says, tilting her head in the direction of the bar without taking her eyes off ‘Optogram’, ‘It’s a good turn out. So,’ she says again, ‘you did it. You made the eye, finally.’

My mouth seems to have stopped working altogether. I nod mutely, waiting for her to give her opinion, wanting to know what she thinks, not wanting to know. I notice the small black notebook held tightly in her right hand, its cover buckling in a long thin line down its centre where she has shut its pages around her pen. The notebook is the same type I remember her always having with her, next to the bed, in her handbag, her backpack, the table next to the telephone, anywhere she might need to write down an

idea, a thought she'd had, a word, a quotation, a conversation she'd been part of or overheard. It's strangely comforting to know she is using the same type of notebook. I'm sure too, that the pen tucked inside the notebook is the same kind of pen, yellow, six-sided, with a blue lid. It is less comforting to imagine what she might write in that notebook while she is here. 'What are you doing now?' I ask her, trying not to look at her right hand, 'for work I mean.'

The small smile that flirts across her lips is hard to read. Is she pleased that I have asked the question? Pleased with the answer she is able to give me? Bemused that I didn't already know? 'Well, I've been writing for *ArtSpeak*,' she says, lifting her eyebrows, 'you know, the magazine.'

'Oh yeah, I know,' I say, 'but I thought, I mean, I read that you'd left.'

'Oh,' that smile again, just as indecipherable, just as quickly gone. 'Yeah. You heard?'

'I read it. I ... have a subscription.' No need to admit to the internet searches for her name, typed in the middle of the night, immediately erased from the computer's history.

'Well,' she says, flicking her head around to look behind her, checking on the queue snaking its way towards the drinks table. I spot a waiter a couple of metres away and swiftly take the last two glasses of champagne from his tray, handing one to Remy.

'Thanks,' she says, and takes a sip. I begin drinking, a little too quickly, as she says, 'well, I've been writing a book. A book of short stories.' She clears her throat to continue talking, and I close my eyes and tilt back my head, and by the time she has told me that her book has been accepted for publication, by the time she tells me its title, *Secrets and Surrounding Sounds*, I have drained my glass.

In front of Remy, one man is reading his catalogue. He flips it over to inspect the back page, the three artist biographies. ‘Ha,’ he nudges his wife with an elbow, making a show of covering a smirk with his programme. ‘Ha,’ he repeats, rolling his eyes as she peers at ‘Optogram’ over his shoulder. ‘Five leaves. Good grief.’

Remy purses her lips, her features hardening for a second. ‘What’s he talking about?’ she hisses.

‘Nick Drake,’ I say, embarrassed. ‘The singer. It was a song. ‘Five Leaves Left’.

‘Oh,’ she says, but she looks even more confused.

I sigh, ‘He had a sister,’ I say. ‘He ... died.’

‘Oh,’ she says again and this time the word brings a softness back to her face. She looks across my shoulder, a faraway look in her eyes.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Such impressive detail in those intertwining branches. Leaves and twigs, tiny, dripping. Such a complicated network. How? Another painted layer beneath the strata of colour and glaze?*

—

take the rotary engraving tool in your right hand and squeeze the button, watching the small diamond-point bit spin · that it feels like a heavy felt-tip pen, a permanent marker, will work to keep you mindful of what you are about to do · by this time, a diverse

collection of newly-etched glassware should cover the surface of your worktable, the results of many weeks of practice · for this though, the actual act, it is better to kneel on the floor, resting the large glass disc you have searched for and found on a black towel borrowed from the hairdresser downstairs · take a breath, hold it, and try to concentrate on keeping a steady hand · one chance · you won't find another lens like this one ·

holding your right hand steady with your left, lower the tool to the glass ·

this is the part that will remain a secret, yours and yours alone · a title card might be made, listing techniques and materials, and, if you succumb to the temptation, perhaps even some kind of description · but exactly how you apply technique to material, the number of times you touch the tool to the glass, and remove it, the directions you move it in, how much pressure you apply at different moments, what you are thinking, really thinking, no will ever know but you · a string of tiny circles with the odd short line, both horizontal and vertical, no discernable pattern other than the outline, that's what they will see ·

it is necessary that you believe this in order to continue ·

already you have traced inside the stencil's outline, it's time now to fill it in, to add depth and shadow · this is where you will embed your secret ·

stop · quickly · pull back your hand · look again, think again · about what is yours and what belongs to Tom · you should not lower the tool again until you have figured this out · then, when you begin to move the point across the glass, your hand will be steady, confident · your whole arm moving in small tight circles · a crisscrossing web of lines appear, like a mesh of fine lace, intricate filigree · the first few words are always the hardest · try not to race through the first layer of sentences · when you have covered the whole area that lies outside the outline of the tree, take a moment to read your confession through before you return to where you began ·

take a breath though, before you start again · let yourself see what the truth looks like before you lower the tool to the surface again, tell it all again · the same words, different words, it makes no difference · around and around that point moves, around and around, and left to right, down a couple of millimetres, left to right and down · in silence, you tell the secret stories to the glass, every layer of letters obscuring the one beneath until all appear as nothing more than air, just shadows and clouds

—

One day, far in the future, Lola will have to admit, if only to herself, that she had known what she was going to do from the moment she dropped the telephone. That already, as she sank to her knees and thought up a story for Grey, in the back of her mind she had also made a decision about what to tell Remy. Already, the last cogent piece of her mind, doing its best to hide itself from all the other shards and pieces, is setting up the conversation, working on phrasing, the correct direction of her gaze, the facial expression, tears or not?

On the telephone, day after day, Lola's mother has been saying, 'I spoke to Tom.'

Late at night, in the dark, Lola has been telling Remy, 'My mother says she has been speaking to Tom.'

On the telephone, her father said, 'Your mother has been speaking to Tom.' He also said, 'I found a pile of letters, to him and from him. All in her handwriting.' he said. And more. How is it that she had been able to sit through Merena's stories, week after week, knowing they were not true, knowing what it meant that they were not true, and yet for the few moments she had been able to stay on the line as Grey spoke the

truth in calm tones Lola had begun to shake with the effort of containing the screams that threatened to break loose from her, break her loose from him.

Eventually, some time this afternoon, Remy will return, and Lola will have to speak again. Offer an explanation. In the meantime, there are a few hours left in which it is possible to stay very still, to do nothing. She lies there on her left side, letting all the other organs slide down to weigh upon her heart. She lies very still, remembering and imagining. She lies there for hours, lost to herself, clinging to one word.

No, she thinks, *no*. *No*.

After an immeasurable stretch of time, she begins to uncurl body and mind. She yawns and rolls over onto her back, blinking against the stark orange light from the bare bulb that hangs low beneath the crumbling ceiling rose. She has done it. Without yet speaking a single word, she has changed *No* into *Yes*. Somehow, despite herself, she has begun to imagine a new way of living. Of being one thing and looking like something else. Tonight, Lola will tell Remy again, *My mother has been speaking to Tom. It has all been true, all along. They can't come down, she will say, he is going to stay with them for a while, you won't be able to meet them after all.* It is almost effortless, this act of bringing him back to life, so straightforward to piece her family back together now that they are so far away. She can control all of the details, make them do whatever she wants them to. So easy, to step out of one world, into another. *All this time I've thought what he'd done, walking away like that, must have been so difficult, so frightening, so huge*, she thinks. *It's not. It's not hard at all.* Simple, it is all so incredibly simple.

8.25 pm

‘Dante?’

‘What?’

‘Dante,’ Remy repeats, gesturing at ‘Optogram’ with her champagne glass. Word has travelled that it is acceptable to touch the mobile and a small crowd has gathered around it, some taking turns to align their fingers with the tree’s sprawling limbs, others holding it still so that they might get right up close to the surface. Every now and then there is a small gasp as someone finds themselves suddenly able to see an arm or leg amongst the branches.

‘I don’t get it,’ a tiny woman standing beside me whispers, handkerchief held over mouth, to her equally diminutive friend, ‘is it an eye, or is it the world?’

‘Maybe it’s both,’ the other woman whispers back, frowning. They stare at ‘Optogram’ a little longer, concentrating hard, but when they look back into each other’s eyes something breaks free in them and they dissolve into a fit of the giggles. ‘I never know what things are meant to *mean*,’ laughs the woman who spoke first.

‘Neither do I,’ agrees the second and they are off again, clutching at each other’s arms for support and wiping tears from the corners of their eyes as they make their way over to the point on the wall where Terry’s line of photographs begins.

A small gasp of laughter bursts from my surprised lips and when I turn back to raise an eyebrow at Remy it is a moment devoid of self-consciousness. It is an automatic act, I want to share this fun with someone, to relish the joke before it fades and becomes an anecdote, meaningless when removed from its context. The smile we share is real. Everything is suddenly very real. Remy is here. Not dangerous Remy. Not

Remy the idea, Remy the ghost, Remy the guilty secret, but Remy who was once my friend. Remy who I once loved.

She curls her lip good-humouredly, modifying her question, ‘So, if not an eye, and not the world, then maybe Hell?’

‘Hell?’ I laugh, ‘does that look like Hell to you? A *pretty* tree, all that *green*?’
 ‘But it is a suicide tree, isn’t it?’ she continues, her voice dropping a little. ‘The soul trapped for eternity?’ Despite the fact that caution has crept into her voice, softening and lowering it, a few people in the crowd have overheard, stepping forward to take another look at the mobile.

‘It’s a tree. Yes.’ I say, still smiling. ‘And yeah, the idea did begin with Dante. But it’s not his tree. It’s nothing that ... punishing. Violent. It’s nothing that violent.’

‘Hmmm,’ she says, nodding. ‘Nothing violent,’ the fingers of her right hand contracting slightly around her notebook.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *An engraving.*
- *We flinch, imagining the diamond point-tool approaching the lens, the whir and whine as it nears, and touches down, spinning at speeds high enough to cut through the surface, wear away its shine. We narrow our own eyes, we wince, whistle through our teeth, and turn away. A ridiculous reaction. Instinctive, visceral, empathic, logical and absurd. Ce n’est pas un oeil. And still, we lower our lashes. Take a deep breath in. Think about the care taken to create this tattoo,*

the meticulousness necessary to produce this level of detail, the vigilance, the technique, the courage necessary to even make the attempt.

- *The wake created, those thousand tiny shards of glass flying into the air, rolling around one another, pluming like clouds, floating slowly down to settle.*
- *A reversal: what has been carved out is not the image itself but its surroundings. Rendering negative space visible to create the image. Making something out of nothing. Carving out space. The tree is borne of our inability to believe in the void. It is ours. We conjure it.*

—

tear the masking tape from the glass and carefully peel back the stencil, lift it free, drop it to the floor · a layer of fine white powder dusts the room · sitting back on your heels, brush white-gloved hands over the smooth lens, revealing the finished etching of the tree · push your facemask up onto your forehead and take a long breath in · blow gently on the surface, and cover your nose and mouth with your sleeve · take care not to inhale again until the tiny glass particles have settled around you ·

look from the lens to the photograph taped to the wall beside you, and back again · compare the two · a perfect reproduction · perfect · so what is that feeling weighing down the thrill of accomplishment, threatening to overshadow the relief you feel at having come this far without slipping, without overrunning an outline, or cutting too deep into the glass? why the nagging thought that you have forgotten something?

the work is shaping up to be an impressive piece · and still this persistent desire to keep working the image · and still this persistent fear that a single extra mark made with the diamond-point might ruin everything · perhaps you have only come this far because you had the stencil to guide you, the ghost of Tom's hand to guide your own ·

the idea of adding anything new, freehand, no matter how small, terrifies · you would then have to face the limits of your own technique, your own talent, or lack of ·

take another deep breath · lower the mask over your nose and mouth · go back again · you know what it is that is missing, who it is you have left out of the picture

—

There they are, those two girls, a thin pair of spoons in an afternoon bed. There she is: Remy, short blonde dreadlocks curling up at the ends around those tiny round near-lobeless ears. There she is: Lola, black hair shaved boyshort, that long drooping fringe with its blue streak hanging down across her eyes. She doesn't care about the hair across her closed eyes; in this fragile moment all things seem perfectly positioned exactly as they are. Remy has one long arm wrapped around Lola holding Lola's right hand in her own.

Lola is not sleeping, but still, she dreams.

She is thinking of Tom, again. Remy's chest moves slow and steady against her back. Lola tries to pace her own breath to match Remy's but is never able to extend her exhalations quite long enough. Remy's breath warms the air in the room. Both girls are thin, the long hours in low-paid bar jobs see to that, long hours drinking and dancing see to that. Lola is paler but Remy is thinnest and when she wriggles to get comfortable her golfball knees dig into the soft undersides of Lola's own.

Awake and dreaming of Tom, Lola has not moved since she and Remy separated the connected parts of their bodies and began to whisper softly to each other in the false dusk created by the almost-shut venetian blinds. Having listened to Remy's

voice fading into the seasounds of inhalation and exhalation and now hearing those breaths lengthen again as Remy falls gently off to sleep, Lola knows she can let herself drift further and further out toward the past.

She keeps perfectly still. The immobilisation of her body gives free rein to her travelling mind. She keeps herself still for long enough to make her way to the place she needs to be.

The window is foggy, it's freezing outside. And Tom is in there, breathing.

Lola lies in the suddenly too-hot bed, wanting to pretend to herself that the problem is with the keenness of Remy's left knee, become unbearable digging into that soft spot between the tendons at the back of her own.

A little glow comes in through the window from the new moon, but he hasn't turned the light on.

She tries to believe that Remy's knee is the source of the physical discomfort making it impossible to keep still enough to stay in the reverie, rather than her own prickling sweat, pooling in the dip above her clavicle. She knows though, even as she squeezes her eyes tighter shut, that there is more to it than that.

Tom can find his own way home.

It doesn't matter how hard she tries, she can't alter that memory.

Can't make her seven year old self speak the truth of what she now knows that she saw. What she already knew she had seen, even then.

D'you find Tom? No? Oh no, don't start up again, it doesn't matter. He'll turn up when he's hungry.

Will he?

Lola has long found her way into sleep by peculiar means. Tracing and retracing this memory is one path. She returns to the beginning and works her way through the

sequence until she becomes stuck, again and again, at the end. At the moment that she made her decision to turn away from the window, away from Tom. There have been a few mornings when the only way to break out of the repeating scene is to get up for a glass of water, go to the loo, step outside for some fresh air, or sit in the kitchen scribbling with pen and paper, deal with it in the same manner as a nightmare. But usually it has a strangely soothing effect. Usually, by this stage, she is dreaming before she realises she has fallen asleep.

The dreams are safe to share, because everybody already knows that the sleeping mind is unruly, so these she tells to Remy, who likes to listen, and scribbles them down in the notebook she keeps on the dressing table next to the bed.

The dreams are safe to share but the ways Lola reaches them are not. There is this way, and there is another, stranger meditative practice. For years now Lola has lain awake at night imagining all of the ways in which her brother might possibly have taken his own life. Going over and over the list of possible methods she has never risked describing to anyone after that disastrous afternoon in primary school when she had been discovered writing them in the back of her exercise book.

She has told Remy about Mrs Smith, about her lost back tooth. About running away from school, about being found by her father in the tree. She has told her about the stinging slap from Merena, and the way her mother then held her so tight Lola began to panic, thinking she would never let go, never let her breathe again. About the surprising way that the days to follow passed without further punishment, that none of the day's events, not the list that had been found in her exercise book, not the tooth, not the running away was ever mentioned again. The biggest risk she has taken has been to explain to Remy how that day marked her out, finally and completely, as an outsider in

the small school in the tiny town, and that until Sam, until Sam and Remy, she had never really had a close friend. She has not told her about the list.

Lola has not dared to tell Remy about the strange comfort she takes in the looping memory of the night she chose to leave Tom outside in the dark. She has not dared to tell her about the hypnotic power of imagining the decisions he might have made later, when he was too far away to save.

Her conscious mind runs along the pattern of grooves in her subconscious, her memory and imagination, around and around the well-known track and it works the way Lola imagines that counting sheep must work. One minute you're saying one hundred, one hundred-one, one hundred-two, one hundred-three, and the next you are waking in the morning, the shock of the alarm clock, and the difficulty of peeling your lids open proving that, despite your fears, you have slept.

Today though, there have been the phonecalls, one from her mother and two from Grey, and it's not night, only the afternoon, and Remy is the only one sleeping. Those long breaths of hers losing their tidal charm and turning to a high whining snore. Her sweet fragile bones melting with the heat of her easy-found sleep, thin limbs growing heavy, soft skin beginning to bead with sweat and stick, suckerlike to Lola's own. Two thin streams of cold air force their way out of those pinhole nostrils, part the fine hairs on the back of Lola's neck and push against her prickling skin. They will tunnel their way through. Pores tighten in defence. Lola takes a deep breath herself, exhales through gritted teeth.

A hair is trapped between the top and bottom eyelashes of the outer corner of her right eye. It is not her own. It rakes at her eyelid with each blink. Lola lies still, molars grinding, and fights to keep the rising anxiety down. Until her stomach twists so that she gasps, and her mouth is so dry that the gasp causes her to cough, and this wakes

Remy, whose wriggling legs and reaching arms regain their hard skeleton and become human again, tolerable again.

‘Hi.’

‘Hi.’

‘How long was I asleep?’ Remy rolls onto her back for a moment, taking all the warmth in the room with her.

‘Not long.’

How voices can be so soft. How the sun, all those light years away, can be covered by a cloud, wrapping itself around the earth all those miles above the house, and behind bricks and render and paint and wallpaper the dustmotes, rolling and turning in the thin shafts of light let in through the gaps between the blinds, can disappear. How such deep shadows can make it hard to tell your own arm from that of another. How light affects colours, can make one person’s skin resemble another’s, can make skin and a sheet seem as though they are made of the same material. Add a filter, remove a light source, and everything blends into everything else.

‘Cold.’ Remy sits up and crawls to the end of the bed, and Lola, who has not moved, hears the rustle of the thin doona being pulled along the floorboards and lifted into the air above her and feels its cool coverless cotton fall onto her skin in that way down has, that lightness. *Here and not here*, she thinks, *I’m here and I am not here*. The doona settles around them and there is peace. A moment of stillness. Then Remy sits up again. ‘Cold.’ A blanket is pulled up over the doona. Its orange and yellow wool woven into plaid brings with it too much weight.

With a light sigh Remy begins to knead Lola’s shoulders. She’s not a good masseuse. Lola has long accepted that it is the idea of it that is important, to herself as much as to Remy, the thought of Remy giving, asking nothing in return. But it is touch,

after all, skin on skin, and heat builds beneath the skin and melts some of Lola's tension.

'So what did you do all day?' Remy punctuates each word by twisting a handful of the flesh between Lola's shoulders and earlobes, pulling at the skin, never quite gaining a grip on the muscles beneath.

'What do you mean?' The tone is harsher than it would have been if Lola had taken the time to censor herself. Her stomach rumbles, reminding her that she hasn't eaten yet today. What did she do today?

It is a long walk from the edge of the bridge to the midpoint. The air is dark and cold and if you are the one walking towards the one standing at the apex, your long hair whips around your shoulders. The wind laces it together in front of your eyes. It makes you afraid to keep walking. If you are the one standing in the middle of the bridge you shut your eyes against that cold wind, to shut out the sting of it, the sting of everything.

'Not much. Hey are you hungry?'

'Not really. Went to the cemetery with John, had lunch with him after. What do you mean what do I mean?'

'Oh, where'd you go?'

If a person was not watching out for it, they might not notice a small thing like Remy's hands pausing for a split second, might not notice the short accompanying silence.

'Um,' fingers working again. 'That place in the back alley. You know, the one with like two tables. What do you mean what do I mean? I just asked what you did today. You obviously didn't go in to school.'

‘I don’t understand how they make any money.’ At this, Remy stops massaging altogether. Lying on her side still Lola feels her roll over onto her back, hears her take a long deep breath, let it out slowly. Lola hears the soft whistle of air being pushed out through gritted teeth.

The lights that string along the overhead arches of the bridge cast a dull yellow glow, puddling shadows on the grey path. Cars pass and high beams bloom and flare in your vision, leaving ink blots tattooed on your pupils. In your pocket, your fingers slip through a hole in the lining, hook through a hair elastic and pull it out like a magic trick. Tada. Or they find a coarse, strong rope, which keeps coming and coming, unravelling like a multicoloured ribbon. Tada. You bunch your hair together into a tight ponytail, stretching your forehead tight, tanned animal skin smooth. Ready to run. Or you make the rope into a loop, you wind it around itself, one, two, three times ... seven turns for, for tradition. Ready to jump.

‘How who makes any money Lola?’

‘The café.’

‘What is going on with you?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘This is getting ridiculous. I just asked – ’

‘Oh look, I did fuckall today okay. Absolutely fucking nothing. Would you like me to describe it? Shall I give you a little run down of exactly what kind of nothing I did? Will that get you to shut up?’

‘Jesus, Lola I was just interested in your day. What the hell is wrong with you?’

Lola still hasn't turned over. The only movement she's made since Remy started talking was a fit of kicking to free her feet from Remy's perfect hospital corner. She doesn't turn over now, despite Remy's growing anger, despite feeling the doona and blanket lift and fall again, despite Remy's sniffing, audible over the sound of a pair of jeans being pulled up her legs, the quiet snap of the dome on the waistband. Despite her soft footsteps padding down the carpeted hall, the tinny pinging as the stainless steel kettle rumbles into life on the stove.

Everything is shaded grey. Grey cement footpath. Murky grey sky. Pale pastel grey clouds. Silvery grey steel everywhere. Running, nearly there, see grey ground jolt up towards you and fall back as you run, rise and fall, rise and fall.

It is true. She has done nothing. All day. From around an hour after Remy left until she arrived home again. And it feels indescribable. Indescribable and therefore inexcusable. To say to Remy – the good daughter, the good sister, who spent the hour before lunch with her brother at the cemetery, at her parents' graveside, tending and talking, remembering and hugging him to her side when his eyes clouded over – that Lola spent half the day lying curled on her side on the carpet in the hallway. Paralysed by a sudden collision of her past, present and future. There are things that people say, aren't there? Little white lies? Little protective politenesses? Why can't Lola do it then? Why can't she just say she spent the day *taking it easy*? Maybe next time Remy asks she'll remember to say that.

What did I do today? Oh just took it easy you know. Bummed around. Took a shower. Watched some tv. Relaxed, you know. But she doesn't think that she will.

Remember. Or, she might remember but not be able to bring herself to tell that lie. Why are the big lies so easy to tell and the small ones so elusive?

This is how it goes, between Remy and Lola. This is the script. Because despite the three years that have passed since they met, despite the unavoidable deepening of intimacy that comes with cohabitation, there is a chasm between Lola and Remy, into which Lola whispers her darkest secrets, old and new.

Lola hears the kitchen chair scrape back from the table, grimaces as the plumbing shudders and thumps. Remy is rinsing her teacup. Lola knows it will be put neatly upside down in the dishrack to drain now. Knows that Remy will now be heading into the laundry, pulling heavy wet clothes from the big old top loader. She knows that she should get up and help, but she doesn't. Instead, she lies there, still, on her side; she curls her knees in closer to her chest, and thinks of Tom.

Stepping up to the edge, nearly there, grip smooth chrome rails, run your hands along them, out and back. Monkey bars. Climbing frame. Or take hold of the gun, its cold grey and black solidity, the fast finality of it. Feel it chill the blood beneath the skin of your lips, the inside of your cheeks, your tongue, soft palette. Look up into the faraway sky, even that is so dark, darker than the arcing grey girders dissecting it into long thin wedges.

Not if you are the one with the ponytail, if you are that one, RUN. See nothing, no panorama, no landmarks, no nostalgia, no Sunday-afternoon-movie crossings by yellow cabs and two-tone brown station wagons. Nothing. Just a hundred shades of grey and your brother, standing on a ledge.

Or, a cliff edge, the grey rail of a tourist-lookout chicken-wire fence under his feet. Or in the rough, grey-brown fork of two tall tree branches, arms outstretched, as if

he's about to fly. But he's not going to fly. He's going to fall. Down there is the hard reality of the ground.

The hard dirt of the orchard ground. The hard grey reality of the footpath below the carpark ledge. Or black water, hard as concrete from this height. If you're on the bridge, black water cut into tiny dark diamonds by the tight-webbed steel mesh of the fence. If the cliff, then maybe a churning waterfall, a fast, boiling, unforgiving river waits below.

If it's a gun in your hand then the step you have to take is almost all in your mind now. If its a knife, icy in your hand, the movements you make are a little bigger and employ the arm as well as the hand. Poison too, requires you to move your arm, to lift the pill, the bottle, the glass to your lips, to tilt your head back. If its gas, just sit there in the car, just sit, and wait. Drowning is taking that dark world into yourself, making those emotions manifest.

None of this applies if you are the one with the long dark hair, running towards the highest point on the arched back of the bridge, running alone, lungs filled with ice. If that is you, all that matters is that you keep on running. All you know is that none of it really matters, there is no point even in running. You will never reach him. Never to get to look him in the eye, to open your mouth and let the words fall out from behind your lips.

Only somehow, tonight, he hears you. He lifts his eyes up from the sea and turns his head. He sees you. He holds your eyes with his eyes and says I'm a liar Lola.

You open your mouth to say his name but there is nothing inside, no teeth, no tongue, just an empty cave. No voice.

He says: Liar, Lola. He looks at you, and then down at the lapping water.

You say: Tom. Look at me Tom.

There is a splash and you look down. There is an empty rowboat, oars dragging. Another splash. Someone laughs and then there is a ragged-breathed sigh, sounding like a face cradled in shaking hands. When you look back Tom is gone. You don't reach for him but your fingertips tingle as if you have. The memory of a featherlight brush across your palms. Cotton clothing slipping through too-small hands.

—

8.27 pm

‘If not violence,’ Remy asks, ‘then what?’

—

she will sweep into the room, crying, *it's like snow! it's snowed in your studio!* · behind her in the doorway he will say dryly: *ash. Pompeii* · looking down at the etching she will say, *I've seen that before* · laugh, try not to be afraid: *of course · no · not this · somewhere else · I've seen a man like that before. · man?* he will say, squinting · *what man?* · *in the tree*, she will reply, looking confused, pointing to the top of the tree's trunk, where the branches divide and spread · there, cradled in those branches, draped over them, twisting around and through them, will be a man, his long limbs echoing their form and shape, blending in with them so naturally you yourself had not noticed him even as you wore away the particles of glass to create him · *I can't see it in the photograph*, he will say, having crossed the room to check, his nose almost pressed up against the picture · *it's not there* ·

you might say: *must be something to do with the light, just shadows* · *maybe I read it somewhere · it might have been in a book, not a picture · did I read it or see it?* she might wonder · you have never seen it yourself, and you've been staring at that drawing for more than twenty years · it is something new · something you have conjured from nowhere · from yourself ·

and even when she runs back into the room a few hours later to say, ‘*Plath. that's where you got it from, Plath*, don't be afraid · you can tell the truth · you can tell her you've never read Plath.

and when he says, *Catch 22, is that where you took it from?* you can shake your head · it doesn't matter if he believes you or not ·

and even when she comes back with her laptop and shows you the photograph of the beautiful dead singer, naked, face hidden, limbs melding into branches, don't be afraid · even when she tells you the photograph of the singer was taken by his sister · if you need to give them an explanation, if they need proof that the image is yours, give them Jung

—

You have been sleeping. She sits on the edge of the bed, stroking your forehead with a cool hand. 'You're dreaming Angel. You're having a dream. It's just a dream.' Feel the tears pool in your lashes. Come to full waking, and remember the terror and the grief. Try to remember all of the details, to hold onto them, keep one foot back there in the otherworld of them. Try to be satisfied with the residue of guilt, a grit on the surface of the relief you feel on waking. Concentrate on the gentle way she pushes back your fringe.

'Just a dream Lola, come on, wake up.' Lola hears the clunk of the washing machine before the whirring spin cycle begins. Remy's hands smell of coffee and detergent. Lola remembers where she is, forgets the fear, allows herself to sink back into the sadness. You have been sleeping, she thinks, It's time to wake up.

Opening her eyes to look up at Remy, she means to apologise, means to keep her sadness a secret, she lets herself cry instead. She buries her head in Remy's lap, soaking the denim with her tears. She lets Remy stroke her hair and murmur gentle things into her ear, pushing her lips down into the part of her neck that dips just below the lobe. She lets Remy murmur these comforts into her neck and ear while she cries

and cries. For once, Remy strokes her hair without stopping. While Lola cries Remy will continue to stroke her hair.

We imagine that we lose our tears. That they leave us, become something outside of us. We empty ourselves of them. We imagine ourselves dry and dehydrated, floating Alicelike, in a flood of them. But there are other ways of crying.

Lola swallows her tears and she swallows the thickness that fills her sinuses and her tears burn their way through the pale skin of her reddening cheeks and the flesh beneath her thin skin absorbs the tears spongelike and she swells with them, with the water and salt and knowledge of them. Her cheeks puff and her eyelids swell and her features blur and vanish, her lips the first to draw themselves in and disappear.

Crying, Lola allows Remy to comfort her; she allows Remy to believe that she understands. Lola knows it is all her own fault. The fight, Remy's own quiet tears as she left the room, the washing not done although she has been here all day, doing nothing. Tom. That night he left. Every time he left. Her fault. She should have said something. She should have told the truth. Should tell the truth.

Words start to form beneath her sobbing, she tries to gather and shape them, she takes a breath. Then Remy says, 'Everything's alright Lola. I'm here, I'm here. It's ok. I'm right here.' Lola gasps and her tears run down the sides of her face and slide into the corners of her mouth and fill her mouth and she cannot speak. Her sinuses fill, it is an effort to breathe.

Lola cries in silence, she keeps her secrets. In this way, she holds onto Remy, but she loses herself and her brother over again. The idea of speaking hovers around her in widening circles as she hesitates. Lola cries, knowing: This is the way that I am loved. I cry and I am loved. I am frightened and I am loved. I am lost and scared and innocent and I am loved. You believe you know all there is to know of me. I am what

you know of me. This way, I am loved. Lola knows what she knows, and so she keeps silent. She is giving nothing away just yet.

Not the truth. Not even the lie.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Ultimately, it is the lustrous glaze that has been poured over the piece, pooling in the engraved sections like ink in a fresh tattoo, like blood in an altar-moat, reflecting our own image back at us, which causes us to linger.*
- *And, looking longer, we are drawn back in, to that detail, that dense net of branches and twigs. And perhaps find ourselves rewarded: there, those limbs, human, long, ropy, slack and sleep-heavy, chameleoning themselves amongst the boughs. There they are. There he is. If we desire. If we choose.*

—

8.29 pm

‘Indecision?’ I shrug, looking down, ‘Fear?’ My voice would not even convince a stranger. I take a deep breath. Look up again into her steady gaze.

‘Would you believe, bad faith?’

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Is he there, or not? We don't want these games, we want to know.*

—

drop the paintbrush into the jar of liquid and watch the glazing medium bloom through the glass · let your eyes linger on it, suspended specimen, delaying the next moment · inhale, closing your eyes · feel your exhalation force its way out, a small ‘pah’ of barely contained joy bubbling up from your belly as you open your eyes again and look down at the newly finished work · stand in the studio, staring and staring at the smooth perfection of the final layer of glaze · beneath it sits the painted eye, protected, solidified · beneath that, the etching of the tree-shaped space, with its ghostly shadow of a shape that might, or might not be a person · and, buried somewhere in amongst the details, all the secrets that needed both to be told and to remain secret at once · breathe on the surface, watch the circle of fog on the surface grow and fade

—

They are out driving again. It is well after sunset, and through the left hand window in the back of the car Lola stares deep into the dark. It was light when they left home but even though Lola doesn't know how many hours they have been driving for she knows that they are very far from home. The tyres are bumping across the rattle bridge that marks the halfway point to the place in the hills where they stay on their annual mid-year holiday.

This is not a holiday. There is a terrible slowness to the way Grey drives when they go out like this.

'All in the car,' Merena says, 'we're going for a little drive.' She tries to make it sound like an adventure. 'Let's see if we can see some kangaroos,' she says. Lola knows they're not going on a holiday, she knows it's not an adventure, but every time Merena gives Grey that look across the kitchen and bundles blankets and a thermos into the car, a small, hopeful part of Lola allows herself to believe that it will be better this time. That it must be a better thing, to be out searching than sitting at home, afraid to go out even for a bottle of milk in case the phone rings and there is no one there to answer it, in case Tom knocks on the door and no-one is there to let him back in the house.

In the back seat, leaning her forehead against the window, Lola listens to the old chain bridge rattle beneath the tyres, she listens to the low hum of the engine, the way it changes when her father shifts up or down a gear each time her mother says 'There! What was that?' or 'Stop ... stopstopstop, stop and let me out,' each time she gets silently back into the car, pulling the door shut and turning her head away from the window. Lola listens to the slow swish the tyres make when it begins to rain. She listens to the windshield wipers slap back and forwards, faster and faster as the rainfall grows heavier and Grey is forced to slow down to a crawl. She listens to her parents murmur to each other in the front seat, the way they never mention Tom, never speak about what

it is they are doing out here, driving around through the bush in the dead dark night, in the pelting rain.

‘It’s coming down too heavy to see,’ says Grey.

‘It’s so cold,’ says Merena, and her voice is a tiny shivering creature, injured, alive but barely. ‘It’s so cold and wet.’

The windshield is fogging up completely and Grey wipes furiously at the glass with the sleeve of his jumper. Her mother winds her window down a couple of centimetres letting in the cold air. Drops of rain enter the car too, they stick her hair to her forehead, they run down the sides of her face and off the end of her nose like tears.

‘Love,’ sighs Lola’s father to her mother. ‘Love?’

‘No,’ her mother says. ‘No.’

Grey wipes at the windscreen again and carries on driving. Lola fogs up the side window with a long slow exhalation. She slides off her right glove and puts her index finger to the glass. Against the darkness, in the small circles she makes with her breath she writes the word *gone*, and erases it, breathes on the glass again, writes *disappeared*, erases that, breathes again, writes *missing*. Erases, breathes, writes her brother’s name. Writes her own.

8.30 pm

Remy closes her eyes, drawing in a long deep breath. 'Bad faith,' she repeats, nodding slowly, and the way she says it, it sounds like a small prayer. Not a plea, a blessing.

—

Notes, contd: Optogram.

- *Even before we step around to stand behind the lens, we know already what we are going to see. From this perspective, that tree, with its possible occupants, obscures nothing, it frames everything we see.*

—

go to the tree, in the end, to be in the quiet · for no other single reason · to be alone with yourself · to be quiet · to silence all the other reasons

because the tree is an old and trusted ally, you might climb it · hand over tired hand, feet searching out and finding knots for support, knots, and notches and other rough purchase ·

because it is a fig tree, you will already know there is a decision to be made ·

because it is a fig tree, branches will mirror roots, spreading, curving fingers, gnarled and huge · forking where the trunk ends, revealing all of the ways in ·

between the branches, a cool and shaded well, a shallow bowl, worn smooth with waiting for you · the top of that wide trunk, a cupped palm · you might fill it with tears ·

you might climb in, lie down, mold yourself into its receptive shape · let it cradle your whole self · curl up, close your eyes, and sleep

—

On the inside of the cover of her maths book, Lola is writing her name, and her brother's name. Four letters and three. One atop the other she writes the names until they merge into one another, until they become illegible, until they disappear.

With the tip of her index finger, on the inside of the passenger window of her father's car, Lola is carving the word LOST out of darkness. Erasing it. Breathing on the glass. Beginning again.

—

Part Two

Gift

‘Meaning something doesn’t make it true. Don’t confuse the two things.

Meaning and truth. They’re not the same thing.’

Alex Miller, *Prochownik’s Dream*.

One

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *Three life-sized standing figures, human, limbs entangled, necks entwined. Covered, draped, shrouded. Muslin? Tulle?*
- *Three? Or four? Or are there only two people under there? Or just one, moving?*

—

Lola meets Sam in the first week of art school in Melbourne. After class on the second day of semester, they cross the busy main road to the milk bar. They sit together, on the concrete steps of the empty laundrette next door, stirring sachet after sachet of white sugar into nasty takeaway coffee, trading tales. How they each ended up here at this small private art school in this shabby, poised on the verge of trendiness, inner-city Melbourne suburb. Where they want to go. Where they come from.

Sam's an Adelaide boy; Lola has encountered plenty of those back home in the Bay. They turn up in Byron by the carload every summer, all pricey beach clothes and even more expensive, clean new dreadlocks. The pair talk about Byron, a place Sam did actually visit for schoolies, and about Adelaide, a place Lola has never been. It seems far away, Adelaide, not quite real.

'Byron's the imaginary place,' he says, and Lola rolls her eyes. 'All those hippies,' he continues, laughing, 'they're creating it with their meditations, they're holding it together with the sheer force of all that positive thought.'

His eyes flick across the scribbles on the front cover of her notebook.

‘No offence,’ he continues, with a quick grin, sarcastic without being unfriendly.

She glances down at the cover: four letters boxed into a square, she has been doodling while they spoke, wishing she’d asked them to put milk in the cheap, powdered coffee.

‘No,’ she says, embarrassed, but wishing she were cool enough not to be, trying hard not to be. ‘That’s not L.O.V.E. it’s L.O.L.A. Lola.’ She turns the notebook around to show him. ‘It’s my name. It doesn’t mean anything. I’ve just been drawing it like that since I was a kid.’ He holds up both hands, palm out, to either side of his face, shrugging, surrendering.

‘Hey. Hey. Different strokes, and all that. Anyway,’ he drops his gaze, ‘I’m not really an Adelaide boy.’

Even before she follows his eyeline back down to the notebook she knows what he is seeing. The image – a tiny figure, a girl, with long streaming hair and a triangle for a dress – threatens to take her over, tries to push her back in time, it is an effort to stay present, hard work not to merge into that image, its right-angled, stick-figure legs and the perfect diamond of a kite floating above her, five bowties strung along its dragging tail.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was born there, but I went to boarding school here, in Melbourne, from Year Seven.’

‘Boarding school?’ Boarding school itself isn’t too foreign a concept. Some of the wealthier kids from home used to go down to school in Sydney, coming back up for the holidays, bringing home their rich friends, who all looked as though they should have been on television. But Adelaide’s not that small, is it? Not like Byron. It’s a proper city right?

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he says, and Lola can feel him skirting around the question she hasn’t really even asked. ‘What do they say? Just a big country town, Adelaide. That’s what my father says anyway.’ She waits, unconvinced, and suddenly feeling secure enough, in this brand new friendship, to intimate with one raised eyebrow, that she doesn’t believe him.

‘My father’s from Melbourne,’ he exhales, as if in explanation, ‘He went to school here, and his father before him. You know?’

‘Still,’ she says, wide-eyed, trying to imagine Sam, a lone twelve year old in a swarming mass of boys in white shirts and grey flannel trousers, ‘that’s pretty young to be on your own.’ There is a moment, a beat, out of time, in which she is struck by the strange suspicion that, perhaps, it’s not him she is feeling sorry for. It brushes up against Lola’s ideas of her own childhood, memories she had thought were fixed, solid, boxed away. She shakes her head, and lets him think she means it for him.

‘Hey,’ he says, ‘Listen, I did find a great candle up in Byron, in a crystal store.’ She rolls her eyes.

‘Of *course* you did. Pick up some Nag Champa while you were there? Have your palm read?’

‘No, really,’ he continues, ‘I’m not taking the piss. It’s a cool candle, this naked man and woman wrapped around each other. Hand carved.’

Of course it is.

‘I might even show it to you one day.’ His eyebrows dance.

She doesn’t tell him she spent her last solitary summer at home, pouring hot wax into rubber moulds, making candles just like his ‘handcarved’ one, in the room out the back of her mother’s shop. Waiting for them to set. Peeling off their thick flexible skins. Turning them under the light to check for flaws. Because she doesn’t tell, he begins to

tease her that afternoon at the milk bar. He believes he has discovered what it is that makes her reticent about telling anybody else where it is that she comes from. That it's all about not being taken seriously, about taking herself too seriously.

He's good for her, he tells her, everyone needs to learn to laugh at themselves.

They bond over bad taste jokes at the expense of the life drawing models. Everyone else seems to want to be so cool about it all. Sam catches her eye, winks, and gestures at the title he's given to each drawing he completes. There is the *ugly feet* series, the *crooked penis in a bowl* still life and the infamous *Minge Mohawk*. They are serious though, when it comes down to it, about art.

'You have to make it everything, don't you?' Sam says, and Lola nods, she bites her lip and nods, and tries not to let his words frighten her too much.

At the end of their first year, they manage, through a friend of a friend's friend, to get themselves shown on the walls of a small pub up the Windsor end of Chapel Street. They hang the hyper-real drawings Lola has been obsessively making, version upon version of herself as a child sitting on her brother's shoulders, and Sam's paintings, all those tessellating shapes he has given Christian names, on the fake wood-grain walls of the front bar and the tiny lobby that houses the betting counter and the bottleshop. They make phonecall after phonecall on the payphone outside, trying to round up everyone they know.

Late November, and the weather has come over suddenly hot and sticky. That sheen to everyone's skin, people walking around looking like melting wax models of themselves. Everyone drinking far too much and the humidity making Lola homesick for the first time since she stepped off the train at Spencer Street in January.

An incongruous situation. An unrefurbished, unreconstructed workingman's pub, newly taken over, now filled with art students, a scattering of teachers who don't

look like teachers, a few staff from the trendier local retail stores. There have been some suspicious looks from a few of the old men playing cards at the tables along the side of the room, mostly though, they keep their eyes on the horses running across the screen of the television up in the far corner at the back of the room.

Standing just inside the lobby, just in range of your peripheral vision, is a girl, laughing. Her head is thrown back, her hand on the shoulder of the young man to her left. He looks very proud to have made her laugh in that way. She is wearing a dress, and it sets her apart. There are miniskirts, and knee length skirts everywhere and even some jeans, despite the heat, but there she is in a canary yellow cotton dress, the shoestring straps set wide on her fine, square shoulders. Her hair matted into fat yellow-blonde dreadlocks that fan out from her head like a spiky halo, and she is wearing big heavy black docs.

It's the dreads, Lola thinks, the dreads and the docs, that's how she can get away with the pretty dress. Somehow, though, Lola knows that the technique wouldn't work if she tried it herself. Tried is the right word, it would just make her look as though she were trying too hard.

She feels a nudge at her elbow and moves aside to let someone pass. But it's Sam, a champagne in each hand.

'For you, my friend. Up your bum.'

'Up yours,' she replies, without taking her eyes off the girl in the yellow dress. She's moved across the room to the bar, she's leaning across it now, forearms resting on the mat, toes up on the footrail, so that she can kiss each of the barstaff once on each cheek.

'It's hot,' she says, drinking too fast from her wine glass. Sam laughs, replying, 'Yeah, she is, isn't she?' and before Lola can react, he has slapped her on the arse and

winked and is waving across the room, and the girl in the yellow dress waves back and picks up her pint glass from the bar to come over and join them.

‘Old friend of mine,’ Sam whispers in Lola’s ear as the pair of them wait for her to reach them. ‘Remy,’ he continues, ‘we went to each other’s Year Ten formals together.’

Lola’s own school formal feels like the distant past. Even before she left town she had begun to lose contact with the small group she went through highschool with. It had all become too difficult. The conversations too treacherous to navigate. The consequences of a particular question asked, or accidentally answered, too dire. She has described them, and the strange, strained relationships between them to Sam. ‘Like cousins,’ he said. ‘You’ve known each other too long to pretend you like each other, but who else is there?’

Not for the first time she wonders if she’s ever really had what people call a friend. Not for the last time she feels a pang of jealousy, faced with the way that bonds between other people can stretch long and deep like that. How do they do it? she thinks. It can’t be as simple as sustained proximity. There is something else at work.

Watching the girl in the yellow dress make her way across the room, she has her first glimpse of what that something else might be, in this case at least. Sam’s friend seems to know everyone. She pauses to play peek-a-boo from behind the shoulders of a girl Lola doesn’t recognise and is swept into a joyful embrace. She is stopped by a hand on her wrist, to jump up and down with a boy from Lola’s painting class. She is waylaid and hugged and kissed and picked up clear off the floor by almost everyone she passes as she tries to make her way across the room.

Even if Sam hadn’t told Lola the girl’s name, she would have known it long before they were finally introduced. *Remy. Remy. Remy.* It echoes in the noisy room.

Remy. It slips beneath conversations, splashing down from knocked glasses to slide across the floor and pool around Lola's feet. *Remy*. It swirls around and through the clusters of nodding, tilting heads like cigarette smoke.

‘Sammy.’

‘*Remy*.’ Sam hugs her to his side, one arm hooked around her slim neck. ‘Lola, meet *Remy*, first girl I ever kissed.’ He kisses the top of her head then, with loud smacking lips. She tightens her hand into a small, sharp-looking fist and punches him in the side to free herself. She relaxes the fist, extending her hand.

‘Hi Lola, I feel like I know you already, he talks about you so much.’

He has not though, until now, mentioned *Remy* to Lola.

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on the bus, travelling in to the studio, lean the side of your face against the window · let the glass conduct each bump in the road into and through your body · sitting right up the back near the exhaust, right above the jolting jouncing wheel despite the migraine you are risking · courting illness · desiring discomfort · punishing yourself · just because you've finished one piece what makes you think you are capable of creating another? of creating anything ever again?

what good are these notes in your journal? ... ‘The Lovers’ ... candle ... Munch, ‘Jealousy’ ... triangular positions, iambic limbs, jawline/cheekbone, elbows, *not* the body ...

meaning not just anybody · a particular body · a particular mind in a particular body · what good are the pictures stuck all over the wall · pieces of a jigsaw, the plan for which has been misplaced · the strange shapes of the gaps and spaces you keep finding

suggest there are pieces missing that may themselves not yet exist, may not have been imagined ·

try not to believe it · remember school · remember the revolving nature of culture · think of clichés, they are always heartening · think, if there is truly nothing new under the sun, then what I am looking for must exist · somewhere · post-modernism charged with optimism · think, this clouded mind is still your own mind, you have just as great a chance of uncovering silver as you have grey · think of bodies, the way the shape of one demands the shape of another.

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Not too far away, two men are involved in a heated argument about whether there is anything inherently Australian about any of the works on show. They do not speak quietly, the way Remy and I have been, they do not care whether anyone hears them or not.

‘Not a thing,’ growls the older, the one whose jowls drag his mouth down into a permanent frown, his bottom lip jutting forward, making his top lip almost invisible. ‘Not a damned thing. And it’s all so bloody earnest and self-reflective. A lot of navel-gazing if you ask me. Where’s the character? Where’s the politics?’

‘Have you looked at those photographs over there?’ asks the other, the thin, middle-aged one, twirling his finger in his ear. ‘Have you thought about the people who made those images on the street? Where they live, how they might live? These are not Australians? And what does it mean that we, *as a country*, allow such a thing? Allow it and disapprove of it all the while?’

There is a tone *akin* to disapproval in his voice, something *like* passion, but it rings slightly false. This is make-believe, the argument, the objection, the whole thing. They are playing, this is a game, no, this is a play, a playscript set in an art exhibition and even his own role is not even interesting enough for him to truly care.

‘Pah,’ the first man scoffs, crossing his arms. ‘Rubbish. All of it.’

The woman I saw Grey speaking with earlier, the art school mentor Charlotte still keeps in regular contact with, has been hovering, listening, and weighs in now too. ‘Well, what about this?’ she says, pointing to ‘Optogram’.

‘What about it?’ both men ask as one.

‘Well,’ she answers, in a measured voice, ‘there’s something intensely Australian about fear of the bush isn’t there? Of what it might hide? Of getting yourself lost?’

Remy takes hold of my arm and leans in towards my face: ‘In a minute,’ she breathes, ‘she’s going to start banging on about McCubbin.’ The woman has noticed Remy whispering in my ear. She catches my gaze and holds it as Remy slides her fingers down the inside of my arm, taking hold of my hand. I look away not wanting to be seen as part of either side of the argument. I can’t look at her, can’t look at anyone and I can’t speak. There are too many things I want to say and I don’t know which of them is the right one. What is being asked of me. What might be the correct answer. What it might be permissible to ask for myself.

I want to ask the two men where the borders are, and who might be allowed to dwell within them. I also would like to know who is responsible for their care and maintenance, the borders not the men, they can take care of themselves, but I would like to know who guards the borders and I would especially like to know what material they are made of, if it is malleable or not, if it might stretch, or just break. I don’t ask because

I wouldn't believe in their answers. I don't think that they are too sure themselves whether they are inside the line or outside. I think this is why they are arguing.

I want to tell Charlotte's teacher something without letting Remy hear. Remy squeezes my hand again and whispers a joke about *Dot and the Kangaroo* into my hair. Her breath is warm on my neck and it makes my mouth fall open in surprise. I want to tell Charlotte's teacher that it is nothing personal, the fact that I am tilting my head to keep my ear close to Remy's lips. That there is a copy of a McCubbin painting sellotaped to my studio wall. That I am serious. That I am a real artist, a proper artist, not a silly girl getting drunk at her own show and giggling with her friend. *I'm not that girl*, I want to say, *she is not me*.

I am not myself, that's the problem. I am not myself, or, I am not the self I have become used to, I am another one, a buried self resurrected. Remy lets go of my hand for the briefest moment within which I am both devastated and relieved. This is familiar territory. This is how the story goes. She loves me she loves me not. But then she takes my hand again; she makes it into a loose fist and curls her thin fingers around it as though it is a ball she might at any moment hurl across the room. She moves her hand in a circular motion around the top of mine, winding it now inside mine, so everything is suddenly, subtly reversed. I am holding Remy's hand and she is brushing the back of it against the crease in the centre of my palm like a cat rubbing against a pair of legs. The way a cat does when you come home, the way a cat does when it is hungry.

I want to ask her why. I want to tell her to stop. I want to beg her not to stop. I want to tell her it is too late for this. I want to ask her what this is. But most of all I want this to be enough. Everything, and enough, to be standing here, in front of my mobile, holding Remy's hand. If it was enough I would be able to let go.

‘So, what’s this then?’ Remy asks suddenly, and my breath catches. She indicates the sculpture ‘Gift’ with a nod, and I exhale. Still attempting to avoid the gaze of Charlotte’s art school teacher, I shrug, raising my eyebrows, and say stupidly, ‘It’s a sculpture.’

Remy laughs but it is a good natured laugh and she lets go of my hand but only long enough to punch me softly in the upper arm and then she takes my hand again.

‘Can we go and look?’

I nod as if there really is some permission I might have withheld, and she pulls me over to the sculpture as though she needs me to explain it to her.

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Two

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *That trick from school. Take the fingertip of your right hand and use it to count the fingertips of your left, thumb to pinky, tapping them as you go, speaking each number aloud. Swap hands, carry on counting from six to ten.*
- *Five fingers per hand, and two hands equals ten fingers. Simple. Everybody knows that, right?*

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Parents are once again dressing their children the way Lola and her brother are dressed in the photograph. Just the other day she saw a little girl in a tight skivvy, corduroy dress and thick-knit cream tights. Not just the colours, it's the hairstyles too: wide-fringed pageboys, Farrah Fawcett flicks. In magazines, in shops, travelling around town on the heads and bodies of young men and women too old for their parents to still be buying their clothes, too young to have known those mustardy yellows and tudorhouse browns the first time around. Younger than Lola is now, just past twenty.

Just a bub in this little shot though, the only photograph of him that she owns. Just a little kid, about four she thinks, fawn cords bellbottoming out around her brother's long torso in its slim-fitting T-shirt. She would love to know how old Tom was that day. She has never been able to recall how many years older than her he was. How old will he always be now? Who can she possibly ask? Merena? Grey? It would be tantamount to both a confession and an accusation. I don't remember. You forgot to

remind me. I never knew. You never told me. What was that thing that Merena used to say? You'll always be my little girl. No, that's not it. You'll always be a baby to me. That's right. Those are the words.

Eighteen? Is he eighteen? He is younger in the photograph than in her memory of that moment. Tipping over the cusp. Only just. A man, broad shoulders stretching fraying seams of thin lemon-yellow cotton looking soft as another skin.

1982 in the Channon banana fields and Lola rides high off the ground on his back. It looks like the seventies, but that's just their hand-me-down clothes, it's just the light, just the texture of the paper. She always believes she was sitting on his shoulders until she takes it from her wallet; the evidence has her on his back. That's all about wanting to emphasise the age gap, she thinks, make herself even tinier, younger, he a giant.

The brassy buckles of her overalls, tiny metal hands, are just visible above his messy dark hair, those overgrown curls her eyes have traced and stroked for so many years. Her fingers automatically circle in toward each other as she follows the twisting path of one brown lock, and then another, her hand moving now as if she holds a pencil, despite the fact that she is not alone drawing at the table in the sunlit sleepout of the tiny miner's cottage she shares with Remy.

Instead, rattling into town on this crowded tram, she sits stockstill, trying to muffle the sudden thumping of her heart and hide her shaking hands. Late and unprepared for the birthday party she brings her sunglasses down over thick tears, to keep them secret from the passengers surrounding her, each of them only slightly more a stranger than Tom.

When she left the house, Remy had been teasing her. She was running late, Remy said, precisely *because* she has had so long to prepare for his arrival. 'Because

two weeks is long enough for someone like you,' she said, really getting into it now, 'to imagine the *perfect* reunion. Long enough to write lengthy lists of things to do, for odd jobs to become all-important. To argue with yourself over which café might best express your personality, or, even better, disguise it. Or wonder if maybe a pub would be better, more casual, a more male approach to reunion.'

Two weeks, Lola had to admit, even if only to herself, feels like it should have been long enough to discover and practice the proper facial expression to wear. One that will encompass and express the many emotions it will be necessary to convey. Enlightened acceptance. Love. Forgiveness. Strength. Resilience. Obviously, two weeks has been long enough for perspective to be lost.

Long enough to allow herself to be overwhelmed, Remy continued. To plan the perfect reunion, and then to procrastinate, and panic, and sinkingly give in. So nothing is ready, the dishes are unwashed, the heap of dirty clothes piled in a corner of the scummy bathroom is almost as tall as Lola herself. There is no spare bed set up, no visitor's linen. She has not utilised these past two weeks to transform herself into any kind of hostess, she has not managed to do any grocery shopping. She has not bought a gift.

The short tram journey is long enough to let go of one of these petty failures: Lola passes a big old pub with green and yellow walls and the sight of it triggers her to decide on a counter meal. It will be easy to justify later – it would, of course, have been pointless to shop for food without being sure how long Tom would stay, no longer knowing his tastes, his appetite. Besides this single beautiful photograph she has nothing to work from, only unreliable childhood memories to rely on.

There is one task she will not fail though. She will find a gift. The perfect gift. A gift of welcome. Of apology. A gift that will stand in for the undiscovered, unperfected

facial expression, for the preparations she should have made, for the knowledge Lola wishes she had.

There is though less than forty-five minutes until she is supposed to be meeting him in the city, and less than half an hour left before the shops shut, so her stomach, already tightening each time the tram brakes protest at stopping, twists in on itself as she listens to the little bell ring every time another passenger pulls on the cord to let the driver know they need him to stop again. Again and again. Ding. Ding. The bell and the traffic outside the window and the various electrical and mechanical noises the tram makes fill the carriage, already oppressively noisy with teenaged boys belting each other and the angry territorial flicking and folding of broadsheets and one woman attempting to settle a real estate deal over the telephone. Biting her upper lip, wincing, frowning her forehead she attempts to shut it all out by concentrating all of her powers of invention on this imaginary ideal gift.

It is difficult to do this while trying to scratch the heel of one foot with the toe of the other, through her shoes. There is a blister under there, because the shoes are not actually hers, they are therefore a little loose and they rub. She knows this to be what she deserves. She did not ask if she could borrow Remy's shoes, she knows very well that Remy does not like to share. The tram has not started up again and when she looks out of the window she sees that there are two more trams stopped in front of them. An accident maybe. A breakdown. She looks at her watch in disgust. The bell dings again, triggering a moment of déjà vu that disappears out the tram doors with the woman who disembarks still gabbing away into her mobile.

At some point this evening Lola knows that she will have to run up the Flinders Street steps, trying to race back through lost time. She can feel the blister tingle, weeping. *For God's sake. So vain, needing to wear shoes that match your shirt.*

There is a letting go that comes at the end of panic, a giving in, less a leap of faith than fatigue, the exhaustion of courage, an oblivious falling. She stretches the skin of her face out towards her ears with her hands, pressing first lightly down on her eyelids, letting her vision blur and refocus. In the seat facing her, travelling backwards, is an old woman. She winks and pulls the corners of her mouth into a wide straight line, a grin. Lola thinks, *I can see every one of her teeth. There's that phrase isn't there?* she thinks. *It's the thought that counts*, and it rolls around in her head as she takes in the old woman's bright lipstick, and pale pink twin set and matching high heels and handbag.

It is too warm on this tram, in amongst these bodies, for the clothing she carefully layered on herself before leaving home. She is starting to sweat in her long sleeved black T-shirt beneath the tight denim jacket. Her black three-quarter length trousers. Her white ankle socks and Mary-Janes. The old woman's eyelids are little painted cherries and Lola can't help but smile back even as she finally allows herself to imagine arriving back home without a gift. What it would mean. What that would say about her thoughts.

She opens the buttons on her jacket with the first finger and thumb of her right hand. It was cold when she left home. And windy. She smooths her hair with the palm of her left hand. *She* knows that she meant to get something. Will that count? Will all the planning and dreaming mean nothing if there is nothing tangible to show for it? And she wonders who it is that she is defending herself to. Wonders, mean nothing to whom?

'Cheer up love, things can't be that bad,' the woman in the matching outfit startles Lola, who has been staring at the rabbit-pink skin visible beneath the thin white cloud of the woman's hair.

‘No,’ she answers automatically, watching the woman’s hands wind a fragile looking handkerchief around and around. Unwinding it. Pausing for a second. Winding again. The tiny pause is just time enough to catch a glimpse of the miniature roses embroidered there. Three pale flowers, stems intertwined. ‘Things can always get worse,’ she says in place of goodbye, grabbing her backpack and pushing open the tram door.

She winds her way through the unmoving cars to the footpath. She keeps her eyes on the footpath as she passes Flinders Street Station and heads up through the Swanston Street shops. She scans the signs and windows, left and right, she hovers around the front of a bookstore and a two dollar shop.

If there’s nothing worth buying, she thinks as she powers up the hill, don’t buy anything. So simple and so difficult to do. Better not to get anything than something pointless, without meaning, with no thought put in. Breathe. It’s four twenty five, I have twenty five minutes until the shops shut, less than forty five until the train comes, but if I take off my watch time will cease to exist so I’ll put it in my pocket and just pretend I’m an old lady smothered in pink and I can wink at people and they’ll smile thinking: She doesn’t know what she’s looking for. So cute. I’ll be harmless and they’ll all want to help me and who knows what could happen.

The sun has come out, the wind has died down. It’s too hot for Lola’s jacket, she’s so glad her shoes match her shirt. She turns down a laneway in desperation. Stops at the first place that has a sign with the word ‘Gifts’ on it. Chin up, She thinks, eyelashes lowered, pink aura securely swathed. *In we go.*

as the bus rounds the corner, sway in unison with thirty-odd other bodies, left, then right, then left again · all remember yourselves, and where you are, as one · squeeze those thigh muscles, tighten those buttocks, pull yourself into alignment by gripping hard with your abdominals · all this exertion in an effort to keep still and re-centre your rebellious bodies and regain that lost individuality · all done so privately, so internally ·

everyone staring into the middle distance · elevator expressions draped softly over secret thoughts · if bodies have to be this close, let minds be far, far away · don't let him catch your eye · don't let her catch you reading over her shoulder · close your eyes lightly, pretend you are someone else, somewhere else ·

impelled forward by momentum as the driver applies the brakes, pressed back into your seat as the bus pulls to a stop, thinking about the tidal urgency of people, the desire a body has to continue in the direction it is headed · remembering who and where you are, open your eyes to check that the stop is not yours ·

the thick tan neck of the man in front of you is covered in thousands of tiny blonde hairs, the sun made them that colour, gold, almost white, and the sun shining in through the window is causing them to glisten and shine now and it is an effort not to lean forward in your seat, make your tongue wide and flat and lick the length of skin between his collar and his hair · tell the truth now, what you want to do is make your jaw wide and sink your teeth into that flesh · if that act could be all there was, perfect in and of itself, with no messiness to follow, you would · but people are not like that · you are not like that yourself ·

across the aisle an old, saggy-skinned man in a cheesecutter hat looks up at a woman standing by the door. his glasses are almost as thick as they are square · in your peripheral vision, her matching long skirt and cardigan make you imagine that her hair must be white, pure white, and soft like lambswool ·

ah well, he says, nice talking to you · he puts his hand to the brim of his hat, tipping it as he speaks · with two fingers, he lifts it a centimetre or two up into the air · a tiny gap between the cap and his forehead, a slow respectful blink, a quick, sharp nod · *this is what he does, you think, he talks to people, on the buses* · if you are this old man and a stranger sits down beside you, you make a connection where there was none · introduce yourself, converse a little, say goodbye · much given: nothing lost · if the stranger is female, you tip your hat as she gets up to disembark, thank her for the words ·

but you, you choose an empty seat · you sit by the window and put your bag on the aisle side seat · you are silently offended if someone asks you to move it before all the other seats are filled · it is a shameful and familiar habit, in a list of shameful and familiar behaviours you are waiting to outgrow · but now, think, if you were that old man – look at that almost imperceptible smile on his lips – think how many faces you would have seen, up close, how many noses you would know, how many shapes of eye, angles of cheekbone, lengths of earlobe ·

how many expressions you would fall in love with: muse after muse after muse · how much easier, perhaps, the creation of these kissing figures you have been imagining might prove · profiles · begin with profiles, and work your way through all the parts of the body · backs, thighs, waist, hips, feet, hands · and on, and on

—

Remy stops walking, back on my right side, closing the circle she has made around the sculpture. She shapes her mouth around a long, low wolf-whistle and curls one lip in appreciation.

She says, ‘I can’t believe you made something so ... sexy.’

‘Is it sexy? I suppose it is. I’m tired of it. I’ve been looking at it too long.’

‘I bet you have,’ she smirks.

‘Oh *ha ha*. I mean, I had so much trouble with this. Making it, I mean. And even today, I mean, look, the thing is finished, and yet I was in here this morning, moving it around, still trying to get it right. Hey, what are you doing? Are you writing this down?’

‘No,’ she says, not looking up from her notebook, ‘no, it’s something else.’ I wait for her to finish scribbling and while she is writing I truly believe that when she looks up again I am going to say something that will let her know that I have something pressing to attend to so that I can break away and find Charlotte, and my father. This is partly guilt, and partly that while she is not looking at me, talking to me, or touching me, I feel completely returned to myself, as though the last ten minutes were a short waking dream.

And then she looks up. She looks up and she looks over my shoulder and when she meets my eye the expression on her face demands action. Her eyes are stretched wide, her mouth a stricken grimace.

‘Quick,’ she hisses, ‘help me.’ She grabs me and positions me in front of her body, crouching slightly so that her face is near my breasts.

‘What? What is it?’ I say, trying to turn my head to see what monster is wreaking havoc behind my back, but she grabs my face, her thumb and forefinger pressing hard into tender points of my jaw to stop me.

‘No,’ she gasps, ‘don’t look. You have to help me.’

‘What is it? What do you want me to do?’

‘Get me out of here.’

‘Wha...?’ I struggle to get free of her fierce grip on my face but she is too strong.

‘Get. Me. Out. Of. Here. Hide me. Is there somewhere else? Another room?’

‘Ma moof.’

‘What?’

Finally, I prise her hand from my jaw. ‘The roof,’ I say quietly. ‘Down the hall. Out the back window.’

Behind us, a young girl says in a psuedo-whisper, ‘It’s a bit gay-ish, isn’t it?’ and someone snorts in reply. Remy gives me a smile that takes over her entire face, and mine. We are twenty years old again, surrounded by idiots and frauds. We are the only ones with the big important knowledge, the ones who know the only secrets that are worth keeping. Only this time *I* am *her* saviour. I am the one who can give her what she wants. The one who has what she needs.

As we snake through the room though, as we slip through the open door and into the dim hallway, lit only by a row of tiny tealight candles on a thin shelf, as I lead her to safety, she holds my elbow the same way Terry and I held the elbows of ‘Gift’ when we moved it this morning. The position hadn’t been working for me. So we had picked them up and moved them, and moved them again. We shifted and manoeuvred them until they were right where I wanted them to be.

Three

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *The trick is in the reversal. How you present it.*
- *Begin with your left forefinger this time and count backwards from ten to six, tapping the fingertips of your right hand. Say: "Six". Then hold out your left hand. Look at it. Say: "Five". Because one hand equals five fingers, of course it does, everybody knows that.*

- *Say: "Six plus five equals what?"*

"Eleven," they will say.

"Eleven? What?"

—

A string of tiny bells hangs down the inside of the front door of the shop. As it creaks open and she smells the incense she is reminded of Remy, the way she convinced Lola to let her read her tarot cards last night. Lola had tried to refuse. 'Superstition,' she said and they got talking about that kind of thing, this kind of shop. The staff: the inevitable desire to impress on you their spiritual superiority. The wares: Headbands to help you pick up cosmic vibrations. Wristbands to protect you from the vibrations of your mobile phone. But mostly the staff, she told Remy, piling it on, deflecting.

'This is what will happen to me if I ever go into a shop like that,' she groaned. 'I'll say hi, yeah, just looking thanks, but despite my best efforts I will accidentally look one of them in the eye, and she will shriek and faint and when she comes around she'll be crying and telling me all about this terrible disaster she's seen me in and then what

do I do? How do I explain to her that it is the very situation I am that is the disaster without offending her.

‘Anyway,’ she continued absentmindedly, ‘I can read my own cards. My mother taught me when I was a little girl.’ The room was quiet for a while, while Remy rolled and lit a joint. She passed it to Lola, and waited, nodding slowly with full lungs before exhaling: ‘Translation. So it’s not that you don’t think there’s truth there. You just don’t trust the translation.’

‘Intention,’ she answered, shrugging, ‘I don’t trust the intention behind the translation.’

There is a high tinkling peal as the string of little bells swings out in a wide loose loop through the air, a clack and a louder, heavier clang as Lola closes the door behind her and they all hit the glass at the same time. The smell in the shop is incredible, a mixture of skin, hair, sandalwood, patchouli, desire, desperation. There is more space in here than she imagined, more tables and shelves and more light. More objects, more choice. She has, of course, a list of criteria: beautiful, strong, small, enduring, and somehow symbolic of the two of us, and, of course, perfect. It’s not asking too much, if you think about it. One single, simple gift, after all this time. *Breathe. Browse. File the list somewhere so you can pretend it doesn’t exist. No pressure. Take a casual look around. You have all the time in the world.*

Creak, tinkle, clack, clang. ‘You’ve got to come see this Darren! The American guy has this amazing amethyst.’ A young, fragile looking girl with long blonde ringlets and a muslin dress is pulling on the arm of a man at least twice her age. His trousers are made of natural fibres, his tie-dyed T-shirt looks oddly new and is tucked too tightly into his leather-belted waistband. He strokes his goatee with a chuckle. He had been in the middle of showing pamphlets from the rotating display rack to a female customer.

He laughs again, nervously. 'Sorry,' he says, 'I'll be back in a minute. Have a look, see if there's anything there that you're interested in. The Tantra one up in the hills is a fantastic weekend,' he calls over his shoulder, disappearing out the door. Lola winces.

The customer he has left behind stares at the rows of leaflets, blinking. Lola takes in the tight navy T-shirt, white capri pants, small-heeled pumps with bows across the arch, and wonders how deeply Darren believes his own bullshit. She spots the pamphlet he was talking about, right at the bottom of the rack and reaches across to remove it. The woman startles, but then smiles, blushing. Lola returns the smile and moves away. From the corner of her eye she sees the woman bend down to pick up the pamphlet she had knocked to the floor.

She searches the long table covered in crystals, trying to ignore the watch ticking away in the back pocket of her jeans. As she makes her way down the second side she looks up and through the large window behind the table sees Darren laughing and rubbing his pointy beard and the blonde girl with her fluttery little hands on her cheeks, excitement lifting her shoulders to her ears. A tall, short-haired man in a neat, dark suit is reaching into the back of a shiny blue four wheel drive.

A monumentally stupid thought, that she could find the right gift. Even for the people you know best it's too hard, there's too much pressure to please, to somehow present a tangible model of love. Maybe, if when she gets back home, she can dig up a sketch in a folder somewhere. At least it will look like thought went into it. Not a new idea but a pleasing one, that a drawing is a thought.

She rattles a silk bag filled with stone runes. She can't buy these, because she'd have to listen to the list of reasons why they weren't right, from Remy who had suggested they go out into the bush, find a tree, ask permission, and spend the week

leading up to today burning symbols into slices of branch with a soldering iron. She takes her hand away.

Through the window, the man in the suit pulls an enormous purple crystal from the back of the car. Lola can't imagine how he squeezed that huge four-wheel-drive around the corner and into the laneway. He hoists the crystal into the air like a trophy and the girl's hands quiver, following it, preparing to catch it if it falls. It would crush her Lola thinks, right to the ground, its jagged edges pinning her to the bitumen. But the girl is stronger than she looks. When the man starts to pass it to Darren, she intervenes, taking it easily and greedily from his hands. Her eyes are gleaming, her smile wide. An adrenal tension in her jaw.

Darren pulls his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and counts fifty-dollar bills into the tall man's waiting hands. The two men watch the money. The girl's eyes are on the stone. A hand on her shoulder makes her start. Lucky her own hands are behind her back, or they might have flown up in surprise and knocked the crystals from the table.

'Can I help you?' asks the woman whose hand is on Lola's shoulder. She is staring in the direction of the window. Her irises are cloudy, opaque. Amber-coloured beneath the mist.

'Oh,' despite herself, Lola manages to register the woman's appearance at her shoulder as a kind of deliverance. 'Yeah, actually, I'm looking for a present.' The woman doesn't respond right away. Darren and the girl are coming back in from the parking lot and they pause for the door and the bells and the excited chatter and the oohs and aahs. The entire population of the shop seems to make its way over to the counter where the girl is happily displaying her gift.

Lola hears Darren telling someone ‘Yes, it is a lot of money but it *is* her birthday and she *is* turning twenty-eight and I *know* Kat, she’s going to need it.’ *Twenty-eight*, Merena’s voice, unbidden, rises over the babble, *The Saturn Return*.’ The woman from the shop speaks in a low, throaty voice: ‘It’s very beautiful,’ she says solemnly. ‘Small but powerful,’ she continues, ‘Very well made.’ Small? she thinks, *that thing is fucking huge. Is she blind or something?* But when she follows the line of the woman’s gaze Lola finds herself surprised at what she sees.

In her own right hand is a small crystal wand. She must have been fiddling with it while she was watching the others, trying to remember the date of her brother’s birthday, attempting to guess at his age for the millionth time. ‘Oh, yes,’ she says, a little befuddled. ‘Yes, it is. Beautiful,’ she continues, taking a closer look. ‘What stone is this at the top?’ Lola asks the saleswoman. The grip she has on Lola’s shoulder seems to have tightened, although it’s the length of time she has held on that is actually discomforting.

‘Moonstone,’ the woman answers, without looking at the wand, and while Lola is thinking, you idiot, of course, a stone that looks like a little moon, moonstone, she continues, ‘It balances. It is intuitive, reflective, it brings good fortune ...’

‘I’ll take it,’ Lola says. ‘Can I get it gift wrapped please?’

The woman with the cloudy eyes passes the EFTPOS handset across the counter, morphing instantly from fortune teller to retail drone: ‘*Chooseyouraccount pinnumberandokaythanks*.’ Lola sneaks a look at her face while she waits for the receipt to print out and of course she is not blind at all and not even that strange now that her hand is no longer on Lola’s shoulder and a counter separates their bodies. She licks her thumb before she tears the receipt from the roll across the little metal teeth of the machine and Lola is distracted and it’s too late before she notices that the blonde girl

people into an idea might be powerful enough to turn metaphysical lore into physical law. *Why would she say she? Why would she say that? She doesn't know me. How could she know? Why didn't I ask her?* And then, remembering the wand's colour, Lola exhales. *Oh, what, because it's pink it has to be for a girl? Is that it? Is that all she was assuming? Why did I immediately think she had somehow figured out what I am doing? Because her eyes were cloudy,* Lola thinks, giving herself a mental slap on the wrist. *Because she looked the way she looked. Because I am a crazy person, doing a crazy thing. Because I am guilty. Ashamed of myself. Exhausted. Because I am ready at any moment for someone to see through this lie.*

—

everything happens all at once, all of the time, you just don't normally notice · when you do, each moment reveals eternity, contains and is the core of itself · you are the centre of everything, and the smallest speck in an endless universe of meaning · you can't create these moments · you can't hold onto them · all you can do is notice · pay attention ·

when you are on the bus, for example, and you are thinking about your work, the piece you are having trouble with, and you are wishing you were the old man across the aisle and you are thinking about the neck of the man in front of you, how thick it is, how tan and thick, how different it is to Charlotte's neck and how the quality of desire you have for his neck is different to the quality of your desire for the slender pale curve of hers, but the depth of that desire is the same, and you are trying to make a connection happen in your mind between those necks, that desire and other necks you have desired in the past, you might lift your hand up from your lap to stroke your own neck, to

understand it, the way it is shaped, the way it moves, how soft and penetrable its surface, how hard its sinews, how strong the muscles there, how substantial its inner structure · you might notice this, the fleshy reality of your neck, the way your pulse throbs along beneath your skin even when you are sitting still, thinking · the heat of all that blood moving beneath your skin ·

partly because you are thinking about the old man, and partly in deference to the queue of people feeding in from outside and snaking down the aisle, move your bag from the seat beside you to the floor in front of your feet · take out the book you have been reading · turn the pages slowly, one by one, because it is difficult to concentrate on the dense text with so much noise, the bus engine, the traffic, the chatter · let your eyes trip gently across the images on those pages, reproductions of paintings, photographs of sculptures and installations, photographs of artists, the candid and the posed for · look lightly, look and don't look ·

feel a tiny puff of air sent up by a turned page touch the skin on your face and gasp, take that little draught down into your lungs with that breath, that sharp inspiration · become aware of the importance of this moment, the ontological significance · how necessary it is for you to know that you felt the touch of it, the quickening of the idea in the very moment that the curves and features beneath the folds of cloth in the reproduction of the painting became visible to you · before you let your eyes drift to the bottom of the page, to the acknowledgement: Rene Magritte, 'The Lovers' ·

how important to know that you have not simply been drawn in by the obvious coincidences, the tarot card you have pinned to the wall in the studio, the memory of the candle, the coincidence of the candle, the connection between you, and Sam and the candle, the working title of the sculpture you have been trying to imagine creating · to

believe that something else is at work here, that you were attracted instead by some invisible sign, the totem lurking in the murk of mass-consciousness ·

important enough that you close your eyes and shut the book, trying to seal this thought in your mind · that you place your right hand on the page, palm placed lovingly on its smooth surface, caught in the act of stroking those fabric-draped faces, now trapped between front and back cover, between your left hand and your lap · your face turned aside, towards the aisle · a smile that is the whole being you have become in this moment ·

dog-ear the page with the Magritte before you slide your hand out of the book even though there is no chance you will forget it

—

‘What are all these doors?’

‘Oh. The studios. Mine. Terry’s. Charlotte’s.’

‘Ooh. Can we?’ Now that we are out of the main room, Remy is her confident self again. She has let go of my arm. She is about to turn the handle on the door to Charlotte’s room.

‘No,’ I say, reaching out and actually removing her hand from the doorknob. She shoots me a look of surprise. ‘I mean. That’s not mine. That’s ... Charlotte’s.’ I know the pause was audible. I know that I have given myself away, and I still try to pretend it hasn’t happened. ‘This one is mine, you can look in here if you want.’

‘Aah,’ she says nodding. ‘Charlotte. That’s your girlfriend?’ We both know that this is not really a question requiring an answer but I give a silent nod anyway, not

looking her in the eye, opening the door to my studio room, stepping to one side to let her through.

‘You’re all packed up in here,’ she laughs. ‘Ready to do a runner?’

I am hovering in the doorway. I manage a smile. ‘Well, you never know how these things are going to go.’ This last phrase is enough to cause her to flick a glance over my shoulder at the open door but not enough to make her explain who it was she saw out there, who she is hiding from.

She walks the length of the room, running her fingers along the tops of the packing cartons lined up in front of my worktable. She stops near the big easel in the corner, fiddling with a loose wingnut. She makes a soft clucking noise with her tongue against her teeth, and begins to take the kind of steps small children often take when happy or self-conscious, or both. She balances her weight on one heel for a second then lets it fall onto the ball of her left foot. She repeats this on her right foot. Heel, toe, heel, toe, left foot, right foot, tiny steps, faster and faster and she reaches the spot on the wall almost tucked behind the door where my collection of photographs and sketches, newspaper cuttings, cartoons and other images are taped. They are the last vestiges of my work in this room. I have not been able to bring myself to remove them yet.

She stops in front of them. Her hands are on her hips. Her breathing is loud and regular. The way she looks at the collage of cuttings makes me feel as though it is necessary to step into the room after all, and to close the door behind me.

Four

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *Just like that, this sculpture, this gift. Just as we decide we have everything figured out, that we know that four legs and two heads equals two bodies, of course, everybody knows that, we take a step or two around the work's base (clockwise, anti-clockwise, it makes no difference) and catch sight of it from a different angle.*
- *Are those two more legs we see? Where did they come from? Where do they go? What is that shape jutting out there beneath what we thought was an armpit? Another chin? An elbow? But how can there be that many arms?*
- *Best go back a step or two, begin the count again.*

—

Lola had to run into that icy headwind to meet her brother's train, with her blister bleeding into the fabric of her sock and the elastic of her hairband fraying and threatening to break as she tied and retied her ponytail. And the jacket tied around her waist, sliding down her hips as she ran, fell all the way to her ankles and tripped her and because she was trying to perfect her hair she wasn't able to stop her fall with her hands and landed on her face in front of the Town Hall. She tore her jeans and grazed the tops of both knees. She was forced to waste precious moments fighting off the people who tried to help her up, more still picking up her bag and her jacket and limping down into the train station, trying to keep up with the crowd of workers heading home. 'Taps'

playing in her mind since the bells on the town hall clock rang out as she fell. The small details are very important.

Lola was not prepared. Not prepared for the electronic gates and for having to search through the bunched up sugar packets and receipts in the bottom of her bag for her multitrip. Not prepared for not knowing which platform to go to. Not prepared to find it empty when she finds it. Not prepared to give up though, so she searched it end to end, even asking a stranger (too short to be Tom) to go into the men's toilets and call out his name.

Of course he wouldn't do it so she had to call from the door and when she received no answer and the railway guard came over she had her photograph and was able to ask him, 'Have you seen my brother? I can't find him,' even though actually saying these words out loud brought back terrible memories from her childhood, made her feel as though she was becoming her mother. The photograph is very old of course, and so she found it quite easy to dismiss the guard shaking his head, and remind herself that she had been late after all, and head back up to the street and scan every waiting face on the corner for his eyes.

And then, even then, there was no point in panicking, especially once she looked across the road and spied a man with a loosened tie shaking the hand of another, sitting at a table on the footpath, his own tie hanging from the corner of his chair and was reminded of Remy's earlier idea about pubs and masculine meetings. She should definitely check out the pub. He would be there she was sure, her tall brother, her long-haired brother, his hazel eyes scanning the room patiently, waiting. He would be smiling at punters, sharing a story with the barman. Maybe he met someone on the train, another guy with long hair and little luggage, maybe they were both reading and swapped plotlines, started talking and when his sister wasn't there to meet him, his new

friend offered to wait with him, 'Let's go and have a drink over the road,' and he had agreed. It is what Lola would do herself in that situation. The kind of thing she would say, to reassure someone looking a little lost: 'I'm sure she'll turn up.'

She'd asked for a beer at the bar, walked the length of the place and back again while she drank it. Sat down at an empty table when she didn't find him. Stood up again, gone to the bar, ordered another pint. Sat at the bar drinking cold, cold beer while the heat rose in her face and forehead and her knee swelled and bled. Let her heart begin truly to harden against her brother for the first time in all this time.

Fine then you selfish fuck, she'd thought. Don't bother pretending to come back next time. Next time I won't return the call. Won't even answer the phone. Won't be here to return to.

Where had her love for him gone? Into the bottom of the chasm that opened up inside her when he left. The one she had tried so hard to disguise. She had covered it over, telling everyone how she was the only one in her family who would accept that he was gone forever, that her brother was dead, and probably by his own hand. She'd covered it over for so long, hidden it so well that by the time she answered the telephone and heard her brother say those words: *Hey little Lo*, she had forgotten it was there at all.

She wasn't looking out for it, had only been half paying attention. Her brother spoke and his words stopped her dead in her tracks and she found herself suddenly too heavy for the false ground she had built up beneath her feet. He spoke, it gave way, and she fell. She found she had turned herself inside out. All the secrets on the outside, and nothing left beneath her skin. Lost to herself, she clung to what she knew, the few details she could remember. She took hold of them and used them to bring him back to life, hoping that he would do the same for her.

Those curls, those shoulders. She forced herself to imagine and make manifest in her drawings the changes the years must have wrought on his physical self. But there was no one at the train station that looked anything like any image she holds of him. No one at the pub. No one who looked as though he might be looking for her. And for once, she was not in control of the picture. By not turning up, Tom had given her a brand new image of himself, one that has ruined the few golden ones she had left. Not just the moment from the photograph in her wallet. All the memories from before he disappeared, she watched them turn from gold to brown to black and to dust.

This is what she will tell Remy when she asks. When Lola returns home, drunk and emptyhanded apart from the wand she bought for Remy in the crystal store. And the little figurine she has been hiding in her room as she prepared for this day. It is the kernels of truth in the story that will make it ring true.

‘Same again, love?’ Do barmen actually say that? He just did, didn’t he and Lola feels like a character in a movie, feels like she has to look him in the eye, lift her eyebrows slightly, nod almost imperceptibly and hold out her whiskey glass to be refilled. But she’s not drinking whiskey and he’s not about to refill a used glass from the beertap and if she is a character in a movie it is definitely not the strong silent leading man because what she says in reply is, ‘Yes please,’ followed by, ‘Thank You.’ She is such a *girl*, such a good girl. Pat her on the head. Watch her skip. See her colour within the lines.

—

let the feeling that time has been suspended recede into the background · allow your conscious mind to pull you gently back into the real world, the one with all the bright colours, the one populated by other people · think again of the two faces in the painting,

think about the way it seems possible to discern which face is male, which female, despite the fact that the faces are covered completely in their ... *shared shroud*? it's so simple, you think, it shows through ·

but think also about why this is so easy to do · because one head is higher than the other, and therefore belongs to a taller person? so? because one nose is smaller and turns up where the other turns down? and? because one set of cheekbones is higher? one jaw wider? it means nothing, you think · and that is something · that is something you can use ·

there is the Rider-Waite card too, of course, *The Lovers*, the story it carries, so you will need an angel of sorts somewhere, and some stronger hint of God · a stronger hint of God, that might be all that's left to find ·

your right hand moving across your face as your subconscious and conscious mind work to meet in the middle of the cloudy images these things have the power to transform a twenty-eight year old woman into a crusty old man, scholar, philosopher, right there in her seat, on a mid-morning bus · the natural reaction to such a metamorphosis is to take your lips between your fingers, to stretch and mould them in order to embody a depth of thought that might appear to the world as absentmindedness · pulling on the end of your nose will add to the effect · if you had a beard you could tug at it · instead, the action of smoothing the skin on your forehead up into your hairline with your fingertips, stroking up along the ridge of each cheekbone with the flat of your palm, still warm from having been wedged into the book, between your thighs brings you back to the present · that palm, still warm ·

a warm hand on your cool cheek, the opposite to this morning in the bedroom getting ready · just like every morning you turned the heater on and left the door closed while you went to the bathroom to shower · when you opened it again the air would

have been comfortably warm · by the time you decided what to wear, dressed and done your hair you would be beginning to overheat but still you left the heater going as you rubbed moisturiser into your face, to enjoy the cool surprise of the cream on your warm skin · did you remember to turn it off before you left? is it still going?

you know how to live alone · you are usually very cautious · vigilant even · before you leave the flat each morning you stand on the threshold, keys in hand, and run through your checklist · you know that the home you lock the door on will be the same home you return to this evening · everything just as you left it, not a paper moved, not a magazine flicked through · you open the living-room curtains when you wake to let the sun in · no one will be home before you to pull them closed ·

deadlocks on the front and back doors, keylocks on all five windows · when you return home and open the door the smell is always just the same, percolated coffee and amber oil · you clearly remember the puff of grey smoke that curled above your head this morning when you bent to blow out the candle in the oil burner · that warning sticker those candles came with, *do not leave unattended* ·

but recently things have changed, there is this new girl, this Charlotte, and sometimes you do not return to your own flat in the evening · on the nights you do come home you often have her with you · there has been more than one occasion when the pair of you have fallen asleep and you have woken in the morning to find an empty metal canister, its tealight having burnt out overnight · or worse, a still-burning wick floating in a flattened out puddle of wax that has begun to seep out over the rim of the iron candelabra on the table next to your bed ·

this morning there is no excuse, last night you went home alone, this morning you left alone · you stood outside the door, keys in your right hand, your arm frozen half way to the lock, remembering whether or not you had blown the tealight out · *do not*

leave unattended · candles, fires, electric blankets · *turn it off at the switch, the power leaks*, the voice of your mother whispers at your neck · *turn it off at the switch, what if there's a storm?* if you had heard this voice earlier, before you got on the bus, while you were paused at the front door, you would have dropped your bag, pushed open the door and listened for the buzz of white noise · *turn it off at the switch*, the voice murmurs, comfort and threat mingling in the velvet of it, *there might be a fault, a fire could start* ·

you would make the bus only because you always leave early · you would have had to go back inside first, to turn the kettle off at the switch, and the toaster, television, VCR, computer, bedside lamp, heater · to put a stop to your mother's voice · to protect your things, her home · to know the flat would be there when you returned · everything just as you left it ·

this morning you didn't hear your mother · that other voice, the one telling you that you would never be able to find a way to make the sculpture you wanted to make, had been too loud, drowning everything else out · you locked the door, you walked away ·

and now, at the exact moment you have broken through, have found a way into the work, you have put your warm hand to your cool cheek and remembered switching the heater on, but not switching it off · your first instinct is to reach up and hit the bell for the next stop · your hand actually flies up from your cheek to press the button on the silver pole in front of you ·

it's your stop anyway, the corner of King William Street and the mall · as the driver pulls in to the curb, step off and push your way through the crowd on the footpath · run to the corner to cross the road · you are going back home · on the opposite side of the road you will catch the bus going the other way, get off at the end of your street, run

to unlock your front door and head straight for the bedroom · there is no doubt in your mind that you have left that blow heater running ·

the lights take an aeon to change · pacing back and forth along the curb, jumping up and down on the spot, nothing makes the waiting any easier · thoughts of work disappear, replaced by new images, on a loop · the tiny white heater sitting so close to the ground, blowing its fiery breath out towards the carpet, and the piles of clean, but unfolded laundry heaped around the room · the laundry heaped on the carpet you have become so slack about vacuuming for so long that this morning when you sat on the edge of the bed to dry your hair, a golfball-sized dust bunny got caught between the first and second toe of your right foot ·

the air from the heater moving the dust around, the dust rolling and floating its way right onto the vent and catching alight · a small flame leaping from the carpet to the piles of clothing overflowing the tightly packed cane baskets · and didn't you just throw a load of underwear fresh off the line on top of it all last night? all that flimsy flammable fabric so close to the sparking, dusty vent · the flat burning to the ground · everything burning · your clothes, your furniture, your boxes – letters, drawings, paintings, journals, diaries, everything · all the precious things that had once belonged to you, your brother, Sam, Remy · your things, your home, gone, lost ·

the bus comes up the other side of the road before the lights had changed, but the traffic is too heavy for jaywalking · there is only one person waiting to board, and he gets on, and the bus leaves and then the green walk light flicks on at your corner and the pole clicks into that staccato cross-now signal for the blind · cross, too late, preparing yourself for the overwhelming panic that must be about to descend · as you watch the buses indicator begin to flash, and it swings out across the intersection, turning the corner off King William Street, you will realise the panic isn't coming ·

you cross the street and keep walking · keep walking all the way up through the mall · all the way to the other end, to Rundle Street, for coffee · sit and drink a coffee, drink two if you would like, and start work, make a list of the materials you will need · let yourself get drowsy from the feeling of the early spring sun on your face and shoulders · relax now, while you can, there is a lot of work to be done ·

then, when you are ready, pay for your coffee, cross the road and walk up the stairs to the studio, and get out the yellow pages · start looking up hardware stores · you will need a lot of wire if you are going to make three lifesize figures ·

relax, not because you have remembered turning the heater off after all ·

relax, because this is no time to panic · because it is time you got back to work · because after this piece there is another to be getting on with · because you can't remember everything, all at once, all of the time · because sometimes its not just the heater that needs switching off · because sometimes you find yourself able to hear the voice you know belongs only to you ·

because, as the bus started to pull away from the curb across the road and you stood imagining the heater starting a fire in your bedroom, the waiting gave you time to do an unfamiliar thing · to stop, and to think the disastrous image through, all the way to the end · the room would catch alight, you thought, and then the fire would spread, creeping under the door, and across the floor and the furniture in the living room · cans in the kitchen would swell and explode, the glass in the windows would splinter and break in the frames, anything plastic melting and pooling where it lay, anything paper turning to smoke · the flat would burn to the ground · you would come home and there would be no door to unlock, nothing to plug back in and switch back on, nothing as you left it, everything gone ·

the only thing left then, you think, over and over, all day, would be me · me · free

—

Remy's eyes range over the pictures on the wall, her features giving nothing away as she looks from one to the next. Tom's fig tree drawing is the centre, all the other images radiate out from that.

Years ago I did a week's work experience as a courtroom artist. The first ring of images around Tom's tree is made up of the portrait sketches I made of the people who sat in the witness stand. Remy taps each in turn with her index finger. A young woman, her head in her hands, her hair completely covering her face. An angry young man with a thick black moustache, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his mouth set in grim defiance, his chin lifted high, his eyes looking down and away. A middle-aged woman with no hair, both hands clenched into fists in front of her body.

There is a strip of paper I tore out of the newspaper, a series of eight men behind a wooden court railing. Whoever painted those eight men left all the emotion out. Their faces say nothing. Eight different jawlines, eight different hairstyles, eight different shirts, eight different sized heads, even eight different noses, and somehow they all look exactly the same. Exactly the same expressionless eyes, and mouths.

There is a group of small recent sketches: Charlotte, Terry, Tom, myself. There is one of a man, hollow-eyed, sallow-skinned, gaunt and dark, kneeling on the footpath in the centre of a small, faceless crowd.

'Who's this?' she asks, pointing to him.

'This guy, I used to pass him every day on North Terrace, you know the road where the uni is, the Art Gallery, museum?'

'Yeah, I know North Terrace. What, some homeless guy?'

‘I don’t know if he was homeless. Maybe. I used to walk past him every day on my way here from my bus stop. Over the last year I taught ... well, sort of taught, at a senior college just out of town, and ...’

‘*Sort of* taught?’

‘Artist-in-residence, you know the kind of thing. Run a couple of workshops, organise the graduation show.’

‘That must have been weird.’

‘Weird? No, why? Oh, because I didn’t graduate? Not really. They’re such different things, highschool, art school. I didn’t really think of it like that. Anyway –’

I know I am babbling, even before Remy shoots me the look, before she asks again, ‘So, who is this guy?’ As though it’s not already too late. As though, if I just keep talking I can avoid the subject of the photograph at the top of the diamond, cut from the pages of a magazine I found in the hairdresser’s downstairs. Two figures, heads cropped. Hints of hair: a blonde curl, wisping at the ends, threads through an earring, a glint of sapphire blue cuts across one sharp jawline. Lower bodies disappear beneath what appears to be the hem of a rumpled sheet. Two barely distinguishable shades of pale skin, deep shadows at the joints and creases. All arms and curving ribs, collarbones. Encircling arms. The angles of their elbows echo each other.

Strangers. Models. Posed and posing.

Not us. But. Us.

‘Yeah. Right. The chalk guy. He’s the chalk guy, he does, he did, he was doing these amazing chalk drawings on the footpath, on those big square pavers all the way down North Terrace. He was going from Kintore Avenue to Frome Road. I got to know him a little bit. I used to take him lunch sometimes.’

Remy's eyebrows, having shot up at the word chalk, have lowered into a frown by the end of the sentence.

'There are some photographs of his stuff out there in Terry's series,' I say, gesturing towards the exhibition room. 'These great 3D drawings, like, where they look flat and two-dimensional when you're standing above them, but then, you take three or four steps away and look again and suddenly they're ... real ... you know?'

She nods, '*Trompe l'oeil*. A hole in the ground that looks like you could actually fall into it. A pool you want to dive into. A big sheet of glass, and all of a sudden people are stepping around it like it's really there, like it might smash.'

There is no way to say, *Yes Remy, I know the phrase trompe l'oeil, I know that's what it's called*, without sounding like an idiot, so I don't say it. Instead I say, 'Yeah, they were very cool, his drawings, they were ... beautiful. All plants, it was like he was turning back time, digging up the street, or, like this strip of land had been left untouched right down the centre of the terrace footpath.'

'Uh-huh,' she says, looking away, back to the wall. I am boring her. I am boring her and losing her and I don't want to care about that but I do. And so when her gaze lands on the photograph I took out of the magazine, the one with the figures that so strongly echo the girls we were ten years ago, and that smile of recognition flirts across her lips again, I don't try to distract her. When she turns back to face me, I only look away so that when I look up again it will be out of the corner of my eye, through lowered lashes.

I don't speak, and neither does she. I have lost the ability to form sentences other than the words filling my mind, the phrase repeating itself again and again, her words becoming mine, *a pool you want to dive into, a pool you want to dive into*.

Five

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *But then they disappear once more, all those extra parts, those areas of shade and shadow, rise and hollow that so recently so loudly called out to the eye.*
- *Shadow limbs. Phantom limbs perhaps, and they do speak of loss, wrapped as they are in that shroud they share. The idea of them hangs heavy in our memory.*

—

‘Fucking fuck.’ Her keys are gone. First she *knew* they were in her bag, so she rustled through the rubbish and the pens, feeling pencil shavings collect under her fingernails. No keys. Then she was *certain* that she remembered, hours earlier, shoving them into her back pocket. She could even feel them there, could remember their hardness digging into her when she sat down heavily on the barstool at the pub, more heavily still in the taxi. Turned out to be her watch, its leather band warped, a new crack running the length of its face. ‘Piece of shit.’ She checks every pocket of her jacket and jeans, twice each, before starting in on the bag again. She knows they’re in there. They have to be in there. She’s got her collar turned up to stop the biting wind, but her face is hot again, with anger, embarrassment, alcohol.

The taxi driver hasn’t turned his radio down and tomorrow that woman from next door is going to glare at me and speak just a little too loudly to her kids as she shepherds them into the four wheel drive: *I know you’re tired darling. Its very difficult when you haven’t had a good night’s sleep isn’t it?* And he’s going to wake Remy, which Lola doesn’t want. She just wants to find her damn keys, sneak down to the

kitchen, take a twenty from the fishbowl they use for a kitty. Pay the creepy cab driver so he'll fuck off. Go to bed. Tomorrow's going to be bad enough without a big drama tonight.

It's no use. He toots his horn and revs the engine. Because that's going to help. 'Yeah, *alright*,' Lola yells over her shoulder, giving up hope of not waking Remy. 'Fucking hang on, dickhead,' she continues under her breath. She exhales slowly, trying to remember which facial muscles do what when you're sober. She knocks three times, knowing she's not knocking hard enough. Takes another breath, presses her finger on the doorbell, and leans her hot cheek against the cool wire mesh of the security screen.

Through the tiny diamond shaped gaps Lola can see that the main door is open. She can see the cardboard square that she helped Sam make to replace the broken panel of glass. She is past hoping that he won't be here. Remy's silhouette is small and dark, moving swiftly as she unlocks the screen door from the inside. Tiny, tiny Remy. She's like a baby bird, all angles and bones – elbow, ankle, chin. Hipbones too, Lola knows, just there under that T-shirt. That's all she's wearing, a big baggy T-shirt, and it makes her look even smaller.

She opens the screen and squints at Lola, shading her eyes against the glare of the taxi's headlights: 'What's going on?' Against the dark hall, the lights from outside make her hair, bundled on top of her head, sticking up like a feather headdress, look the greenish yellow of olive oil. People shouldn't dye their hair if they're going to swim in chlorine, thinks Lola nastily. 'Sorry,' she says. She's not but she wants to get past her down the hall. 'No,' Remy says. One hand wraps around Lola's forearm and she squeezes hard, just once. *Stay*, it says. 'Wait,' she says 'I want to know what happened. Where have you been? You missed the whole party.' She looks around Lola, outside to the empty porch. Back at Lola. 'He's not with you?' she asks quietly.

She rushes off down the hall, and Lola waits in silence, her chin dropping to her chest as the fresh air from outside mixes with the beer, making her head heavy. She can feel the fluid collecting in her forehead, the blood thumping in her temples, the pressure building behind her eyeballs. Tomorrow is going to be very, very bad. Remy squeezes Lola's arm again, a little more gently this time, as she pushes past her in the doorway. Despite herself, Lola feels her skin rise to meet the other girl's, her breath quickening. She catches herself biting the inside of her lip, and tells herself not to; she's too drunk to know when to stop, she'll open up that old scar.

Remy's laugh cuts through her and without looking up Lola knows that she is leaning her weight onto one hip, knows she is playing with her hair, knows that driver's forgotten all about the girl he drove here, all about the offer he made her to take it out in trade if she couldn't get into the house to get the cash. He's turned his radio down now, Lola notices. She knows exactly what he's thinking about now, and she doesn't even blame him. She watches out of the corner of her eye as Remy pays him, the elegance of those slim wrists as she counts uncreased notes from her purse.

Lola is pretty sure he's giving her a discount and she feels an empathy that starts to dissolve her anger. She thinks that if she were ever to run into him again, looking him in the eye would be like looking into a mirror. Like he'd take her wherever she had to go, for free, from pity. But then she catches herself staring at Remy's long bare legs, the smooth planes of the backs of her knees, and knows that the truth is, he'd only recognise Lola within the context of his dream of Remy.

She laughs once more, and if you didn't know her better you'd believe that laugh. She thumps the top of the cab twice with the heel of her hand. *Thump thump, see ya, you're off, bye mate.* She crosses her arms over her chest against the wind and her T-shirt rides up as the cab pulls away. That poor guy, thinks Lola, his night is over. She

looks both ways before she crosses the road, although even Lola is still lucid enough to know there'll be no other traffic. It's after midnight, and they are at the end of a cul-de-sac.

—

he won't mind being wrapped in the screen door sheeting · ask him · look at that shrug, he doesn't mind · yours is the difficult job, the wresting and bending, smoothing and shaping those lengths of wire around the curves and planes of his body without kinking it into too sharp an angle, using a strong enough hand to force the metal mesh into a new existence, a gentle enough hand to avoid scratching or scraping his skin · without letting the thin pliers slip, and gouge a hole in that material ·

she won't mind either · she will be the one who suggests a solution to the gender question · *take my head*, she will say, *and put it on my neck, his torso, my arms, his arse, my legs, a foot each* · *and then begin again* · *take his head, and my neck* · *his nose, my lips, his ears, my forehead* · *you're not going to worry about eyes are you? no* · *no eyes, no genitals* · *yes* · *yes* · *hands? hands* · *definitely hands* ·

no matter how hard you try to treat them the same, you will catch yourself over and over again thinking · *am I being more gentle with her than I was with him? or somehow more intrusive? am I being less careful now with him than I was with her, am I overcompensating? there is no way of knowing* · *all you can do is try to adjust your actions to the mood in the room, to whatever energy you might pick up flowing between your hands and their bodies* · *react, and take note of your reactions, react, try not to react*

—

If it wasn't for the McCubbin, we might have kissed then. Neither Remy nor I had moved, but the tension was there, that hidden force that wells up in two people when they lock eyes for a certain length of time, and all their desires surge at once, all their defences fail at once. We hadn't moved, but our eyes had let each other know that moving was a possibility.

And then someone laughed in the hallway outside the door. And we both turned our heads to look in the direction of the laughter. And as we were turning our heads back again she caught sight of the reproduction on the wall. Frederick McCubbin, 'Lost', and drew in a sharp breath.

'Oh,' she said, surprising me by blushing. 'Hey, Lola, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything. Out there. When I said that.'

'I know you didn't,' I rushed to reply, hearing the false note in my voice even as I said the words, the lie and the desperation.

'So,' she says now, 'what happened to the chalk guy? Did he gets his drawings all done?'

'No. One day I walked over to see him and he wasn't there. It had started to rain, and the chalk was running, all the colours mixing together and running into the gutters.' But Remy has stopped listening. She moves towards me, and without breaking eye contact, places her right foot on the top of my left one and presses down hard, smiling all the while.

'Where's this roof then?' she says, keeping her voice and her eyelashes low.

Six

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *We find ourselves circling the sculpture, walking first in one direction, then the other, retracing our steps, trying to find our way back to the point at which we felt the ground shift beneath our feet. Back to the last moment in which we felt sure of everything. Before we were distracted by other beckoning possibilities.*

—

Wanting Remy does something strange to a person; it brings with it the power to make you lose all sense of proportion. As though the depth and breadth of feeling what you feel for this one person takes away your ability to feel anything for anyone else. As though this yearning felt for her is so intense, so extraordinary that it makes you yourself extraordinary, for being capable of it, for being interesting enough, somehow, to keep her close to you. To admit the idea then, that someone else might feel something vaguely similar, is to be reminded that you are not, in fact, so special and unique after all.

That you might just be one of those poor slobs you've seen so often, staring at her long after she's passed them on the street, pining over her in the corner of the bar where she works. Punching holes in the wall when you try to buy her a drink and she says, 'Oh, thaaaanks, but no thanks,' with an appreciative, slightly condescending tilt of her head. Adrian the bouncer putting you in a headlock while she looks at you across the bar, eyes wide with the shock and confusion that let you know she has never really

noticed who you are let alone how much you love her, that realisation hurting just a little more than your elbow, twisted up behind your back at such an unnatural angle by Adrian, who, you will realise later, holds you just a little bit tighter, pushes you just a little bit harder, kicks you in the stomach when you fall to the ground, long after you've already stopped fighting back because, and only because, it is Remy you have dared to offend. Adrian's friend Remy. Who he loves, really loves. Not like you, you poor deluded slob.

—

tear the paper into long, inch-wide strips · such a satisfying sound · there is a silken quality to the feeling of slowly pulling one sheet of newspaper into two · there is no difference, none at all, between the way it feels now and the way it felt back in primary school when you made that pig-shaped piñata, building layers of papier maché around the balloon that was the perfect shape to form its base · in that case the features, pointy triangular ears, a big round snout, little rectangular block legs and a tightly curling tail were added on at a later stage · this time, the features are going to be sharpest beneath the layers of glue-soaked paper · the wire forms are quite clearly recognisable, surprisingly human, each feature endowed with an unmistakably gendered shape · they are the opposite of the shapes you are searching for, they are the reason you decided the layers of papier maché were necessary ·

while each layer of paper was still wet with glue, glistening with an air of malleability, hope hovered just above the quickly evolving sculpture · now, three layers in, you are being forced to admit that your plan is not working · is not going to work · is taking things in the opposite direction than you want them go · each layer, as it sets, drying and hardening to the point where you can rap your knuckles against it and be

rewarded with a woody little sound, only works to exaggerate those tiny differences of size, shape and proportion that you have been trying to confuse, or blur, or at the very least call into question. ·

don't panic · breathe, take a step back · look again · remember why you are here,
what it is that you are trying to achieve · remember where it all began

—

The silence is stretching too long between us, but I can't think of a way to break it. There are noises from the street, cars, and catcalls, and music and the low growl of the early Saturday night crowd. Is it still early? Since stepping out of the main room, away from the clock above the front window, I have lost all sense of time. When I focus on the fact that I am sitting out here on the roof with Remy it feels as though it has been mere moments, but when I remember Charlotte, and Grey too, back inside with no idea where I am, who I am with, my suspicion is that at least an hour has passed between when Remy put her hand on my shoulder and the long moment we are passing now, sitting together, not saying anything, having stepped out the back window and onto the corrugated iron.

It might be the fresh air causing this strange unbidden bubble of joy up through my body, just fresh air mixing with nerves and the dregs of adrenalin and too much champagne and relief and surprise making that bubble burst out as laughter, it's probably only that. But it feels like more. It feels like a vitamin overdose, like arcing out over a deep swimming hole and letting go the rope. Suspend and plunge. Like freedom. Like childhood. Making decisions without the possibility of repercussion.

Seven

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *Out of the corner of an eye, in the back of the mind, buried in our memory, perhaps there is some other knowledge being spoken to. Someone else being spoken to, or of.*
- *Magritte, most definitely, his drowning mother, his kissing Lovers.*
- *And Munch. His Lovers, and his Jealousy.*

—

Tomorrow is going to be very bad. It is already tomorrow and it is all already very bad, just not as bad as it going to get. Lola thinks she might throw up, right here on the front step. The taste of rising bile and the image that it brings up, the picture her imagination creates of what she must look like right now, drawn, bleary-eyed, unable to stand up without leaning against the screen door and the picture her mind creates of herself bent double throwing up on the step makes her lean forward and stick out her chin. It makes her remember Sam, the way his face turned green as he stood in the doorway to Remy's bedroom that day, all that time ago. It really turned green; Lola had always thought that was just a figure of speech.

The look on his face when he opened the door and saw Remy and her in bed together. Not *in* bed, that might not have been so bad, on top of the bed together. Naked and wrapped around one another, half asleep, on top of Remy's duvet. The shock in his eyes. The way his mouth fell open and he blinked very slowly. The anger in his eyes.

The betrayal. The way it was Remy he was looking at, when his anger tipped over into pain.

Her lurching stomach brings with it these memories of that night, and time folds in on itself and not only it is already tomorrow it is also yesterday, in a faraway sense it is yesterday, that other yesterday, when Sam ran out of the room and Remy said, ‘Shit,’ through her teeth, and Lola jumped up and pulled on her T-shirt and jeans and ran after him through the house to the front door calling ‘Sam, Sam, wait, Sam,’ and he looked at her and said, ‘Oh fuck, Lola,’ and then the green drained from his face and he bent double and threw up on the front step, all over Lola’s cold, bare feet.

—

it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work, it doesn’t fucking work · the feeling is surprisingly familiar, overwhelmingly physical · skin prickling · gut churning · face hot · heart racing, thudding loud in your ears · it was going to be perfect, I know · it was going to work · everything was back on track ·

you primed the figures with gouache · you chose your colours carefully, lining the watercolour pencils up along the edge of your workdesk in the order you would use them · you sharpened each one to a fine point · one of them broke while you were sharpening them, you considered that a sign of encouragement · you picked the pencils up, one by one, colour by colour, and covered the figures in line after line of colour · the colours made the secrets you were setting down, even the most shameful ones, beautiful · it was going to work · you began to hope again ·

when you had covered the surface in those stories, you filled in the gaps between the lines with even more words, until there was no white left · it was surprisingly

physical work · you had to reach across and around, to straddle and crouch, and stand bent double so that your hair dragged in the dust and pencil shaving as you wrote · at one point you lay on your back and wrote with your arm held straight up above your face ·

you began to have your suspicions when you finished writing · too many colours, too hastily chosen · but you held your breath, there was no going back, it was onwards or nothing ·

you wet the soft, thick-bristled brush · you ran it lightly over the kaleidoscope of brightly coloured words · you watched the colours brighten and bloom, begin to swim and merge at the edges of themselves ·

the merging is not the problem · you remember enough from school not to allow the whole thing to turn into a muddy brown mess · when you finish turning all the pencil to paint the colours are still separate enough, still vibrant and alive · it is the idea that is wrong · because you had forgotten where you come from · because when you look at it now, when you look at all of these colours all you can imagine is how many people will think this is some kind of tie-dyeing reference · the colours turn the figures into neo-flower children, and not the beautiful nostalgic kind, the other kind, the ones that want to sell you detox diets over the internet ·

it is probably unrealistic to imagine that you might not cry now · try not to spend too long on the ground · try to remember to get up and throw a blanket over the figures, if not yourself

Outside on the old, sloping tin roof, under the glowing moon, Remy suddenly looks like a stranger. Her hair pulled back off her face like that, brittle with spray. The highlights in her neat, dark ponytail catching the light. The perfect job-interview navy fabric and cut of her suit. There is something about the corners of her eyelids, a new sharpness. She keeps pulling at the cuffs of her jacket sleeves, she sits on the slanting roof with her back held very straight, shoulders back, chin up.

Back inside, where it was well-lit and crowded I hadn't been able to look at her like this. For one thing she would've caught my eye by now, she wouldn't have stayed in profile for so long. She would have noticed me staring. Someone would have noticed. I thought she hadn't changed at all but she has hasn't she? And not just physically. After all this time she's taken the time to come down here from Melbourne, all alone, to see me, to see me and my work. She has taken time off her own work for this, for me. And, and this is key, she has forsaken that crowd in there, the contacts she could be forming, the relationships she could be reinforcing, the kind of audience she would have taken immediate control of in the past. To sit outside with me. The one time she did recognise somebody she actively fled the room, to be with me. After all this time. I feel as though I should be able to name this, what it is that we are attempting to do here, but I can't. Reunion, reconnection, catching up, all of the descriptors I think of sound so clear, so organised. Impossible. String around jelly.

I am finding it difficult to look at her again. I form a circle close below the rim of my champagne glass with both hands, forefingers and thumbs meeting and take slow, spare sips, wanting to take a great, brain freezing draught, but wanting to project an image of control more, wanting, most of all, to stretch out this silence, this perfect moment where nothing has been begun and nothing is over, just a little longer.

Eight

Notes, contd: Gift.

- *Incongruous, just as strong as the rest, something of the New Age about it. Remnants of Aquarius. The title card tells us that the forms for the figures beneath the fabric have been constructed from wire sheeting. A layer of papier maché. Overlain with wax. Is this the explanation for the mystical air – candle wax, muslin? But a candle draped with fabric begs disaster doesn't it?*
- *Perhaps there is only one figure beneath there after all, nothing human, a phoenix? That chin a beak, tucked down into that elbow, that elbow a wing?*

—

Lying on her back on the sagging couch, Lola tries not to let on how comfortable she has allowed her head get in Remy's lap. The most important thing to remember, when someone is smoothing your hair and forehead with long sweeping strokes until you feel your breathing deepen, is not to move. It is important because, if the someone who is stroking is Remy, then the overriding feeling is that if you were to move, and particularly if you were to move in any way that communicates how much you are enjoying her ministrations, she will stop.

She has always been like that about massages too, Lola realises, and footrubs, and even simple embraces. This knowledge of the importance of remaining still that Lola is concentrating on right now was a long time in the learning. Lola is trying to

keep afloat, trying not to fall asleep, trying to stay a step ahead of her own story, trying not to sink into an old argument, all at the same time.

‘When I was seven,’ she begins ...

—

even after you have hidden the evidence of your first failure under an extra layer of newspaper you struggle with the figures ·

movement, that’s what’s missing ·

tell her: *they’re ... static. the papier maché has made them hard and mannequin-like* · she will say: *hard. so you want softness, then · no. not softness. movement · movement* ·

close your eyes · she will not hesitate to oblige · then her eyes are closed, turn her, like she is ‘it’ in Blind Man’s Bluff · turn her and turn her, faster and faster, until you are sure she will not immediately stop when you let her go. When you let her go, begin to walk around her in the opposite direction · *open them!*

you will know from the look in her eyes whether or not she has understood · what she says next will be the answer ·

whirlpool, she’ll say · *air, rushing air, made visible* ·

rush · that’s it · and ... *swirl! rush and swirl · visible* ·

she might, at this point, jump up and down on the spot, her excitement, like all her emotions, always makes itself swiftly physical · she might take your face between the palms of her hands and whisper: *fabric · not papier maché sculpted folds · real folds, real draping folds · and ... swirls · around their faces · around their bodies · around their ... necks* · she will pause, but she won’t be afraid · she will be waiting for

your smile · she will know that it is not a bad thing she has said · that it is totally perfect
· both what she has said, and that she was unafraid to say it · *fabric · gauze · muslin*

this is it · you're nearly there · the fabric she helped you find is perfect · the
softest kind of tulle you have ever seen, softer than you could ever have imagined tulle
could be · such a gentle weave, such a fine thread · then the woman from the fabric shop
took it down from the high shelf behind the counter, her voice dropped to a low whisper
· *American Tulle*, she breathed · it looked blue on the roll but this was an illusion she
said · *it will pick up and radiate any colour it is laid over*, she breathed · *it sort of takes
whatever is beneath it and makes it better, makes it more beautiful · perfect ·*

back at the studio, the act of unrolling the length you bought feels like a sacred
act · as if it would be disrespectful to speak · it lies haphazardly spread across the
figures · you take hold of each corner of one end; she holds the corners of the other ·
you count, *one, two ... three!* and together you lift your arms · the fabric billows up into
the air, it fills the room, reaching up to the ceiling, out to the walls and the windows,
hanging suspended in the air above your heads for a moment like a parachute before it
falls softly, settling over the figures, skimming the curves, nestling into their grooves
and creases ·

this is it, you think · but you are wrong · everything is grey · the tulle is picking
up the blurred print from the newsprint and turning grey · in turn, everything around it
looks grey · dirty and drab · the grey takes the hardness of the angles and turns them
sharp and dangerous ·

from across the room, she calls quietly, calmly, *so, fix it* ·

you nod, it's all you can bring yourself to do

‘What’s this?’ Remy says, finally breaking through the tense silence, pointing to the shapes I have been drawing, over and over again on the rippled surface of the tin roof. There is a square, a triangle, a circle. I am sitting with my legs crossed lotus-style, dipping my finger into the last few centimetres of champagne in my glass, using the liquid to draw the shapes in front of my shins. They dry and disappear almost as quickly as soon as I finish them.

‘You didn’t get through school with circles like that,’ she says, doubtfully.

‘No,’ I reply, ‘but then, I didn’t get through school at all did I?’ And then, because she blanches, I continue, ‘anyway, it’s not a circle. Just, circle-ish.’

It has the desired effect. Remy has taken off her suit jacket and folded it in her lap and as she fishes in the pocket, she smiles again. ‘Circle-ish,’ she giggles. ‘Yeah, what *was* that in there? *A bit gay-ish?*’

‘I wanted to say, only as *gay-ish* as you are *dumb-ish*. Silly little bitch.’

‘Ha,’ Remy says, holding out two tightly bunched fists. ‘Where’s the present Lola?’

I raise an eyebrow, choose the left hand. I let my finger sit on the top of her hand for longer than is necessary to communicate my choice. She turns her hands back over, opening them both to reveal a fat crumpled joint. As we pass it back and forward, Remy is transformed once again. Tendrils of hair have escaped her tight ponytail. There is an attractive flush to her cheeks. She leans forward and her shirt is pulled crooked across her shoulders. How could I have forgotten the fragility of her collarbone? The way the flesh drops away above the cochlea curve of bone like the inside of a seashell. She looks up again, about to speak, but catches me quickly pulling my eyes away from her skin. She tugs her collar straight and raises an eyebrow.

Not a stranger then, after all. A stranger might let that pass, might keep right on talking, try to distract us both until the moment had dissolved. Old lovers, though, don't make believe so easily or generously. She holds my gaze, her own eyes steady and bright in the moonlight. She forces me, in that way, to smile and push a small laugh out through my pressed together lips. As though I have been doing something I shouldn't.

Is there any point in trying to explain? No. There's no way to say it: *No Remy it was only your collarbone*, and have her believe it. And anyway, why should staring at her collarbone be any better than ogling her cleavage? In a way, she has caught me in an even more intimate moment than she realises.

I don't want to think about sleeping with Remy. I am thinking about sleeping with Remy. I don't want to sleep with Remy. I want to sleep with Remy. What is it that I am doing out here on the roof otherwise?

I become aware that I have been holding the joint for too long, my arm frozen in space, halfway up to my mouth, only when she reaches out and takes hold of my hand. I am so immediately ready to relinquish it, to apologise for the bogart, that it takes me a moment to realise that she is not taking it from me, that she is holding my hand in hers and guiding the joint to my lips. I inhale, only half-intentionally, breathing out as she removes the joint. She carries my hand with hers over to her own lips and takes a long drag.

I feel the rest of the world falling away around us as if it is actually physically happening. Remy performs a particularly tricky manoeuvre, taking the joint from my hand with her left never letting go of mine with her right. She tries to stub it out on the tin roof and then drops it into my almost empty champagne glass, where it hisses for a millisecond before dying. Or do I imagine that hissing noise. I am imagining an

earthquake. The ground splitting. Time somehow suspended, and moving too fast, all at once.

—

Nine

Notes, contd: Gift.

- A trinity if there are three of them, or a coven. Man looking to woman looking to God. Or an orgy. A dream of an orgy, too clean, too pretty to be real, there is something about the piece that reads like a failed attempt at pornography.
- The wire, that mesh skeleton, pushes through the skin in many places. It distracts. It undercuts. It won't allow us to fully believe. A constant reminder that these are not people, not bodies. That they do not live – breathe, speak, kiss, fuck.

—

‘When I was seven,’ Lola begins.

‘You start every story the same way,’ Remy interrupts, ‘*When I was seven*, you say. There are not enough days in a year for that much to have happened when you were seven.’ She’s right, Lola always begins that way. It’s become a habit over time. Somehow easier than: *When I was a little girl*, somehow more true. Even if she was five, or six or eight at the time. But Remy’s wrong too.

‘Some years are different,’ Lola argues.

‘They sure are,’ Remy groans. ‘You missed my birthday party, Lola. You missed everything.’ There is something about the tone of her voice that lets Lola know she is being humoured. That Remy had barely noticed her missing from the party. That she hasn’t believed a word of Lola’s explanation. Lola hadn’t planned on getting so drunk, that is where she went wrong. It was too difficult, trying to remember the

intricate details of the story, the bits that made it believable, the parts that were true. She heard herself repeating the same parts too many times and every time she repeated herself it all sounded less and less plausible, less and less like the truth. Tomorrow is going to be very bad. But tonight, for now, Remy is stroking her hair and if she doesn't make any sudden moves, or say anything else, or appear to be enjoying herself too much, Remy might not stop yet.

—

if, as you scrabble through your speeding thoughts, searching for a way to resurrect the sculpture, the memory of that wand keeps rising and returning perhaps the best thing to do is to stop trying to ignore it · there may be a connection, you never know · you know that this is desperate thinking, but so what? you *are* desperate · let yourself remember · pick up the pencil that has fallen to the floor beside you · hold it in your hand and let yourself imagine it is the wand you are holding again, close your eyes and try to visualise the details ·

the body of the wand fits in your fist · the stem · the stem is rose quartz, pink and watery like weak red cordial · you roll it between your palms and the ridges of its geometry, six sided like a lead pencil, make themselves felt and heard · if you were to take a pen, or the points of a pair of scissors, a fingernail, and run them along the length of a piece of corrugated cardboard it would make exactly this sound, a tiny engine speeding up, a small craft about to take off ·

you can't help yourself, you rolled the pink wand carefully back and forward, feeling its six flat sides grow warm under your palms · at one end of the wand's perfect stem is a chunk of amethyst, uneven and unpolished rough, almost jagged · holding it in

place is a pewter snake, its body winding around the wand; its jaws spread wide and clamped down on the purple stone · its eyes are thin slits · at the other end, in pewter again – this is what makes the tiny wand so surprisingly heavy in the hand – the talons of a bird of prey splay and close in around a milky sphere, a cloudy, off-white marble, a full moon in miniature ·

open your eyes, drop the pencil. it's not the wand itself your subconscious has been trying to get you to remember · it's that night, the night you took the wand back home

—

Our faces are so close. I close my eyes and when I open them again, barely a breath later, I see that Remy has closed hers. That she is still moving towards me. My mind is whispering at me, *don't do this, don't do this. Remember, remember*: I remember. I remember sitting on the swing in the park at the end of our street, not long after Sam moved out and quit school, trying to convince myself it would be alright, that the whispered phonecalls behind closed doors were nothing sinister. That it was a good thing that Remy and Sam had managed to stay friends. Opening my eyes to see Remy standing there in front of me, hair shining under the streetlight. Just watching. I had no idea how long I had had my eyes shut, how long Remy had been standing there while I dizzied myself on the swing. I remember her standing there with the light shining on her skin. I remember that she looked at me as though I was a stranger. I might have been a stranger who had stepped on her foot in a supermarket queue.

Her lips make the tiniest popping sound as she opens them and lifts her chin. My own mouth is open before I know it.

I remember her voice, dripping with contempt:

‘Seriously Lola, what the fuck is going on with you?’

I tried so hard not to tell her the story I had been manufacturing. I tried so hard not to let those words come out that I couldn't speak at all. ‘Lola,’ she started again, ‘we need to talk. I just think it might be best if we ...’

I remember that that was when I found my voice, my terror of losing her overriding the last of my scruples. I pretended I hadn't heard her. I had to stop her from saying what she was about to say. I couldn't lose her now. Not so soon. ‘Remy,’ I said quickly, ‘my mother spoke to Tom this morning.’

‘What? You mean she *told you* she spoke to him again?’ She took a step backwards, her hand came up to cover her mouth. When she took it away again, she shook her head and said, ‘Look, Lola. We have to ...’

I remember the range of emotions I watched travel across Remy's face as I repeated the words, ‘She said she spoke to him.’ Shock, confusion, excitement. ‘She rang to tell me she'd spoken to Tom. This morning she rang. But then my Dad rang too, later. All this time I've been thinking ... but he's not ... Dad rang me, he said ...’ At the last minute I chickened out. I never said the actual words.

‘What? I don't understand. Do you mean, they found him? How? Where?’

It didn't matter that I hadn't said the words. I had told the lie. My heart was thumping, my mind racing. Later, I could say I had been about to explain. Later I would say, you interrupted, you misinterpreted, you made assumptions. In that quick elastic moment I could say nothing at all.

She stared at me, trying to make sense of what I was saying. ‘I can't believe it,’ she said, slowly, wondrously.

‘Me neither,’ I said. *No*, I thought, *who would have believed it could be so easy*. Later, I could say I never had a chance to explain.

Walking back to the house in silence, I held Remy’s hand firmly in my own, feeling her fine bones move beneath that paper-thin skin. I kept my eyes on our feet, two pairs of brown leather lace up boots splashing through the wet streets. I noticed every soggy leaf, in every shade of tan and brown, sticking to our shoes for a few strides, just as suddenly left behind, slipping beneath a heavy sole to be skewered by the point of a tarry black stone. I kept my eyes on the leaves, and on our boots, listening for the silence just beyond the tidal swoosh of car tyres skimming the slippery road surface. I held tight to Remy’s hand and tried to imagine possibilities, all of the places and the ways in which this resurrected brother might live.

If I were going to keep him alive, if Tom, My Brother Who Killed Himself, was really going to become Tom Who Had Been Found, My Brother Who Was Once and Now is No Longer Dead, I would need more than a few sketchy details to work with. This man made of memories so few and sparse, this pale ghost, would need to be made somewhat more substantial, if he was going to turn me and Remy back into something solid.

My skin is prickling, covered in goosebumps, all hairs standing on end. My mouth is open. Remy is about to kiss me. I don’t want this, I think. It is not the vague, messy, sprawling type of thought I have been slipping further and further away into tonight. Clear, articulate, concise. I. Do. Not. Want. This. ‘No,’ I say, putting my hands against her shoulders and pushing her back an inch or two. ‘No.’

Ten

Notes, contd: gift.

- *And yet, here they are. Standing before us. Connecting. Communicating. Being.*

—

Behind the loungeroom door, a floorboard creaks in the hall, and it creaks too loudly for the person who stepped on it to pretend it hasn't happened and Lola and Remy both lift their heads and look up at the door. After the shortest pause, the doorhandle turns and the door swings open and Sam comes through the door and walks into the room. He looks around as though there is something, someone missing, until Remy says, in a bored voice, like it is an over-rehearsed line: 'He's not here Sam. Tom didn't turn up at the station.' He stands, shifting his weight uneasily from foot to foot, both hands deep in his pockets, he raises both eyebrows at Remy, over Lola's head. He will not meet Lola's gaze.

'Look,' Remy drawls, 'Lola brought me a present.' She holds out her right hand, unfurling it to reveal the crystal wand sitting across the centre of her palm.

'There's one for you too,' she says, reaching out to pick the tiny package up off the coffee table and hand it to him. Sam just stands there, staring at it, shaking his head.

'It's not *my* birthday,' he says.

'Open it,' Remy urges. 'I want to see what it is.' Sam shakes his head again, but he turns the paper package over, and pulls gently on the string until the bow unties itself and falls slack. He peels back one piece of Sellotape and taps the tube of paper softly

against his palm. He stares in silence at the small figure laying there in the centre of his hand.

‘Wow,’ says Remy, squinting to make out the details of the facial features, the intricate meshing and moulding of copper and tin and aluminium worked into the shape of a tiny, thin man with long curling hair, a tall staff in his left hand, a bedding roll strapped to his back. His right hand is held at waist height, just in front of his body, fingers pointing upwards, whether waving goodbye, or warding something off was unclear. ‘That’s actually pretty cool,’ she says. ‘Did *your* Dad really make that?’

Lola nods, chewing the inside of her cheek.

Sam swallows audibly, shifting on his feet again. ‘Lola,’ he says, ‘I can’t take this.’

‘Yes you can. It’s for you.’

‘No,’ he insists. ‘I can’t take it. It’s yours. It’s yours.’

‘I don’t want it anymore,’ says Lola, trying not to cry. ‘I want you to have it.’

‘I don’t want it either.’

All three of them have risen to their feet now. They cannot look at each other any longer. For the last few moments before Remy speaks, before the truth is finally spoken out loud, none of them says a word. An aching silence hangs heavy in the room, the scent of deceit and shame and disgust mixing itself with the stale smell of smoke from the fireplace as they watch the flames lick against the blackened glass of the combustion heater.

the smell in the studio is incredible · *like jam on the stove*, she will laugh. *the hairdressers will think we've gone all domestic* · take a deep breath, inhale the scent of berries and wax and oil and heat · take a breath, take a scoop of hot blueblack wax from the deep vat and hold it above the heads of the figures and tip the ladle · know the moment you let it drip onto the forehead of the first one, and it moves like slow lava, that everything will be okay ·

it's going to work, she'll call happily. *look, it's going to work!* you will have to wait until you are done to walk around to where she is applying the deep crimson wax from the second vat to one of the other figures · the wax sets quickly and so you will have to wait until the vats are empty to walk around and kiss her · if you look her in the eye now though she will understand · it won't really be like waiting at all · more like beginning already ·

try not to get any wax on the floor, or yourself, or on her · it will burn, it will set hard

—

'What happened?' Charlotte says as I walk up and stand beside her, not yet able to speak. I'm back inside, back in the main room where the noise from the crowd is overwhelming and there is little room to move and it is stuffy and stifling despite the open windows. 'Were you with ... back there? That's *her* isn't it? The one in the suit.

Over there, with that other woman?'

It is her, over there, standing next to 'Gift'. The woman she is with is holding two glasses of champagne while Remy uses her back as support for her notebook, scribbling away again. Remy's fringe has completely escaped its clips and keeps falling

down over her eyes. Every time she flicks her head around to look at the sculpture she puffs out her cheeks and blows the hair up and out of the way. The other woman is looking at the floor, misery weighing down her shoulders.

‘Yes,’ I manage, ‘that’s her.’ I look down at my bare feet, at my shoes dangling from my right hand. ‘Charlotte ...’ *I am not going to lie, I am not going to lie.*

‘That girl, the other one,’ says Charlotte slowly, not looking me in the eye. ‘She’s been wandering around trying to find her for a *really* long time. She’s been carrying those two drinks around, looking lost for ...’ she checks the clock above the door, ‘for over an hour and a half. That’s how long you have been gone.’ When I don’t reply she looks at me and says, ‘She didn’t even take a sip of her own drink you know. Not one. She was waiting. I’ve been watching her.’

‘Charlotte, I’m sorry.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I am Charlotte. Nothing happened.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘No, I mean, okay, but nothing ... I didn’t ... Charlotte, I love you. I’m a dickhead okay. I’m an idiot. But I love you. And I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. And *nothing* happened.’

I have never said that to her before, *I love you*. We haven’t said that to each other. And now, the first time I said it to her will always be attached to this horrible moment, this stupid, gross, pathetic moment. I hold my breath, wondering if it will also be the last time I get to say it to her.

Charlotte looks over at Remy again, who is still writing, still looking furious, and at the woman she is with, who has now drained one of the glasses of champagne and appears to be trying to resist the other. She wipes at her brow with her forearm and

when she lowers her arm she sees us looking at her and my heart lurches but she stares right through me. She shifts her gaze the tiniest bit to the right of me, as though she is looking at someone else standing there, or at a photograph on the wall behind me, as though she hasn't seen me at all.

When we look into each others eyes again I can see that Charlotte has seen it too. I don't look away. I don't speak. I wait for her to say it, to leave me. She takes a deep breath.

'I love you too, Lola. And you *are* a dickhead. And I can't talk about this anymore right now or I will cry, and I'm not going to cry in this room.'

Forever now, the first time she told me she loved me will be soaked in the shame of this moment. But she did say it. And, just like that, this moment seems like the beginning of forever, not the end.

—

Eleven

‘You should go and find your Dad,’ says Charlotte, as I take hold of her hand. She’s gone back to not looking at me; she’s blinking furiously and sniffing.

‘Go,’ she says. ‘I’m alright,’ she says, when I don’t let go of her hand. ‘I’m alright. I’ll see you after.’

‘Oh, for fuck's sake!’ Remy’s voice carries over the chattering of the crowd. ‘Can't you fucking keep still?’ Charlotte and I are not the only ones to turn and look. Remy’s beautiful features are made ugly by her anger; she licks the nib of her pen and scribbles violently in her notebook, but it must be out of ink because she glares at it in disgust. She grabs the notebook from her weary companion’s back and wrenches it away with a gesture just large enough to graze the edge of ‘Optogram’. The crack of knuckles hitting the glass brings the crowd to a silent standstill. The lens swings wildly for a moment and a little plaster falls from the ceiling rose. Part of me wants it to fall. How satisfying it would be, if her flailing arm sent the mobile swinging and the swinging action worked the chain free from the ceiling and the whole thing came falling down, shattering into thousands of tiny shards across the floor. It soon finds its centre again though, settling back into a smooth revolution.

Charlotte and I turn back to face one another. After a long pause, she squeezes my hand quickly three times. ‘Go,’ she says, ‘I’ll see you after.’

‘I’ll see you,’ I say, repeating, ‘I won’t be long.’

‘I heard him talking to Terry about the sitting room earlier. He might be back there.’

‘I love you,’ I say, and turn to walk out of the main room without looking back, in search of my father, and the future.

you will need to be quick · lift your end of the tulle, for the second time, for the last time, high into the air · trust her to be with you, to lift her end herself, there is no time for talking anymore, barely time to signal across the room that it is time to let go ·

you will let go and she will let go and the fabric will fall softly down onto the about to harden wax and drape itself around the figures and you will both rush in towards it, pressing the material as gently as you can onto the surface of those bodies · pressing it hard enough to adhere but not hard enough so that the wax will push through the tiny diamond-shaped holes in the weave · taking the folds and creases the fabric has fallen into naturally and suspending them in that moment just before all the lightness of the fall, all the air trapped so briefly beneath the tulle escapes and leaves it to slide swiftly to the ground

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Part Three

Wunderkammer

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Guillaume Apollinaire, *Collected Poems*.

Before you go

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

- *The cube is knee high. A box, closed, but the triangular lock is made of cardboard, and has, in any case, been left undone. The hinges at the back of the lid are clearly visible, the lid and the cube are themselves imperfect, they do not sit flush. The uneven edges create gaps through which we can glimpse the darkened space within. Every edge, every place where the cardboard has been sliced with the scalpel knife, cut with scissors, or torn, is obvious. These edges, rough and smooth, pinked, scalloped, ask us to touch them, to trace their contours, prise at them. In particular, the lid, its front lip jutting out a centimetre over the side, asks us to lift it, to open it, to look inside.*
- *Each of the squares making up the outside surface of the cube is papered with collections of ephemera, paper objects of myriad shape and size. There are photographs and drawings, doodles and post-it notes, shopping lists and postcards, journal entries, diagrams, mathematic equations, lists of names and family trees. Pictures and articles cut out of magazines and newspapers, book pages, the covers of books, scrawled quotes, and song titles, book titles, titles of the works of other artists, both major and minor, the stubs of tickets to films, plays and ballets. Envelopes, stamped and unstamped. Lists of names, ages, birthdays, anniversary dates, addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses, web addresses, plane, train and bus tickets. School reports, transcripts and resumes. Bank statements. Receipts. Doctor's certificates. Payslips. All captured, pinned down, trapped beneath thick layers of resin, forced, like the wings of prehistoric insects to contradict themselves by outliving their intended lifespan.*

- *Amongst the proliferation of paper objects a handful of artefacts stand alone, stand out against the seeming chaos, drawing the gaze, focussing the interrogating eye in its search for a pattern, patterns.*

It is a long drive north from Adelaide to Byron Bay. If you take the direct route and try not to make too many stops along the way, it will still take three days. If you go through Melbourne, spend a day or two visiting the galleries, if you take a break in Sydney to see a friend, if you make no effort to curb the desire to pull up on Main Street in the odd country town along the way, it will take you a great deal longer to get there. This is the way Lola and Charlotte will choose.

They will finish packing up Two Way Street, the larger works going into a smallish storage unit with the things they are unable to let go of when they vacate their respective flats. They will be surprised how easy it is to be ruthless with furniture and clothes. Lola's books, Charlotte's enormous DVD collection, it can be taken for granted that these things will be kept. The same goes for the two huge old suitcases they will fill with a random assortment of paints, brushes, palette boards, sketchbooks, visual diaries, pencils, pens, textas, chalk and pastels, rulers, scissors, craft knives, scalpels, stencils, paper stock, cardboard sheeting, adhesives, protractors, tools and mediums for the application, dilution, alteration and removal of paints and pigments of every kind. Once combined, the range of materials they have accumulated separately will take them aback. The areas in which their collections double up will cause them to smile, gaps and absences they hadn't known were there will make themselves apparent as they are filled, each bringing small moments of joy and surprise.

Once these things are packed away together and the hardshell thrift-store suitcases have been stowed in the boot of the aged sky blue station wagon, rusty but

roadworthy, their first joint purchase, they will mix and merge and become the kind of assemblage not easily replicated, the kind a person might work very hard to keep whole.

The morning the trip is to begin, the percolator will hiss and whistle on the stove. Lola will switch off the gas element, bending to blow out the last tiny flickers of blue flame that dance around its edge. Outside in the street, a car horn will sound twice. Someone being picked up? Someone leaving? *It's getting late*, she will think. *I should go and wake her up*. Sitting down on the edge of the inflatable mattress, she will carefully set a cup of coffee down on the carpet. As she reaches down to brush Charlotte's fringe back off her brow, Charlotte will smile and hum a tiny two-note greeting.

'Oy,' Lola will laugh. 'I thought you were still asleep.'

'I *am* still asleep,' Charlotte will answer, without opening her eyes. She will yawn and smile again and Lola will feel her own chest and cheeks stretch and fill with air. She will get lost for a moment in thoughts of reflections, mirrors, doubles. Her belly will thrill a little at these thoughts, her fingers tapping excitedly where her hand rests on the back of Charlotte's neck. *Later*, she will think, *write it down later, in the car. It's okay, the ideas aren't going to dissolve, you won't forget them*.

'What time is it?' Charlotte will ask, pulling the sheets further up around her neck and shoulders, closing her eyes, snuggling down for a longer sleep in.

'Late,' Lola will answer, 'it's after seven.' It will only be half past six but this is only a small lie, and Charlotte will not be offended.

'Okay,' she will say, lifting her head, and then letting it fall back down onto the pillow. 'I'll get up.' Lola will sit there next to her for a minute, watching her chest rise and fall, until the rhythm slows and deepens and she knows Charlotte is falling back to sleep. Gently, she will take hold of the edge of the sheet. As she walks to the door, Lola

will drag the sheet behind her, leaving Charlotte naked on the bed. From the hallway, heading for the loungeroom, empty apart from the telephone sitting on top of a white and yellow tower made up of four telephone books, this year's version on top of last year's, Lola will hear Charlotte's soft laughter. She will smile again, thinking about mirrors again.

There is always a slight delay between the moment you finish pressing the last digit of a telephone number and the end of the *tchktchktchktchktchkchk* which follows. You always notice it, and always, as soon as the person you are calling answers, you forget it again, until the next time you pick up the phone and dial. While you wait though, there is a little moment out of time, in which you exist in a peculiar bubble of awareness. At your end of the line, the earpiece rings to let you know your call is on its way to its destination. *Brrrr brrrr*. Pause. *Brrrr brrrrr*. In the pause, a quieter pair of notes echoes the first, and you imagine this is the sound of the actual telephone ringing in that other house, far away. *Brrrr brrrr, brrrr, brrrr*. You imagine the person you are calling registering the sound of the telephone, getting up from their chair, leaving what they are doing, walking towards the phone, about to pick it up, to say hello. You rehearse: Hello. *Hello*. Hi! You listen to the ringing. You breathe and listen.

Lola will listen and breathe, and notice, again, the difference in volume of the two different tones. She will stand and wait, sipping her coffee, not moving, not talking, not thinking too far ahead, just sipping her coffee and waiting, listening to the telephone handset.

So she will be in the perfect frame of mind to hear the other telephone ring. The third tone. *Brrrr brrrr*. *Somewhere in one of the upstairs flats, she will think*. But when she steps out onto the back patio, carrying her coffee in one hand, pushing the door with the other, the phone wedged between her ear and her shoulder she will change her mind.

Outside, she will think. She will blink against the glare, watch the point of light tunnel its way through the dark cloud of her vision, spreading, overcoming. Close her eyes, open them again. Try to concentrate on the light that comes after the dark.

The sun will shine down on the leaves on the shrubs and the black gravel around the garden bed in iridescent ways. Ordinary greens, yellows and orange shades turned suddenly alien. The small patch of grass in the centre of the courtyard, the brilliant green of a tree frog. *The light is different this early in the morning*, Lola will think, *I can't remember the last time I was up at this time*. Waiting for the blue of the sky to burn through the black sun-shadow, knowing how long it takes for her pupils to contract by now, but impatient to see, she will look up in the direction the third ring seems to be coming from.

Brrrr brrrr. A branch of the olive tree overhanging and shading the low, pastel flora that embraces the edges of the shared courtyard in a small semi-circle.

Brrrr brrrr. A tiny, tan, round-bodied bird, perched on the branch, half hidden by the clusters of rich green foliage. Hopping on the spot, twitching its tailfeathers to the left and then the right, pausing every now and then to tilt its small round head back, ruffle its short-feathered wings and lift its little fawn-coloured beak to the sky.

Brrrr brrrr.

Click. 'Hello?'

'Hi Dad, it's Lola.'

'Everything okay?'

'Everything's fine. We're leaving in about half an hour.'

'Call me tomorrow morning? Let me know how you're travelling.'

'Of course. I will.'

'Good-oh.'

‘Good-oh.’

‘See you soon, then.’

‘See you soon.’

Hanging up the phone she will hear the high-pitched whine of the ancient plumbing straining against a rush of water. She will wait for the little bird to finish singing and fly away before she heads inside to join Charlotte under the shower.

After you leave

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

- *On one side of the cube, a beautifully rendered pencil and ink drawing of an astrological chart, the hieroglyphic symbols of the twelve houses, of the planets and the signs, the lines connecting each demarcated position to the whole (the overall impression of which is of a sectioned-off diamond, a kite), are each an image perfect in and of itself, outside and perhaps despite its own meaning.*
- *The chart itself lies in the centre of this side. It acts as nucleus. It draws our attention to the way that each paper object on that surface has been placed carefully to a plan in order that it fall along one of twelve lines, each corresponding to one of the twelve houses, spreading out from the centre to the edges of the square. It draws our attention to the links and connections that bind each radiating image to every other. The repeating motif of line drawings of a small girl running, long black hair trailing behind her along with a red, blue, yellow and white kite, its tail a string of bow ties, for example.*
- *The right hand side panel is less colourful, less detailed and more immediately accessible. It is divided into smaller squares, measuring five centimetres by five centimetres. Within each of these is a picture of two people kissing. There are photographs and drawings, paintings and advertisements. Not the originals, they are faded copies. Women kissing men, men kissing women, women kissing women, men kissing men, although the effect of the repetition is that these distinctions are not immediately recognisable. Because the faces are in profile, most of the features are obscured. Hairlines, jawlines, the thickness of one neck in comparison with another, the size and shape of a nose or ear become markers in the search for gender.*

- *The pictures are so arranged as to make up a tessellation, although each features a different couple, they are posed similarly and in the process of printing their colour has been manipulated so as to present an image of prism-like reflection not unlike that seen through the stopped lens of a triple mirrored kaleidoscope.*
- *One of the kissing partners is the same person in every picture. SA fine boned girl with pale skin and dark lashes appears again and again. It cannot be the same girl, it is obvious that the pictures span centuries, the globe and a range of media, and there are subtle but significant points of difference. And yet somehow it is the same girl in every square, one hundred permutations of her.*

If you walk out the front door of the National Gallery of Victoria and cross the wide, busy street, and the bridge, and the road that curves around the parklands, you can step off the footpath onto the grass and find a tree to eat some lunch beneath before you get back into the car. There is still a long way to go, but you are on your way now, and a day or two break in the city is enough. Almost time to get back on the road.

Having eaten, if you choose to lay back and have a little rest before packing up and heading for the car, far above you, you will see the gnarled and spreading branches of the tree, of many trees. All will resemble Lola's tree, Tom's tree, all looking like big upturned hands, fingers outstretched, cupped hands, hiding the surface of their palms. Lola will see them. She will point. She will pull Charlotte down beside her. They will lay on their backs and look up at the sky through the branches.

'Look at this,' Charlotte will say, sitting up suddenly, pulling her laptop out of her bag and flicking it open. Lola will roll over onto her side, pull herself up onto one elbow and crane her neck around to see what Charlotte is bringing up on the screen. Charlotte will have two windows open, one containing a photograph of a dark obelisk, a

memorial stone. A dark obelisk. Engraved on the time-worn stone are the words 'In Memory of Lost Children'.

'What's that?' Lola will ask.

'Terry emailed me,' she said, 'He wants to know if we're interested in doing this collaborative thing. For the end of the year. Daylesford. I was looking up places to stay.'

'I can't ... In Memory of Lost Children. What else does it say? I can't see it properly.'

'They just wandered off,' she will tell Lola. ' "These three little children wandered off, from their homes," it says. "After an ineffectual search," it says, "their remains were found by accident in a hollow tree." '

Lola will close her eyes. 'There's a picture,' Charlotte will go on, 'a painting. Look.'

As Lola opens her eyes again Charlotte will tap lightly on the mousepad, switching to a second window, framing a second image. The blurb at the top of the page will tell her that she is looking at a print of a wood engraving. Two versions already, and now another. One tall tree in the foreground, in the centre of the image. There are many, many trees in the background but this one is closest to the viewer, this one has the thickest trunk, the widest base. A tall triangular hollow at the foot of the tree. Three small, pale shapes in its dark shadow.

'Imagine those poor parents.' Lola will turn away. 'Do you want to go?' Charlotte will ask. 'To Daylesford. In December?'

'No.' Lola will say. 'No more trees,' she will say. She will not need to say: I want to be able to look at a tree and see bark and leaves and roots and that's all. No-one

hiding in the branches. No-one hidden in the trunk. I want to look at different things. Out. I want to look ... out.

In the silence that follows, a tram will rattle past. Somewhere close by a man will let out a deep happy growl, and a child will squeal and laugh. Lola and Charlotte will look into each other's eyes for one long moment before helping each other to get up. They will run across the grass to where their car is parked, laughing and trying to shelter their hair from a sudden autumn downpour.

Writing, while travelling in an old car, at freeway speed, is difficult. It helps if you are not concerned about pretty handwriting, tidy lines, if you are writing something away, getting it down to empty yourself of it, rather than to hold onto it, to take it in, make it real. It helps if you are not intending for anyone else to read your words. Once you have made the decision that you will never send the letter you are writing, that it does not need to be legible, or polite, or mean anything to anyone but yourself, you are free to say what it is that you need to say. Awkward to begin with, Lola will get there in the end.

Merena, she will begin, and then *Dear Merena*, and then ... *Mum*.

Dear Mum, she will begin, and she will already have come far enough that it will no longer be a strange word to write.

I'm very sorry you weren't able to come down for the exhibition, she will continue cautiously. It was an interesting night. Everything went pretty smoothly, a lot of people turned up and lots of people had a lot of nice things to say. I'm sure Grey has told you all about Terry and Charlotte, the other artists in the show. Terry sold all eleven of his photographs and has been taken on by a major Sydney gallery. They've

flown him up there already to talk about giving him a solo show. He was also approached by someone who is putting together a book about outsider art and wants him to take the photographs. Big success, he's very happy.

Charlotte is waiting to hear about a grant she applied for to make a film. It's to do with these deep divers, not the kind with air tanks and all that other equipment, another kind. The only gear you have to help you is a pair of flippers. You take a breath, and plunge into the water and you go down as far and deep as you can make it. Someone is going to attempt to break the world record, off Main Beach at the end of the month. When I say Charlotte is waiting for the grant I don't really mean waiting, we've packed up the car and we're already on our way up to Byron. Charlotte is a bit like those divers really, just plunge in and see how far you can get. If the grant comes it'll be like a bonus.

It's a long drive, three days even if you do it all in one hit. We think we'll stop off and see a few places on the way. Neither of us is in too much of a hurry.

Writing a letter like this is as tiring as it is freeing. Every now and then, the words will run dry. Lola will stop, and look out the window at the dry yellow paddocks and the blurring brown telephone poles and fenceposts for hours at a time. Sometimes, returning her pen to the page, she will discover that she cannot begin where she left off.

Dear Mum, she will begin again. I am so sorry it has been such a long a long time since we have spoken. I have forgotten how to talk to you. I am frightened that you will not talk to me, when I am home.

I am sorry that you didn't feel you could come to the exhibition.

I don't know what Grey told you. It was a muggy night. We had many more people show up than we had expected. The space we were using was the top floor of an old terrace building and it was packed, there was barely room to move. People fanning themselves with the catalogues. The food ran out but there was plenty to drink and nobody seemed to care. The academics in the room tended to group together around Terry's photographs of street stencils, and tags, and chalk portraits. There was a lot of solemn nodding from people wearing black clothing and steel-rimmed spectacles. I'm sure you can imagine.

Charlotte's work used these projected videos and this kind of dislocated soundscape, and it was strange, walking around in the crowd, watching people talking, trying to discern the moments when their attention was truly on the person they were having a conversation with and where it had been dragged away by something they had heard in the background. You could see people's eyes stray towards the projections on the wall and it was different somehow from when someone stopped in front of a picture. Charlotte's pieces escaped their boundaries somehow, they followed people, intruded, participated.

Things got pretty messy. Catalogues everywhere, loud, intense conversations threatening to turn nasty, wine glasses everywhere. The catering staff gave up and found their way into the drinking crowd.

I hadn't seen a lot of Grey over the evening, I'd been a bit preoccupied. I finally found him in this funny little installation the three of us had put together. We had reworked these school reading primers, writing in pencil in the margins and in the space between the short sentences, the plain, neat typeface on that thick creamy textured paper, and scattered them on the side tables and armrests of these old tapestry-covered club chairs in the twin rooms off either side of the corridor. Kind of light relief

from the main room I suppose. I walked down the hall looking forward to having a laugh with him.

On each page of the little books was a short passage written by one of us about another, describing our note-taking methods. I wrote Charlotte's, in greylead pencil. At the beginning of the paragraph the letters are thin and dark, spiky, with sharp elbows and neat, straight crossbars. By the end, the pencil has begun to wear down, just a little, the hand grows softer, the letters rounder, some definition is lost, but the effect is prettier. The first sentence reads:

Charlotte uses mechanical pencils, thin, precise, and always sharp.

Charlotte wrote one for Terry. She used her mechanical pencil, and the letters are so beautiful, so exact and perfect, they might have been made by a machine. She wrote:

Terry writes in ink. He makes permanent marks. He is unafraid of making mistakes. He does not accept the possibility of their existence.

Terry, wrote mine. In ink of course. He has a decorative, old-fashioned hand:

In the effort to make as fine a point as possible, Lola often sharpens her pencil until it breaks. This leads to smudges. She is constantly trying to erase these accidental marks.

Dear Mum, Lola will begin again, I am so afraid.

Dear Mum, she will try, I am so sorry.

Oh, she will write, this, this is the truth. This fear. This pain. This journey home. I do not know my own mother. She does not know me. This is the truth.

Biting her pen, Lola will *not* write: Dear Mum, when I walked into the room, Grey wasn't looking at the books. He was standing in the centre of the room. There were

tears streaming down his face. In my whole life, I had never seen him cry. When I asked him what was wrong, he just grabbed me, and held me to him, sobbing into my shoulder. He cried so hard that I began to cry too, and finally, when I thought he would never stop, when I couldn't stand the weight of guilt anymore I said sorry. 'Sorry,' I said, 'I'm so, so sorry.' The words forced their way out of my mouth. They started the conversation I have been avoiding so long.

Grey stopped crying then. He straightened up and looked me in the eye, confusion on his face. 'Sorry? What are you sorry for lovely Lou Lou?'

'For doing this,' I sobbed, gesturing around me, towards the main room. 'For making you look at all of this. For the tree. For using his drawing. For not wanting Merena here. For never calling her. Never calling you. For never writing. For pushing you away. For lying. For failing school. For being this crazy person. A bad daughter. I'm a terrible daughter and I'm sorry.'

While I was talking he put his hand on the top of my head the way he used to when I was a little girl. When he ran out of words, he took my face between his hands and said 'Stop, Lolo. You must stop now. Come on, it's alright. It's alright.'

'No,' I yelled, shaking free of his hands, 'it's not alright. Tom is dead and it's all my fault.' He looked at me like I had lost my mind. 'What?' he said, '*Your* fault?'

'My fault. My fault Tom's gone. My fault Merena is ... is like she is. All of it, my fault.'

'Lola, what are you talking about?' I could hardly breathe by this stage, but the tone in his voice, almost gruff, brought me around somehow, gave me the strength to speak. I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'I saw him, that night, when Merena sent me out the back to find him, and I came back in crying and you both were so lovely to me, and I just cried and cried.'

‘You’re talking about ... when you were just ...’ he put his hand out in front of him at the height my head would have come to when I flung myself at his chest that night. That night when I was seven. I nodded, ‘I saw him, I saw him in your shed, and I didn’t tell you. I saw him packing his bag. If I’d told you he might not have ... he might still be ...’

‘Lola,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘LoLo. My baby. What have I done?’

I must have looked confused. I was confused. He took both of my hands in his. He said, ‘I want you to listen to me very carefully. That night, if you had told me you had seen him it wouldn’t have made any difference. It was me that told him to go Lola. It was me.’

‘You? You told him to go?’

‘I did. He and your mother had had a terrible fight. He ... hit her.’ He waited for this information to sink in. He hurt her. ‘I told him to go Lola. We thought he would come back. We never thought ... We had to do something. We thought we were doing the right thing.’

Dear Mum, Lola will write. I’m bringing photographs of my work up to show you. Dad said you wouldn’t be upset. It wasn’t the work that upset him, he said, it was realising what I remembered and what I had never known in the first place, he said. He said the work was beautiful. Even the tree. Especially the tree. He said you would understand too.

I hope he is right. I hope it will be okay. I hope to see you soon.

Every now and then, Lola will put down her pen and Charlotte will turn down the stereo and they will talk. They will talk about what they will do when they get to Byron. About the work they each want to do. Whether it will be warm enough to swim. When it might be possible for Merena to come home. Whether Lola will be brave

enough to go and visit her in the meantime. About what Charlotte can expect, what Lola remembers.

I only own one photograph of Tom, Mum. Just one. I have always been too afraid to ask you for more. I am trying not to be afraid now. It is the photograph you took of Tom and me on holidays in The Channon. Remember, I was on his shoulders, and he kept ducking behind the banana trees, hiding. It's yellow, yellowing, with time and the gradual soft degradations of exposure. The picture itself disappearing millimetre by millimetre, as whiteness fades in from each rounded corner. This peeling of the thick grainy paper acts like a frame for the shrinking circle of monochrome tones: Tom and I golden brown amongst the bananas. The photograph itself is a small square, small enough to fit into your palm, I should put it back under glass, since it's all that I have of him, but then how would I carry it around? I'm still carrying it around.

A golden shaft of sunlight falling across our faces. Smiling. Squinting. Our skin looks like butter. The heat of the sun. That's all I really remember, hot sun and miles of trees blanketed in bananas. Banana trees with their big greedy green hands clustered clutching all around us. That, and the noise of the chain bridge rattling beneath the car wheels as we crossed it. And Grey saying, 'Cheese,' and pressing the button on the camera. Although I might have imagined that too, because it is a photograph. Because we are both grinning.

I thought I remembered so much. That my mind was filled with memories of him, but it's not true. There's so few really. Hiding with him behind the banana trees, hiding from him in the fig tree, standing in the dark watching him through the shed window. My Tom, the one I always thought of as a memory, is just a figment. He's make-believe. He's not a real person to me anymore, and I am less and less sure he ever was. I know

that it's different for you. For Grey. I imagine it to be different. I try to imagine what your memories of him are, how real they must be. I can't imagine, but I am trying, after all this time, I am trying to imagine how you must have felt, how you might feel now.

It's because of you that I was able to make 'Wunderkammer', because of you that I had everything I drew when I was a child. Diaries with tiny locks and keys. Notes passed in classrooms. Paper games. School reports. Everything. Even after I went through it all, taking what I needed for the collage, what is left still fills a packing carton. When Charlotte and I went through everything before we left, I tried not to open it again, not to look at the images I made of him, drawing him so obsessively for so long.

It is too hard to put them away again, too easy to let myself sink in to that world, into his face, my face. They are terrible drawings, their naivety makes them fragile and looking through them is like peeping through a keyhole, through a hole drilled in a bathroom wall. Even as you put your eye up to the plaster you're not sure you want to see what you can't stop yourself looking at. Their residue is shame and pity, and while I am never sure who I feel these things for, I am always afraid it is not myself.

The banana trees are always too perfect, in the drawings, the bananas themselves too yellow for plantation fruit, everything in the picture is too perfect. This is my brother, these pictures say, this is my brother and I am his sister and this is our place this place is golden and these are our trees and our bananas and my daddy is taking this photo of us and he is our daddy and this is the way it is this is a day and every day is like this and will always be like this.

I am seeing things differently Mum, I am remembering. Not Tom. You. It is you I am remembering.

Spelling lists. Walking down Bangalow Road to the beach. Writing in the sand. Dinner party stories. You and Grey laughing, hugging, kissing. You and your friends laughing. You and your friends sitting around the table talking about astrology and crystals and runes as though they were as real as the rest of the world, calling out the meanings of tarot cards as though those chunky little guidebooks were as trustworthy as dictionaries.

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

- *Behind the oversized, ineffectual lock, a single image. Two heads suspended in space. A young girl, a child (the long dark hair insinuates itself again), her chin rests on the top of a mop of sandy blonde curls it is the head of a youth. No bodies, no limbs, no physical context. Surrounded by the leaves and fruit of a banana tree. The positioning of their heads tells us that the girl rides on the boy's back. The unsettling composition and the use of golden browns and yellows lend the picture an air of melancholy.*
- *The side that is covered entirely in lists of names and addresses is also more organised than it first appears. Each list of names is contained within a cut-out shape, designated according to the number of names on the list. For example, if the names Merena, Grey and Lola appear, the shape is a triangle. If Tom is added to list, it becomes a square. If there are two names, they sit alongside each other across a single line.*
- *Each of these shapes are connected to each other and in particular to the central name LOLA (creating its own square on two lines in a glyph reminiscent of the LOVE symbol popular in the late sixties/early seventies era), by an intricate network of perfectly ruled and measured pencil lines and brackets. The chart includes the names of several well-known artists and writers, living and dead. An impossible family tree.*

Words, Lola will remember words, phrases.

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

- *The theme of the child/adult schism is in clearest focus on the top of the cube. This is where the paper identity of the adult comes into focus. Bills, resumes, and other mundane documentation of day-to-day existence. Here we have squares again, the papers have been cut up and formed into four ten centimetre by ten centimetre squares, stained yellow, blue, red and green and each attached by one of its sides to the edge of the box's lid.*
- *A synapse is tickled by folding back the inner points of the small squares. Where have we seen this before? In the playground: as we glimpse the purple handprints hidden beneath the top two squares, red and blue, the symbolism swims into view – this is a play on a childhood paper game, the origami folded game (Chatterbox) made to fit over the thumbs and forefingers of both hands, the four points pulled into a pyramid and then manipulated back and forward, sideways and back to the centre again as many times as dictated by the number of letters present in the colour chosen by the player taking their turn.*
- *We are unable to manipulate the game in this way in its manifestation here. We can play a mental game, counting the letters, making our way around the panels clockwise or anti-clockwise, but we are aware that our efforts are handicapped not only by its sheer size but by the imperfections resulting from the constraints of its construction. We realise too, as we come to the last letter of our short journey around the square, that there is something missing, we should be seeing numbers too, that's the next step isn't it? And triangles, there ought to be triangles.*

- *The choices made by the work's creator now hinder us not only physically but visually. A feat of cerebral gymnastics is necessary to conjure up an image of the space we know could, would, should be occupied by those numbers, those shapes. We give up, we continue to lift the panels. Two purple handprints, in thick acrylic paint, only the deepest lines of the palm are visible, rendered so, along with the lines at each metacarpal joint, by their absence. The colour beneath, red, or blue, seeps through these cracks. Only the deepest lines, any others are obscured by the thickness of the paint. We wonder, why not use something thinner, ink perhaps, something that would reveal everything?*

- *Ink has been used for the prints beneath the other two squares, the green and the yellow. First the green, a fingerprint. Instantly recognisable as such even though it has been enlarged to the size of an adult hand, its intricate whorls and patterns drawn in with a fine pen. The ink is indigo, the colour of fingerprints, but also of school stamps, the empty outlines of maps, of states, countries, the world, printed on a blue lined page, to be filled in with coloured pencils. A betrayal of a kind, this fingerprint, the representation of its own magnification making its truth into a lie.*

- *In the fourth and final panel, another indigo print, not immediately recognisable. It is spoonshaped, paddleshaped, half a solid oval. It could be anything. Only when we stand back do we recognise it as a tongue. The fissures give it away. The cracks. The almost imperceptible way the colour is darker around the edge, making it almost a cup. We've seen this before, a tongue, sticking out at us. It is not polite. For the tongue to protrude, the mouth must open. Once that happens, we are close to speech. Anything might be said now.*

Always words Mum. Strange, disembodied words floating around above my head. 'False impression, Fifteen letters. Misapprehension?' You were always saying things like that. Doing crosswords at the kitchen table. The way you used to scratch the letters so hard into the rough, fawn-coloured paper. The special pen, the one you only used for

your crosswords, had dark, smooth-running ink, there was no need to press the nib so harshly to the paper in order to write clearly. I knew you didn't need to press so hard.

Did you know I used to use that pen? Only when I knew you couldn't catch me. The afternoons when you would go out walking, looking for Tom. I used to take the books from the shelves that I had only been brave enough to read the titles on the spines of at other times. Drag a kitchen chair over to the pantry and search the highest shelves for chocolates, or lollies. I used to take the special pen from inside the crossword book, where it marked your page, and, taking careful note of the book's position before I picked it up so that I could replace it just so, I would uncap the pen and carefully, carefully, quietly, softly, write my name on the thick, fibrous cardboard of the inside back cover of my school exercise books.

I would only allow myself to write the letters once per walk. LOLA. The beautiful way the ink flowed out of the nib. The ease of forming the lines and curves into the shapes demanded by letters, into that word. Lola. I practiced an economy of movement, tried each time to write those four letters with the fewest possible arm movements. One day, I felt sure, I would arrive at some as-yet unimaginable future moment when the ability to write one's name without anyone around you knowing that is what you were doing, would be a vital skill.

I would try to gauge the amount of ink that might be left in the pen while I was writing. I would imagine the ink running out mid-word, could imagine the lump that would form in my throat if that was to happen. I convinced myself that the fewer movements I made to write my name, the less ink I was using. I wrote my name everywhere when I was a child, and Tom's and Grey's and yours. Endless lists of names in exercise books, on scrap paper, and once on the underneath of the hutch of your

dressing table. That had been a special thrill, one that I lived in terror of you ever discovering. Did you ever find it? I keep needing to rethink these memories. If you knew I had seen Tom outside that night, what else might you have known and kept to yourself?

My pens were ordinary ballpoints, school issue, and no matter how hard I tried the ink would never run smooth. Blue clots would appear on the nib, smearing across the words when I wrote, when my arm brushed across the page. Or, just as bad, the ink would begin to run thinner, paler, and as I took the nib around the circle of the second letter, gaps would begin to be left. I could never quite join them together smoothly; the O and the A would end up lumpy and uneven, much darker than the two Ls. My name would appear deformed in the middle, fading away at the edges.

There was no need for you to press as hard as you did. But it was your pen, and you always wrote that way, carving the words into the page, unheedful of shape, concerned only with depth. I think you knew I used that pen.

I remember you coming home one day. Not from a walk, I don't know where you had been but I remember you were smiling when you walked in the door, so I knew you couldn't have been looking for Tom. You didn't usually come home smiling. Usually you walked straight in through the door, down the hall into your bedroom and curled up on the bed. This day was different. You came in quietly, surprising me. I barely had time to put the pen down, I didn't have time to put it away properly, on the right angle across the folded newspaper. It was the newspaper quiz you were doing that day, I remember. You sat down at the table, and picked up the pen. I pretended to be busy with homework I didn't have.

After a moment or two you laughed, holding out the paper.

You said, 'It says here, your tongueprint is unique.' I looked up, still too nervous to say anything. Still too wary of this smiling woman who had somehow replaced my sad, angry mother. 'You know Lo,' you said. 'Like fingerprints. You know about fingerprints don't you?' I knew about fingerprints, of course, the local policeman visited our school every year; we all got to line up and have a go with the purple stamp pad.

You laughed, I remember that, I remember the sound of it, the way it made me think everything was going to be okay again. That you would never cry again. You stuck out your tongue at me, and I stuck mine out at you and we laughed together across the table.

Unique. That was what people were always saying about my name, my nickname that had become my name. When I was a little girl there weren't many Lolas around. You definitely could not buy those name badges with the little flowers on, like the one Kirsty Simmons used to wear to school, or miniature numberplates like the one her brother Carl had glued to the top of his pencil case. Not with my name on them. I remember you asking me once if I felt left out about that, saying you would phone the manufacturers to ask if they would make up special orders. I was not upset that you forgot. Secretly, I was thrilled. I didn't feel left out, I was happy. I wanted my name to be my own. Just mine.

'Come here,' you said. 'Come here.' Remember? Remember taking that pen and colouring the whole pad of my thumb, and yours? You coloured in the tips of all twenty of our fingers and thumbs and we covered the newspaper in loops and whorls and swirls.

I'll see you soon, Mum,

I love you, Lola.

Now you are home

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

• *There is a reward – inside the box, there is, pass the parcel style, another. Although in truth it is more a lining than a box. A sturdy, perfect perspex lining with edges that not only meet flush but are sealed with polyfiller. A waterproof lining, necessary, because that is all that the box contains. Water. It is two thirds full of clear water. Clear enough to see through to the perspex, through which we read the words THIS WAY UP, printed on the corrugated cardboard beneath accompanied by an arrow. The words are upside down, the arrow points to the ground and what we see as the inside of the cube we know once was the outside of a packing carton. Everything has been turned upside down, and inside out. The cardboard box has no base. What was once its top has been removed and replaced with a mirror. Somebody has written a message across the mirror in a beautiful sloping hand. At some point, though, there has been a leak, and the words themselves have blurred, leaving a guessing game. Dots and crossbars, lines and curves, tails and tadpoles become islands we strike out for in desperation, branches we cling to. We long to make these shapes into the words they once represented, but it is impossible.*

The trees will be greener, the air abuzz with the sounds of insects you cannot easily identify. The light will appear cleaner, brighter, lending a sharper outline to things. Even before you turn off the freeway, before you reach the road that leads to the road that leads you into town, everything will have changed. No matter where you are coming from, the closer you get to the water, the nearer to home. Charlotte will feel it, despite never having been further north than Sydney before. Lola will feel it, and remember having felt the same way countless times before. When she looks up and sees

the inlet, sees the families paddling in the shallows, the dinghies, the fishing rods and the bridge, it will overwhelm her. Nearly home.

‘Stop,’ she will say, loudly, seemingly out of nowhere. ‘Stop here.’ Charlotte will pull off the main road onto the verge of the road just before the bridge and Lola will have the car door open, will be out in the fresh air, bent over, her hands on her knees, taking great, heaving, panicked breaths, before Charlotte can pull the parking brake on. She will sit down suddenly on the sandy ground and put her head between her knees. When Charlotte crouches down to see if she is alright, Lola will say, between ragged breaths, ‘Just a little dizzy. Like, vertigo, or something.’

‘Or something,’ Charlotte will say quietly, rubbing her back in slow, calming circles. Slowly, as the seabreeze whips her hair around her face and thrusts itself down into her heaving lungs, Lola will begin to come back to herself. She will hear the seagulls well before she feels capable of lifting her head up to see them. She will be able to see them already in her mind, strutting and fighting, whole flocks lifting up as one, hanging in the air on strong outstretched wings, red-rimmed eyes watching, waiting. They don’t come down together though, she will think, not if there’s food to be had, every gull for itself then. The smell of fish and chips and vinegar and the sea will fill her nostrils. She will lift her face to the sun and breathe deeply. Nearly home.

‘What a beautiful little place,’ Charlotte will say. ‘We can’t be far away now. Are we far away?’

‘No, not far.’ Lola will have to take another deep breath then, before she says, ‘only about twenty minutes.’

When her heart has slowed nearer to its regular pace, she will finally be able to say the words. ‘I thought it was her, you know? I thought it was her fault he left.’

Charlotte will know that she is talking about Merena. They will have been discussing Merena for days by now. 'So what do you think now?' she will ask, the circles she is making on Lola's back getting larger and slower, and more firm. Lola will not be thinking about Tom's leaving like that at all anymore, as though someone must be to blame.

'I'm not angry anymore,' she will answer. 'I don't know what it means that I'm not angry, but I'm not.'

'What are you then? What do you feel, I mean, if it's not anger?'

Looking up at Charlotte, Lola will admit that she does not know.

Back in the car, when they have crossed the bridge and the little world of the car has become quiet again, Lola will turn away from the passenger window to Charlotte and say, 'You should show that picture to Grey. The Daylesford one. He might want to make a tree.' A new kind of courage will be growing.

As you reach town, the land is as beautiful as you would expect. The lush tropical trees clump together on either side of the snaking road as you pass the caravan parks and the river. Easter holidaymakers stroll back and forth along the bike path.

Outside the police station a woman will wave for Lola and Charlotte to stop while she crosses the road holding her daughter's hand. They will each be wearing fluorescent sequinned fairy wings, and full body unitards. When they get to the other side Lola will have to remind Charlotte to take her foot off the brake.

Charlotte will say. 'You said it wasn't like this. Like people imagine.'

'No,' Lola will answer, 'I said it wasn't *all* like this.' And she will be reminded of the first time she met Sam, the way he talked about the Bay, the way he knew it as a different place to the one she had grown up in. *Different again*, she will realise, looking

around. Highrise apartments, high fashion boutiques, waterfront mansions. Lola has been a long time gone.

Lola mentioning Sam will allow Charlotte to mention Remy and mentioning Remy will still require something to be said that will keep things light, some meaningless anecdote to take the edge off things, and this time it will be the story about the time Lola let Remy read her Tarot.

‘You did not.’

‘I did.’

‘But you don’t ...’

‘I know. I don’t. I’ve told you what an idiot I was back then.’

‘So, what did she say? What was it like?’

‘Here,’ Lola will say, ‘turn here, at the roundabout, Johnson Street, turn right.’ And then: ‘Here,’ she will say, pulling an old journal from her bag. ‘I’ll read it to you.’

‘You took notes? And what, you have them here?’ Charlotte will laugh, turning the corner.

‘Yep,’ Lola will nod, ‘and I have it here because I have my journal from that year here. When we were packing everything up I found it with an old short story of my mother’s I want to give Dad. Anyway, here goes. Three card spread for Lola T. Hayward. September 1998 ... Oh.’

‘Ooh, what? What?’

‘Hey, stop. Stop here.’

‘Oh Lola really? I think you’re going to be just fine now you know ...’

‘No. Stop. I mean, we’re here. You just drove straight past my parents’ house.’

Charlotte will turn across the smooth wide road and double back. As she pulls into the driveway, Lola will say, ‘There’s nothing in these notes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, all it says is: Three card spread ... The Hierophant, The Two of Swords, The Lovers. I thought I wrote it all down.’ Taking the key from the ignition, Charlotte will lean across the gearstick to see the page Lola is looking at. ‘Huh,’ she will say. ‘What’s this big question mark?’

‘Oh, that’s right. I was supposed to think of a question while I was holding the deck of cards. Like, the question I wanted her to tell me all about.’

‘So you don’t remember anything about what she told you?’

‘Not a thing. I remember thinking she was attacking me. That she was taking advantage of another chance to hurt me, making me out to be ... I don’t know.’

‘Someone you weren’t?’

‘Yeah. Hey, come on. Let’s go in.’

Across the roof of the car, Charlotte will ask Lola what her question had been.

‘Guess.’

Charlotte will not take long to reply. ‘Who am I?’ she will say.

‘What else?’ Lola will shrug, with a wry grin. ‘The problem was, I didn’t know I was only supposed to think of a question that could be answered Yes or No.’

And then

When Charlotte gets home, I am curled up on Grey's musty old couch, papers sprawled across my chest. She tries to tiptoe past behind me on her way to the shower but I open my eyes and say, 'I'm not asleep.' She stops and leans over the back of the couch to kiss me on the forehead. 'How was the island?' I ask, yawning.

'Beautiful,' she replies, catching the yawn. 'You should come with me tomorrow. These people, the divers are amazing Lola. You would love it.'

'I will. I just wanted to get it finished.' I lift the little notebook Remy left behind at Two Way Street off my chest so that I can sit up, folding the three larger sheets of paper, Merena's story, and sliding them between its pages.

She comes quickly around to the front of the couch, kneeling and taking hold of my shoulders, her eyes wide with excitement. 'Are you finished? Is it done?'

'Done,' I say, waving my hand in the direction of the backyard shed Grey is letting me share with him for the month. In there is a new piece I have just finished and only Grey has seen.

'Where is Grey?'

'He's gone to pick Merena up from the hospital, he'll be a while.' I move to make space for Charlotte and she sits down next to me. She takes the notebook from my hand. It is open at the last page of Remy's notes. I stare at it, not so much reading it as remembering reading it the first time.

'I thought you sent that back.'

'I'm going to. Look, I've got the envelope right here. I was just doing it, but I had to, I wanted to, read it one more time.' I flop down again, shifting my head in her lap until I am perfectly comfortable. 'I'm sorry,' I say. She takes my hair out of its tie,

brushing her own out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ear. She cranes her neck down to kiss my earlobe, and stroke my hair.

‘So can I see it?’ she asks, ignoring the notebook.

‘In a minute,’ I grin, ‘that’s too nice, what you’re doing to my hair.’ She laughs and rolls her eyes, and puts her hands down by her sides, but only for a split second before she goes back to stroking. I am thinking about mirrors now constantly, and water again, tides. The latest work is a sort of fluid mosaic, fragments of mirror floating in a shallow pool of water.

‘Hey, did I ever tell you ...’

‘Don’t you mean to say, When I was *seven*?’ She laughs and I swat at her.

‘Maybe. I think I was actually, seven.’ She laughs again, flopping down on her back beside me. I roll over so that I am facing her. ‘We used to have this class, Bible-in-school, on a Friday morning.’

‘The one taught by the woman who spoke in tongues, I’ve heard this already I think.’

‘That’s the one. This story’s not about her though. One day they brought this young guy in, he was from overseas somewhere.’

‘A missionary!’

‘*Charlotte!*’ I laugh, sitting up again, ‘Byron Bay, remember, right here? Not exactly missionary territory. I think he was just a student. Anyway, he stood up the front of the class with this shoebox. A plain white shoebox. And he just shook it. For like three minutes. Just stood there in silence, shaking this box, staring around the room.’

‘Were there shoes in it?’

‘No. That’s the thing, finally he stops, and takes the lid off, and shows us what’s inside and it’s this calculator. He tells us it’s a calculator anyway. It’s unrecognisable, it’s been taken apart, smashed to pieces.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘That was his proof of the existence of God.’

‘What?’

‘Proof of the existence of God. Why the Big Bang theory couldn’t possibly be true. You can have all the components, all the potential, he was saying, but without a higher intelligence to put it together, what you can’t have is anything as complex as a calculator. Or a world.’

‘Good Lord.’

‘Nice one.’

‘I mean, what, so it couldn’t be possible that all the parts and their connections only seem like parts and connections because that’s what we’ve decided they are, because that’s what we’ve named them?’

‘Exactly. The idea had to come first. Not us. The idea of us.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yeah, imagine that going into a ten-year-old’s mind.’

‘I thought you said you were seven.’

‘I did. I don’t think I was. I think I was older. I was older. I must have been. It was ... after.’

After the kind of pause that always follows mention of Tom, Charlotte says: I wonder what he’s doing now, how he’s coping?’

‘Who?’

‘The guy from your school,’ she continues, her smile returning. ‘I wonder how he’s coping with the world. How old was he?’

‘Young,’ I answer. ‘He was really young.’

Charlotte closes her eyes. ‘Chaos theory,’ she says suddenly. ‘What about chaos theory? What would he say to that?’

‘Who made such a complex thing possible?’ That’s what he’d say. ‘Who gave it to us?’

Charlotte opens her eyes. She reaches up to pull my face down to hers, my lips to hers. A bare toe snakes across my thigh and she wedges one foot under both my legs, the other between them where my legs cross at the knee. ‘I can’t find any socks,’ she says.

‘No,’ I nod, my mind still buzzing, high from having finished the piece. My hands still tingling with the memory of how incredible it felt to realise that I had etched the final word on the final shard of glass. And then to pour the water into the little copper tray Grey made for me. To have it done in time for Merena’s homecoming. How strange it is to be here, in a way, before her. Charlotte takes the notebook from my hand. She slides it under the coffee table, on top of the big old dictionary. She pushes her feet further in under my legs.

‘Sometimes my toes get chilly,’ she sighs, ‘sometimes you’re not here.’

‘I’m here,’ I say, pulling her close. ‘I am here.’ I reach out one hand and pull Merena’s story out from the notebook. ‘Listen,’ I say, ‘Listen to this: *My name is Lola. This is how we all begin, isn’t it?*’

Notes, contd: Wunderkammer.

- *Our only solace is the last remaining offering, the inside panel of the lid. And there they are – the remembered and desired numbers, drawn in waxy crayon in the points of eight triangular sections. When children play this game the choice of number, just like that of colour, is dictated only by their own preference, as long as whoever is taking their turn is unaware of the message that lies beneath each flap. When children offer a turn at the game, they have written not only the numbers that appear on the tops of the triangles, but also the hidden messages. The spirit – cruel, benevolent, judgemental, demeaning, hopeful, fantastic and otherwise – of these directives, or pronouncements, is wholly dependent on their author.*
- *Beneath these particular triangular panels however, lies a different kind of message, a range of biographical descriptions. Some appear to have been excised from the pages of catalogues and newspaper articles. Others are handwritten and these are often unfinished, apparent attempted drafts and redrafts. Some though, are finished paragraphs, but filled with details so personal, or strange, or exaggerated, so obviously untrue that they call into question not only their own purpose and possibility, but that of the artist biography itself, that, perhaps, of the attempt to create anything which has any kind of coherence at all within the field of the self portrait.*

*Epilogue***M is for ...**

Lola T. Hayward

500mm x 500mm.

Glass. Water. Copper.

Text reproduced here from artist's notes.

Merena. Mother. Me. I. Am. Particle. And. Wave. I. Am. Past. And. Present. And.
Future. All. Of. The. Above. All. Or. Nothing. Stop. *And*. Go. Yes. *And*. No. Exhale.
Inhale. Move. Be. Still. In. Out. In. Out. Shrink. Grow. Eat. Shit. Swallow. Spit.
Conceive. Birth. Live. Die. I. I. I. I. Matter. Absorb. Precipitate. Wet. Dry. Water. Earth.
Crumble. Dust. I. Was. Once. I. Will. Be. All. At. Once. I. Am.

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Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary:

an exegesis accompanying the novel

‘After and Before Now’

‘Seriously,’ I’ll say. ‘An incredibly complicated dream. The exegesis would take a whole book.’

‘So,’ she’ll say. ‘Write it down quickly ... before it goes. I’ll interpret it for you.’

(Janette Turner Hospital, *Borderline* 13)

Lacunae Revisited: Introducing the Ekphrastic Imaginary

1

To begin, I offer a series of beginnings. I head out from them, and return to them, over and over again. Because I am desirous of multitudinous possibilities. Because my nature leans me in equal measure towards experiment and repetition. Because the nature of research exists in the present, looking to the future and to the past. To innovation and to tradition. Because the nature of my research leads me from vision, through revision, towards re-envisionings. I offer beginnings: embarkations, projections, imaginings, proposals, statements of interest and of intent. We head out from them, and return to them, again and again.

2

The novel ‘After and Before Now’ and its exegesis ‘Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary’, are twins of a kind. Mirror-twins – parallel, reflective, fraternal, uterine – an impossible pair. Two mappings of the same space, two paths across a particular terrain, but also two halves of the same hybrid whole. ‘Parallax’, this doubled text, begins from the idea that:

[i]f autobiography ... is an inventive process that seems to draw impetus from whatever it is that we call the “memory” of our lives, it is as if theoretical writing could be an analogous process impelled by the lives of my mind, or of my “intellectual” selves. (Pont)

Independently, the novel and the exegesis are each a rendering of artistic process and practice engaging with auto/biography in imaginative ways. Together they are a twofold tracing of transformative praxis. The separate documents pretend to a divisibility that the conjoined texts are themselves incapable of embodying. The self-reflexive nature of the exegetical project reveals these forms of knowledge, these writing processes – theory, autobiography, fiction – to be more than analogous, to be intertwined, interpenetrative, and indissoluble processes. For reasons that saturate the writing, ‘After and Before Now’ and ‘Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary’ are envisaged here as temporally and spatially co-existent – intersecting, over and under-laying – texts, neither one preceding nor following the other, instead corresponding, conversing, as they are written and as they are read, *here* and *now*.

‘Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary’ is an attempt to bring process and praxis to light in ways that are at once earnest and oblique – the terms process and praxis being here used to describe a creative research practice reliant on an understanding of the relationship between reading and writing as a symbiotic, ambi-directional one, a practice that encompasses and celebrates experimental, experiential and critical modes of research. The exegesis is an attempt to delineate and contextualise key ambitions, problems and desires inherent to the research project whilst resisting the urge to (re)construct a linear chronological, epistemological narrative of the research process, or to impose interpretative parameters on the novel (Kerr and Nettelbeck 6). An attempt also, to acknowledge and to represent the relationship of influence and counter-influence, balance and counterbalance, opposition and indivisibility – the interconnection, that is – of form and content.

4

The two texts are not equal in practical or material terms – in order to meet technical requirements the exegesis is one-fourth the length of the novel, and expresses the research concerns inherent to the project in a manner that foregrounds theory and influence through a privileging of specificity and substantiation where the novel favours the ambiguous, the veiled, the elliptical and often even the improbable. To these ends, the focus of the presented research must be narrowed, the perimeters drawn tighter. The research cannot be compressed, cannot be made to shrink or to bend in a way that will allow it to fit inside this second skin. The exegesis leaks into the novel, the novel spills its excess onto these pages. Whilst my notion of what such a narrowed focus at the point of presentation might resemble includes the possibility of an examination of the surface area of the body of research, a ‘reading’ of its ‘skin’ (Lee), as a legitimate option for the creative writer in the academy, what I offer here is a core sample.

5

The constraints necessitated by the pursuit of focus are experienced as acts of arbitrary (multiple/simultaneous) amputation. This is writing-research as self-surgery, exegesis as autopsy: the body of the research dissected, its organs removed for examination and comparison (with each other, with those found in others of the same species), limbs, veins and other tissue so vital within the period of process pronounced suddenly extraneous, excised, and disposed of. Accepting the inevitable and acting in resistance anyway, waving phantom limbs, living facing mortality, I make use of a hybrid, destabilising format and a voice that works at extending and sustaining the idiosyncratic accent of the project as a whole, with the aim of producing an exegesis that remains true to the aesthetic, conceptual and intellectual philosophy of the project, that nucleus of

desire referred to by Sandra Burr and James Friel respectively as the ‘personal ethos of creative practice’, and the ‘maverick voice’ of the creative artefact.

I write aspiring to the ideals of the fictocritical mode, to a position that is ‘self-consciously’ hybridised, inescapably intertextual (Kerr and Nettelbeck 6). I write imagining footnotes, endnotes, inserts and asides, addendum, appendices, afterwords, forewords, periphrases (Bennington and Derrida 1), praetextum, postscripts, and ‘preface[s]’ (Krauth). I write to ‘trace over’ surfaces (Kerr, ‘Trembling Hyphen’ 215), and to feel around beneath them. Where I write “write” I read also “read,” and vice versa (Cooper), extending this idea as invitation. I write imagining fiction and theory and I write imagining myself writer, reader, sender, receiver, critic, theorist, novelist, artist and academic all, at once, and always. I emphasise the word *imagine*. I write imagining myself making conceptual art. I emphasise the word *making*.

Often I have written against instinct, against desire, led away (and astray) by the idea that the overlapping of these processes, these (multiple/simultaneous) parallel paper selves, is something to be avoided, rejected, overcome. At these times, I have been writing towards an idea of perfect compartmentalisation, and, I realise now, against the novel, against its characters, against, I think, myself. I write now, ‘capitulating’ (Pont). I write ‘[f]alling into language’ (Wallace-Crabbe). I write ‘seeking myself in a sentence’ (Bennington and Derrida 13). I write in order to recognise, reveal, and create moments of intertextual resonance and resistance. I write to demonstrate and to illustrate the processes of thinking, reading and writing ‘After and Before Now’, within the novel itself and also here. I write allowing voices to converse, to alternate and overlap, to

interrupt, to argue and to concur. Anna Gibbs has described fictocritical writing as ‘traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord’. I write in the hope, above all else, that these voices might here fill each other’s silences, and ultimately create a choral (oral/aural) whole.

8

I write revelling in the contradictory nature of my most deeply held beliefs about writing, between my (multiple/simultaneous) oldest, best-beloved notions of art, and more recently-come-to concepts, with no desire to force a reconciliation, only to swim in the sea of them, to thrive in the bubbling heat created where they meet, mix and cause reactions.

Because art originates in the imagining of multitudinous possibilities:

every text is esoteric, not because it hides a secret but because it constitutes the secret, that which has yet to be revealed is never exhaustively revealable. The only response one can make to the question of the meaning of the text is: read, perceive, experience ... *Who are you?* is probably the most relevant question to ask of a text, as long as one isn’t requesting a kind of identity card or autobiographical anecdote. The answer would be: *how about you?* Can we find common ground? Talk? Love? Create something together? What is there around and between us that allows this? (Irigaray 178)

*Because art leans in equal measure towards experiment and repetition, looking inwards
and outwards:*

Writing: first I am touched, caressed, wounded; then I try to discover the secret of this touch to extend it, celebrate it, and transform it into another caress. (Cixous 45)

To the future and to the past:

A novelist talking about the art of the novel is not a professor giving a discourse from his podium. Imagine him rather as a painter welcoming you into his studio, where you are surrounded by his canvases staring out at you from where they lean against the walls. He will talk about himself, but even more about other people, about novels of theirs that he loves and that have a secret presence in his own work. According to his criteria of values, he will again trace out for you some of his own poetics of the novel, one that belongs to him alone and that is therefore, quite naturally, different from that of other writers. So you will feel you are moving in amazement down into History's hold where the novel's *future* is being decided, is coming into being, taking shape, amid quarrels and conflicts and confrontations. (Kundera 78)

Existing in the present:

The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us ... Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing more than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject' not a 'person,' and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together,' suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it ... The author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The author is thought to nourish the book ... In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a sense of being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*. (Barthes 145)

Floating in the ether, hovering above the inherently unstable ground:

Commotion of writing, give in only to it, do not make oneself interesting by promised avowal or refused secret, so no literature if literature, the institution of 'saying everything' breathes to the hope of seeing the other confess and thereby you, yourself, confess *yourself*, admit *yourself*, you may fall, in an effusion of recognition. (Derrida 210)

10

Compromise then, but in greedy ways: be a magpie raiding bowerbirds' nests (Brady). Call it multi-disciplinarity. Compromise in this way: narrow the focus, choose if you must a single organ to examine. Make it though, the heart. And slice through its centre, reveal a cross-section. And cut it free, but leave telltale aortas dangling untrimmed. And offer this.

Part I: Creation

The Art(ist) Object(ive)

Step 1: *Imagine, for yourself, a protagonist. Ideally, one who will embody the research in clear, plausible, interesting ways, one who will express the research in defensible ways. The artist presents herself as a most practical option. Make her attempt self-portraiture – create a logic (outside the aut(h)o/biographical) for the preoccupation with notions of selfhood, memory, representation and interpretation, perception, truth and time. Make her attempt to cram all of her own ideas about herself into a single self-portrait. Show her grasping for ways to express multiplicity, simultaneity, at-once-ness.*

She will fail of course.

You need her to fail.

The imagined art objects around which the novel is structured, ‘Optogram’, ‘Gift’, ‘Wunderkammer’ and ‘M is for ...’, share a single point of notional, pre-textual origin – the idea of a young female artist on the brink of adulthood, approaching the tipping point between an art education and an art career, attempting to step across the line into a committed relationship, desperately attempting and failing to complete a single self-portrait, before choosing instead to produce a series of fragmented works.

Roberta White identifies a set of ‘remarkable continuities’ across the field she refers to as the ‘female *künstlerroman*’ (15, 27), ‘patterns of recurring imagery in the depiction of women artists and their work’ in ekphrastic fiction written by women (19). Such works, she argues, explore ‘variations on a theme’, representing, and linking, the experience of the female visual artist and the female writer through pictorial and ekphrastic tropes of ‘liminality’, ‘suspension’, ‘unfinished-ness’, ‘seriality’ and

‘fragmentation’ (19, 24). Reading ‘After and Before Now’ in light of White’s work in this field, and on these patterns of imagery, is an uncanny process of simultaneous remembering and re-envisioning. These imagined artworks, all already holding (for me, at least) traces of their multiple source images, and haunted by the ghosts of process (those *imaginary* objects that did not survive the drafting process) are revealed as being intertextually haunted in this additional way, able to be read as verbal objects inhabited by the ghost of the same ‘consistent set of aesthetic choices and interests’ as White identifies within the work of Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, AS Byatt and Carol Shields (four authors whose work has been central to this project’s working bibliography) amongst many (as yet unread) others (24).

Liminality, suspension, unfinished-ness, seriality and fragmentation, the ideas signified by these words inhere in the visual objects Lola makes, the concepts they describe being both fundamental and elemental in the process of the objects’ verbal construction. They describe the thematic focus of the objects – the difficulty of expressing the multifaceted nature of selfhood – and embody the personal political position behind their use – the strategy of aesthetic ‘truth-telling’ of the experience of selfhood (White 18), female, creative, queer selfhood, after Virginia Woolf’s stated desire to create fiction that was truthful about her own experience ‘as a body’ (‘Professions’). I will return to White’s thesis in later sections discussing structural approaches to the representation of time, the object and selfhood. At this point I offer her argument and its checklist of themes as much to contextualise, and hopefully illuminate, certain stylistic decisions, as to situate the novel within an identifiable literary tradition.

Sue Woolfe has described the predicament of attempting to dissect one’s own tropes: ‘I am used to analysing the metaphors of other writers with reasonable

competence. My own metaphors, particularly ones that enhance or exaggerate ordinary reality, are inaccessible to my analysis' (11). White's list is, for me, a way of attempting to combat this problem, a dilemma I see as at least partially connected to a passionate aversion to straightforward explication of formal intent. I include it here as a way to 'come at [my work] sideways, through the work of writers I admire, through broader ideas about poetry and fiction and their place in the world' (Winterson, *Art Objects* 165). These thematic categories resonate, they call out from the page as a description, a clearly articulated *existent* definition of what has been an intensely felt instinct of the imagination, the orientation point for the novel, not only in terms of the themes of its ekphrastic objects but also in relation to narrative structure, perspective, tense usage, in real terms, the organising properties of the novel as a whole.

The conceptual point of origin for the four art objects central to the novel (the biographical positioning of narrator Lola) is encircled and overlain by many others. Each object is also the product of a process of allowing multiple images to intermingle and to fuse. Existent, notional, remembered and projected images. Images that influenced process and images that were the result of praxis. As Byatt reminds us: 'Nothing has only one original in a fiction' (5).

Step 2: Give her a name, establish her age, genealogy, nationality, her biography.

Is it the same as yours? No, not at all and yes of course.

There seemed to be an inherent logic to the progression in an early draft from the impossible single portrait to the triptych, a time-honoured means of representing different aspects of personality, able to be linked to linear notions of a human lifetime

(past, present, future) and of narrative (beginning, middle, end), both areas I was interested in exploring and unsettling.

The scene detailing Lola's decision to split her portrait in three never found a home within the draft however. Instead, the form and structure of the narrative, the depiction of the novel's ekphrastic objects, the voice and style of their narration, indeed of the narrative as a whole (and as a result the novel's approach to the inter-related categories of character and narrator) all spring from and refer back to this idea. The story begins after the fact of Lola's decision; the narrative is always occurring within the bounds of its imaginary, always both manifestation and ramification.

A discussion of the idea of the triptych, and of the sub-textual history of the artworks must make reference to the imagery of the Rider-Waite Tarot – to the layout of the reading that is called the Three Card Spread, a reading in which three cards are chosen to represent the past, present and future of the querant. The use of the tarot spread was imagined at an early stage as both a possible structural strategy, and most significantly as a means of representing one of the ways in which a person might use visual imagery to engage in, and externalise, a dialogue with the self about the self. The cards themselves were chosen for the history of their meanings, each acting as a representative image of a facet of Lola's experience of selfhood.

'The Hierophant' (or Pope) card, when ill-dignified – inverted – is interpreted as representing an upturning of or rebellion against orthodoxy, and much about this image appealed at a basic level, including but not confined to the links that could be made with the tradition of mosaic portraits of Popes and the possibility of Lola depicting herself, her past self, *as* Pope, as a girl-child in charge of her own orthodoxy, writing her 'own version' of the Bible (Winterson 'Interview'). The 'Two of Swords' is described as representing a dilemma, or difficult choice to be made and I connected this to the

possibility of placing Lola at the centre of a series of impossible choices in terms of relationships. The final card-image drawn upon in the early drafts is ‘The Lovers’, a card which has been interpreted as depicting a choice between two possible partners or life paths, but more commonly the making of a choice leading to fulfilment within a relationship (Pollack 154).

NOTE:

These images are included on page 13 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Pamela Colman Smith. From left to right: ‘The Heirophant’, ‘The Two of Swords’,
‘The Lovers’.

Whilst any *literal* reference to these cards in the verbal objects as they exist today in the novel is minimal, from a thematic point of view they are deeply embedded in all four of Lola’s art objects. From an exegetical perspective they can be seen to operate as yet another notional starting point for the imagery of both narrative and ekphrasis – a starting point at which I imagined these two modes to be not only distinctly separate but perhaps even entirely incompatible. A point at which, in fact, I was yet to discover ekphrastic theory, focussed as I was on ideas of selfhood and

representations of sexuality and desire. I was experimenting with voice and style, I was writing multiple *stories of Lola*, ordering and re-ordering scenes and timelines, playing with tense, character and point-of-view, and only just beginning to refer (in guarded, evasive notes and conversations) to the *future possibility* of writing what I referred to as *the descriptive sections*.

Step 3(a): *Write in the direction of the amorphous. Write towards Lola's past. Create the consciousness and it follows that the objects will make themselves obvious, unavoidably present. Create the narrative of her life and the logical objects of representation will present themselves for description in the form of embedded themes and imagery. Singer, then song. Life, then art (Egg/Chicken? Cart/Horse?).*

From a post-process perspective, the pre-emptive protective function of this evasiveness seems obvious. In this way, I was able to acknowledge the inevitable necessity of attempting the representation of visual art within fiction whilst allowing for, and safeguarding, an important period of primary process. This is the stage Woolfe draws attention to in her own exegetical writing, that which neurological science refers to as 'loose construing', a phase during which multiple originary images are collected, and most importantly, allowed to mix, merge and come into conflict with one another on a pre-analysis, pre-articulation, pre-conscious level (91).

Step 3(b): *Make a nest for your lover-Lola. Steal the hair from her brush, the clothes from her wardrobe, the notes she hides at the bottom of her underwear drawer. Gather up the crumbs she drops, chew them into a paste, fix it all together. Build a home for your baby-Lola, fill it with mirrors and other bright things, other toys that look like her.*

Construct a barrier to keep adversaries out, those enemies of your mother-Lola, fashion it from sharp objects. Plaster the outside of the wall with images of her, your sister-Lola – wanted posters, photographs of missing persons.

The ekphrastic objects as they stand today arose out of this process of loose construing, out of the coming together of manifold images (both visual and verbal) identified and collected because they spoke directly to the thematic concerns of the project, because they resonated with each other, or contrasted, and in some cases because the intensity of the experience of *punctum* was simply too great to ignore (Barthes). When I am the novel's reader, when I imagine these objects, what I see is always still amorphous, these multiple originary images are still attached to 'Optogram', 'Gift', 'Wunderkammer' and 'M is for ...'. In the fiction, for the reader, the objects are made present through Lola's feelings about their exhibition, through descriptions of their becoming, through being given access to the events that inspired them, through Remy's descriptive, responsive notes. Here, for me, the only authentic representation is one that begins by naming the ghosts that haunt them, detailing the process of transmutation that occurs and recurs whenever I "see" them.

***Step 4:** Panic. You are not a visual artist, and Lola is not a person, but a fictional construct. Who then, will make the objects?*

I resisted writing the objects until the last possible moment – right up to the point when it became necessary to pull the peripatetic 80,000-odd word draft together into a manuscript that could be read through from beginning to end, the triptych of imagined portraits were still no more than clusters of amorphous unwritten images and

ideas. What had been a useful period of postponement for the purpose of protecting primary process had become something new, an unhelpful and unhealthy anxiety connected to doubts about my capacity to describe an artwork from a point-of-view that was at once extrinsic to the object and intrinsic to the process of its becoming, the perspective of the artist who *made* the work she is viewing, and a deep fear of creating stasis, a generalised concern that the description of the objects would arrest and possibly destroy narrative momentum.

At the heart of this problem was a disconnection in the research. Afraid of producing static writing I was reading literary fiction, narrative theory, criticism and technical manuals in search of strategies for representing the multifaceted self. Afraid of creating a caricature, rather than a portrait of an emerging artist, I was reading literary fiction, artists' biographies and autobiographies, monographs, art history, catalogues, reviews, journals, magazines, talking with artists and visiting exhibitions as a way of attempting to expand the knowledge base from which I needed to confidently verbally (re)create and represent the way my young female visual artist character would think and speak about her practice and her work. The disconnection was between words and images, between *the* word, and *the* image. It was the discovery of ekphrastic theory that would eventually enable me to address this disconnection.

Words and Images: coming to ekphrasis

Ekphrasis – development of a working definition

The term ekphrasis is used here with acknowledgement of its roots in the terminology of rhetoric (White 21), and its traditional employment as a poetic ‘literary mode’ (Heffernan 7), the most succinct, well-known and oft-quoted definition of which is WJT Mitchell’s ‘verbal representation of visual representation’ (‘Picture Theory’ 152). James Heffernan has commented that this phrase is one that is ‘simple in form but complex in its implications’ (3). Those implications have long been debated amongst theorists and this exegesis explores only a small selection of ekphrastic possibilities, strategies and techniques, those that relate directly to the process of writing the accompanying novel. Rosemary Lloyd equates the term ekphrasis to the French *transposition d’art*, which she argues is ‘more immediately comprehensible, suggesting the transformation of a subject or theme from one artistic medium into another’ (2), and ekphrastic terminology is used here in reference to the transformative relationship between the language of literary fiction and that of the visual arts specifically. The working definition here refers to a process of intellectual engagement wherein a creative, critical and responsive art (in this case literary fiction) explores, in representative terms, another of what have been called the ‘sister arts’ (Heffernan 1).

Ekphrasis, as it imagined here, is a term applicable to the description of the ways in which the *processes* of one form of art – art the way Winterson describes it: ‘Art, all art’ (4), painting, poetry, music, fiction, drawing, dance, sculpture, photography, film – might engage with the *processes* of another. On one level this is a gesture toward the Hellenic beginnings of ekphrasis, which both Murray Krieger and Corrado Federici argue are broad enough to encompass any vividly descriptive, representative passage of

writing, being ‘totally unrestricted’ and referring ‘most broadly, to a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art’ (*Ekphrasis* 7; ix). It is also an anticipatory gesture. The mode described here is an active one, perhaps closer to Tamar Yacobi’s ‘ekphrastic dynamism’ than any other definition (‘Pictorial Models 602), one that agrees with Yacobi’s argument for the simultaneous expansion of ekphrasis as an ‘umbrella term’ and closer engagement with its uses as a critical tool (‘Pictorial Models’ 603). This approach enables the mode to be discussed not only as the verbal representation of a visual representation, but as a cluster of methods and strategies for interart engagement. The sister arts, speaking to, with, and about each other, art, all art, translating, transposing, transforming, confronting and competing, but also deconstructing, interrogating, searching the self and the idea of the other for points of convergence and divergence, for parallel planes, lines that intersect. Most importantly, the term ekphrasis is used throughout this exegesis to reflect the development, over the course of the project, of an understanding that ‘After and Before Now’ belongs in a field that might be categorised as contemporary ekphrastic literary fiction, and is therefore as much a novel concerned with the relationship between word and image as it is with its particular protagonist’s individual experience.

The Time/Space Divide

It is also, therefore, a novel that, out of necessity, addresses the relationship between time, space, the image and the word, perhaps the most significant and enduring area of debate within ekphrastic theory. This debate has long been focused on a perceived division between the temporal and the spatial, as put forth in Lessing’s *Laocoön*. Of object-creation, Lessing writes:

If the Artist out of ever changing nature cannot use more than a single moment, and the Painter especially can only use this single moment with reference to a single point of view; if their works, however, are made not only to be seen but to be considered, and considered for a long time and repeatedly; then it is certain that this single moment, and the single point of view of this single moment, must be chosen which are most fruitful of effect. (28-29)

Whereas, he continues, the poet is not under any similar obligation

to concentrate his picture upon a single moment. He takes up each of his actions as he likes from their very beginning and carries them through all possible changes up to the very end; each of these changes which would have cost the painter a whole work specially devoted to it, costs the poet only a single trait, and even if this trait, considered by itself, might jar on the imagination of the hearer, either such preparation has been made for it by what has gone before, or it has been so softened and compensated for by what has followed as to lose its particular impression, and in this combination produces the best possible effect. (36)

An acceptance of this idea that the visual arts deal ‘mainly with objects in space’ and literature ‘exclusively with objects in time’ (Federeci ix), still echoes within much contemporary critical discourse. Garrett Stewart describes Lessing’s divide as an ‘abiding truism’ (73). Byatt begins her study *Portraits in Fiction*, a work discussing the representation of both actual and notional art objects in the novel with the statement that: ‘[p]ortraits in words and portraits in paint are opposites, rather than metaphors for each other ... A painting exists outside time and records the time of its making. It is in an important sense arrested and superficial’ (1). The approach to writing the object in ‘After and Before Now’ has been one of exploring the ways in which the spatial/temporal effects of the verbal art object might be understood and expressed in

order to position ekphrastic writing as closer in nature to the dynamic material object described by Winterson in *Art Objects*: ‘Art takes time’ she tells us, but also, ‘art is aerobic’ (7), or the object Siri Hustvedt imagines working to make time simultaneous, one that is ‘there all at once,’ having ‘no beginning, no middle and no end’ (xv, 5).

Paragone and ekphrastic anxiety

Ever since it beckoned to me some two dozen years ago, I have found ekphrasis both a maddeningly elusive and an endlessly tempting subject. (Krieger, *Ekphrasis* 1)

Stephen Cheeke, echoing Murray Krieger, has described the ekphrastic impulse as having a Siren-like attraction and effect: ‘In a literal sense,’ he writes, ‘the impossibility of ekphrasis – the doom of an ultimate and inevitable failure – seems obvious to all those who approach the task, and yet this understanding has not acted as a deterrent at all’ (1). It has, however, led to widespread anxiety around what Cheeke describes as the ‘central question’ of ekphrastic discourse, that is, ‘can a verbal representation of a visual representation reproduce the artwork in a meaningful way for the reader?’ (168). At its ‘deepest level’, posits Stewart, ekphrastic anxiety is ‘the fear of engulfment’ (89). This anxiety is a central concept held by many writers on the subject, including, amongst others Mitchell and Heffernan; described by Heffernan, the ekphrastic discourse is, at its core, a discourse of struggle:

it evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language, it is intensely paragonal ... the contest it stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space ... the relation between the arts in an ekphrastic work of literature is

not impressionistic ... On the contrary, it is tangible and manifest, demonstrably declared by the very nature of ekphrastic representation. (1)

The idea of an agonistic relationship between word and image is not peculiar to discussions of verbal representations such as those Heffernan is discussing. Foucault has commented on the relationship between words and images in western painting – the kind of representation Stewart calls ‘reverse ekphrasis’ (89). ‘In one way or another’, states Foucault in *This is not a pipe*:

subordination is required. Either the text is ruled by the image ... or else the image is ruled by the text ... True, the subordination remains stable only very rarely. What happens to the text of the book is that it becomes a commentary on the image, and the linear channel, through words, of its simultaneous forms; and what happens to the picture is that it is dominated by a text, all of whose significations it figuratively illustrates. (qtd. in Gaggi 7)

Yacobi ‘challenges the agonistic view of ekphrasis’ (‘Fictive Beholders’ 71), citing ‘countless ekphrases that show themselves neutral or peaceful or cooperative on this front’ (71), and arguing that rather than ‘ekphrastic discourse stag[ing] a conflict between the male-gendered word and the female-gendered image, with mimetic supremacy as the prize’ (71), as in Mitchell or Heffernan, a more complex process of quotation is being enacted through the frame-inset relationship at the core of ekphrastic discourse. Also complicating the idea of the paragonal struggle and the gendered divide is White’s work on the ‘female *künstlerroman*’: its themes of liminality, suspension, unfinished-ness, seriality and fragmentation, and their use in its efforts to tell, in the footsteps of Woolf (‘Professions’), aesthetic truths about the experience of creative female selfhood, and in so doing envoice and authenticate the position of *both* the female visual artist (through its fictional agents) and the female author.

Postmodernism/Poststructuralism, stasis and the spatialisation of literature

Theorists including Mitchell, Mario Praz and Joseph Frank argue that postmodern, post-structuralist notions have undermined the concept of a *stable* divide in terms of the temporal and spatial qualities of the literary and the visual arts, citing innovations in technique and technology as the cause of a general blurring, breaking down and erasure of what must then be viewed as false barriers (Federeci ix). Such arguments, however, tend to focus on the incorporation of spatial ideas into literary theory. ‘We have been told,’ writes Frederic Jameson,

that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism. (16)

Mitchell, however, points out that these discussions carry residual traces of a belief in the temporal/spatial divide as quite inescapable – as recently as 2005, Lloyd referred to Lessing’s divide as an ‘unbridgeable ontological’ chasm (133). Mitchell posits that

the one thing that unites all the antagonists on the issue of literary space is their common reverence for the principles established in Lessing’s *Laocoön*. Those who attack the confusion of genres entailed in a notion of literary space regularly invoke Lessing’s authority, and the proponents of spatial form pay him homage by making his categories into their fundamental instruments of analysis. (*Iconology* 97)

Discussion of experimental and/or postmodern writing often focuses on descriptions of the workings of ekphrasis in ways that bear out Mitchell’s comments, emphasising the mode as one which might, as Laura Barrett argues, cross ‘the verbal and visual divide, [being] a linguistic device that rejects the distinction between

narration and description' in rebellious and/or insubordinate ways (85), but is only able to do so by embracing the limits of the disciplines as described by Lessing. 'In an attempt to create an image linguistically', Barrett continues, 'ekphrasis *stalls* narrativity' (Federici 85, my emphasis). This is very close to Krieger's description of the original function of ekphrasis in rhetoric, wherein ekphrasis 'was called upon to intrude upon the flow of discourse and, for its duration, to suspend' argument, acting as 'a device to interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration' (*Ekphrasis* 7). Yacobi believes that it should no longer be 'very surprising to find the camps divided along these lines' ('Pictorial Models' 611), but also warns against the unquestioning perpetuation of the paradigm of 'an either-or-choice' ('Pictorial Models' 611), rather arguing for the development of a concept able to encompass and delineate 'a range of ever-available, complementary options' in terms of narrative momentum and stasis in ekphrastic writing ('Pictorial Models' 611). By placing such emphasis on the theoretical touchstones of object-stasis and narrative momentum we risk blinding ourselves to other possibilities for the mode to explore the limits of traditional paradigms by means *other than* the creation of stasis, the holding still of time. How, for example, might ekphrasis *create* movement, how might the mode allow the writer to play with time in order to subvert the idea of the static object itself, how might it be used in the acceleration as much as the deceleration of narrative time?

Kaleidoscope/dynamic collage

Many of the ways imagined artefacts are described within 'After and Before Now' speak of and to my deep desire to use ekphrastic strategies to impel narrative forwards and send it backwards in time, *not* only to bring it to a standstill. To represent, in

particular, the way in which the art object functions as reservoir of meaning, and psychic portal. Like Yacobi, I am interested in expanding and testing the limits of ekphrasis, and with White I believe the ekphrastic novel is a significant vehicle for the exploration of creative selfhood. Alongside ekphrastic theory, the contemporary novel with an artist or artistic endeavours and ideals, and of course the object, as a central theme or organising principle, has been an important research focus. The earliest Australian novels looked at for this project are Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline* and *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. Two novels, *The Sitters* and *Prochownik's Dream* by Alex Miller, along with Peter Carey's *Theft*, have been very influential in terms of processes of narrative naturalisation of ekphrasis. The most recent Australian novels focussed on include Gail Jones' *Black Mirror* and Claire Thomas' *Fugitive Blue*.

Michael Redhill's *Martin Sloane* and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* had the earliest and deepest effect on 'After and Before Now' for reasons that might seem contradictory. Redhill's novel was a strong reminder of the capacity of the artist to veil and obscure autobiography in the object while Atwood's novel (along with Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*) provided a model for giving the reader deep access to the thought processes of the artist-protagonist. *An Equal Stillness* by Francesca Kay and Patrick Gale's *Notes from an Exhibition* helped me focus on ways in which the link between biography and the object might be expressed and Hustvedt's *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* and Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* reminded me of the role mystification can play in the representation of the experience of viewing an art object. Each of these novels, along with others that I do not have sufficient space to discuss here, finds its own way to deal with the object; where one reveals a decision to highlight or isolate the verbal object through concrete or other manifest means, another embeds and disperses the object into narrative. 'After and Before Now' is an attempt to put both of these

strategies to work each for its own specific effect, and for the holistic overall effect that might be achieved by the use of each in conjunction with the other, in the hope of producing a kaleidoscopic ekphrastic collage.

Elevating the object

The ekphrastic mode is often highlighted in the contemporary novel through a process of textual elevation. This exalting of the object, which can be seen in the presentation of artwork descriptions that reproduce non-fiction art writing, and replicate the gallery context, appears at a surface reading to be an expression of the internalisation of Lessing's tenet on the spatio-temporal divide between the visual and verbal arts. The novels appear to surrender the paragonal struggle, endeavouring only to keep the verbal object sequestered from the rest of the novel as a means of safeguarding narrative momentum, protecting story from being brought to a standstill by description. However, these strategies, along with more subtle elevating techniques involving temporal shift and focalisation transfer, can actually be used in the development of parallel perspectives and even parallel narratives within the novel. The complex process of frame-inset interplay also opens up possibilities for the ekphrastic novel to subvert the traditional paradigmatic limits of the ekphrastic inclusion as decorative but of no substantial narrative use or import, or threatening because anti-narrative.

Demarcation – reproducing non-fiction art writing

A common strategy for highlighting ekphrastic inclusions in extended fiction such as the novel, is the demarcation of object description by concrete and/or typographical

means. I have come to think of this as a form of exalting the object. The highlighted ekphrastic inclusion within the contemporary novel is often a directly mimetic representation of non-fiction art writing; the ekphrasis seeks to reproduce the material appearance and/or the critical/expository voice of the written texts that surround and attach themselves to actual works of visual art – these verbal texts described by Heffernan as ranging from an artwork's title to ‘the curatorial notes on the museum wall, to catalogue entries, to exhibition reviews, to the explanatory notes that invariably accompany reproductions, and to the pages of art history’ (139), and also, I would argue, including artist-statements, auto/biographical texts, archived ephemera such as letters, journals or working notes, and wider art criticism and reportage. The titular object of Jones’ novel *Black Mirror* is presented in this way. (This example is quite lengthy and appears below in truncated form):

The catalogue description reads thus:

Black Mirror (date unknown) 122 x 122 cm. Oil
on canvas. Private Collection.

Black Mirror is in many ways typical of Surrealist pictorial art of the 30s and 40s, purporting to depict dream states as allegories of unconscious desire or meaning. This painting represents the treachery of art itself ... Finally, the legends déjà vu (seen again) and jamais vu (never seen) adorn the extreme top corners of the painting, a philosophical addition that refers to the endless contest in art between originality and derivation. The tone of Black Mirror is sombre, and it bears clear indebtedness to the work of Salvador Dali.
(273-274)

Other novels use shorter, similar entries as a way of providing concrete visual markers of structure. From the simplest gesture, such as Paul Morgan's use of colours such as 'Viridian Green' and 'Ultramarine' for the chapter titles to *Turner's Paintbox*, through the more complex – the catalogue descriptions of the dioramic collages created by the protagonist of *Martin Sloane* which attempt to reproduce the existential questioning at the heart of the actual works which inspired the novel, the shadowboxes of Joseph Cornell, or those that concretise structure whilst formalising and problematising both the relationship of autobiography to the retrospective and subject/object relation in *Notes From an Exhibition*, to Woolfe's subversive use of the catalogue description in *Painted Woman*. These examples will be explored later in this section in relation to structure, perspective, and the frame-inset relation. At this point, it is interesting to note that, as ekphrastic strategies go, flagging difference in this way, through concrete reproductions of the visual and verbal markers of critical and technical art writing within the frame-text of the novel seems to accept the authority of ekphrastic tradition and cede the paragonal struggle.

Demarcation – reproducing the gallery context

Highlighting the mode in this way also performs the ekphrastic function of (re)creating the context and replicating the experiential effect of the gallery, museum or exhibition space, within which an aura of the sacred is bestowed upon the art object by means of its being placed within a frame, behind glass, cordon and guard, hung on a wall, named and/or explicated on a title card, accompanying artist-statement or within the pages of a catalogue. The authoritative power of the museum is described by Heffernan as having

an individuating influence:

while the art historian may elaborately contextualise a work of art, the museum individuates it *for the eye*, sets it off for contemplation or veneration in its own framed and labelled space, presents it to us as a self-sufficient icon. (138)

According to interdisciplinary theorist Mieke Bal, the exhibition, or gallery space itself, at once ‘suspends everyday concerns and isolates the viewer with the art’ and segregates object and viewer from each other: ‘The objects can be approached, but only to a limited degree, and most often without being touched’ (‘Exhibition as Film’ 73-4). To highlight ekphrastic inclusions then, through a process of textual isolation and demarcation in a way that mimics the presentation of the object in the gallery context, is to present, and perpetuate the idea of the verbal object as a thing apart from narrative, perhaps even a thing *to be kept apart* from narrative. The catalogue entries included in *Martin Sloane* are short, spare, limited to the physical properties of the object, but each is given an elevated presence within the text as a whole – each heralds the beginning of a new chapter, each is set out on its own (otherwise empty) page, the font is both capitalised and contained within the contracted margins that imply the format of the “original” title card or catalogue page. *Notes From an Exhibition*, which also uses catalogue notes as chapter markers (though in this case the notes are more fulsome attempts to link object and autobiography) delineates these inclusions quite literally; each set of notes appears again on its own page, but here the descriptions are further segregated from the rest of the text, framed within a rectangular outline or text-box. Redhill and Gale’s verbal objects are both highlighted and isolated within narrative in a way that, on the surface at least, appears to be a strategy for making the inclusion of ekphrasis *safe*; the isolation of descriptive passages might be seen as an attempt to neutralise what have been perceived as the inherent and otherwise unavoidable stasis-

inducing effects of object-description. This approach seems to accept the paradigmatic limits of ekphrasis by relegating description to use as a framing device or decorative addition that might be removed from the piece with no real loss of meaning.

Postmodern/Poststructuralist influences

The concretising, textual and typographical nature of exalted ekphrasis has clear exegetical links to another group of texts which have had a deep influence on the research project – postmodern/poststructuralist writings in which ‘[t]he classical subject is radically questioned’ (Gaggi 65). Yann Martel’s *Self*, the first novel to make its way into my working bibliography, uses concrete textual means to demonstrate connections between language and selfhood. Early on in the novel, columns of dialogue juxtapose English and other languages in a representation of the experience of the bewildered trilingual child able to discern the surface meaning but not comprehend the subtext of the adult conversations being held above his head. Later, the rape of the narrator narrows the narrative’s ability to express experience to the repetition of single words, ‘fear’, ‘pain’ (286-312), until finally representing the experience as utterly beyond description, able only to be revealed through a series of ellipses, the subaltern victim’s attempt to remain speaking subject. Epistolary (in the form of textually “reproduced” email), diagrammatical, typographical photographic textual interventions, along with techniques of intertextual sampling and even handdrawn pictures used in the novels of such writers as Dave Eggers, Sylvia Brownrigg, Marisha Pessl and Jonathan Safran Foer demonstrate the impossibility of a fixed subjectivity in terms of the postmodern narrative subject through an interart engagement which at times borders on if not becomes a kind of ‘reverse ekphrasis’ (Stewart 89). JM Coetzee's recent *Diary of a Bad*

Year, and its intertextual reference point, Derrida's *Confessions*, in ways both more subtle and more complex in their implications, also use textual means of differentiating intersubjectivity and demonstrating the impossibility of fixed narrative subjectivity, and, in the case of the *Diary*, of the novel itself. While not examples of ekphrastic description, these works contributed in ways beyond the original reasons for their inclusion in the working bibliography of the project. When linked to this concept of exalted ekphrasis, postmodern/poststructuralist novels, short stories and critical writings helped broaden the parameters for experimentation with the concrete verbal representation of the experience of imagining, making, and seeing the visual art object.

Parallel perspectives/narratives

The process of highlighting ekphrasis might isolate the object within the textual whole of the novel but it can also be used to allow parallel perspectives, and even parallel narratives to be developed alongside each other. Passages that reproduce the style and appearance of non-fiction art writing such as those examples discussed above are often used as, and seem particularly well suited to the task of acting as a structural marker, creating a sense of linearity, order or containment in novels with complex, openended and non-linear approaches to narrative. Both Redhill and Gale use catalogue entries as a visible, manifest structure for their novels, the short passages acting as formal stepping stones, each appearing as a brief of meditative description rising up out of a gap in the narrative. If we look at Gale's *Notes From an Exhibition* in particular, however, we can see how these sets of notes (in this case from a catalogue for a major retrospective) also function as a shadow (fictional) tracing of the life story of the artist, juxtaposed against

the biographical frame narrative. These two life stories (one narrating the events of a life and one revealing the transformation of events into objects) contradict and complement each other, each deepening our understanding of, and adding layers of complexity to, the other. These parallel narratives create temporal mobility, leading the reader from the representation of the realised object in the present of the exhibition to the (often) multiple events that inspired or informed its creation. In the case of *Fugitive Blue*, the process of restoring a fifteenth century painting leads the narrator to imagine a centuries-long provenance for the object, the narrative alternating between present and past, with the object acting as a kind of literary time machine. This idea, of the temporal effect of the object on narrative, is at work too in the highlighted passages of ekphrasis throughout Elizabeth Hickey's *The Painted Kiss*, in which the exalted sections are given the titles of Klimt paintings, but rather than describing the objects themselves, each tells the story of the titular painting's subject and, in so doing, provides Klimt's version of the story to balance that of his lover Emilie, who narrates the frame story.

Naturalising description

Naturalised ekphrastic description can also, of course, open up possibilities for the development of parallel perspectives and co-existent narratives through techniques of shifting, multiple perspectives and temporalities as can be seen in Sarah Hall's recent *How to Paint a Dead Man*, which uses a mixture of first, second and third person narration to represent and distinguish between its multiple focalisers and time periods. The focus on dispersal of description that is at the heart of approaches to ekphrasis that emphasise the naturalisation of the mode means that all aspects of narration are made available for use in creating the novel's verbal objects, including (but of course not limited to) dialogue, action and the thought processes of the novel's characters. It is the

latter of these that is most significant to this research project as a whole; of particular importance to 'After and Before Now' is the category of representation that will here be referred to as diegetic notional ekphrasis, in which object description is embedded in the thought processes of a novel's narrator(s) or central character(s).

Notionality and temporal mobility

Ekphrasis that originates from the narrator-protagonist who is an artist is the most significant category of naturalised, or embedded description in terms of the development of this research project. This strategy for the inclusion of object description facilitates temporal mobility in the novel by allowing the narrative access to the memory and imagination of the artist-narrator or artist-focaliser. The reader is thus allowed into the creative process, which, because it can be projective (imagining a future-object), experiential (making an object, or perceiving a previously made object, in the present), or retrospective (remembering or imagining an object's inspiration, inception and facture in the past) has the potential to create ambidirectional temporal mobility, allowing the narrative to move between the object's past, present and future. Toni Powlett, the artist-protagonist of Miller's *Prochownik's Dream*, is drawn into the past of his work, 'troubled by a resistant element' that inheres in the 'dismantled installations' in his studio (5). Finding himself 'unable either to continue with them, or to conceive a convincing new project to take their place' he begins to realise they are 'beginning to stand in his mind for his failure as an artist' (5). In contrast to this retrospective ekphrastic haunting, we have the projective fantasies of Gulley Jimson, narrator of Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*, '[o]ne of the most complete and credible painters in fiction' according to Byatt (69). Jimson's thought processes provide the reader with a striking example of an artist-narrator's 'perpetual recomposition of the

visual world into' possible future works of art (Byatt 70).

There was some coffee on the blue cloth and I pushed it about till it surrounded an interesting kind of shape. But I couldn't see what I do with it [...] I saw that the blue shape could be made into a kind of man, kneeling down like my Adam. But without any right shoulder. One line from the nape to the croup. A sweet line. I fell for that line. Here, I thought, why not. Bring the shoulder forward. Yes, bring his arm right out and have Eve pushing it away. Yes, having her doing the modest. Fending off the first pass. And that nice line will lie right up against the serpent – the serpent will have to come a little behind Adam to avoid two cylinders meeting at the vertical. All right, make the serpent fatter – fatter than Adam. Fat and stiff – erect. And all those red scales against Adam's blue-white flesh ... And I hurried round to the shed. Well, what, I said. It might be something. Probably not. But the fact was, I had got the feeling it was straight from the horse. And when I'd brushed out Adam's damned old knob of a shoulder and got him a new shape down the back, I had that feeling so strong that sat on myself. Careful, I said, don't get too gay. Perhaps this damned old canvas is going to turn into something or other, perhaps not. Probably not. (32)

White asks if the notional 'work can be said to exist at all as an aesthetic object and, if so, to what degree does it exercise authority over the text?' (21). This type of notional ekphrasis creates a complicated form of ekphrastic impossibility; rather than being 'unrepresentable' in the fashion of the famous example of Achille's shield (Krieger, *Ekphrasis* 2) or 'unimaginable' as in Holmqvist and Pluciennik's 'model of a rhetoric of the sublime' (15), the notional object is capable of attaining impossibility through the failure of the narrative's fictional agent to bring the endeavour to fruition. If, as in the passage above, the fictional artist manages to *think* the object out, from its inception, through a projected process of manufacture to an ultimate point of failure without ever picking up a brush or making a sketch, then, ultimately, I would argue, the artwork, as a conceptual, verbal object, has attained no less of an extra-diegetic existence than any

other imagined object created by an author for his or her fictional artist. And yet, on a diegetic level, the object has no existence at all.

‘Optogram’

NOTE:

This image is included on page 35 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Mosaic Fragment of Saint Peter. 5th Century.

On a notional, pre-textual level, the object that would become ‘Optogram’ metamorphosed from that originary image of ‘The Hierophant’ into a mosaic portrait of a female Pope, to a figure of a girl-child standing on the underside of a globe, her hair falling down/stretching out into space becoming other worlds, her feet growing into the earth like treeroots, to a photograph of Lola’s eye superimposed over a map of the globe, to a work of blown glass, to a small block of engraved glass sheets pressed together, hanging above a plinth to refract a light shining up through them from below.

I find myself wanting to go back now and insert another ghost; somewhere in the middle of that list I wish I could add an image: *and a series of blown-glass eyeballs hanging from invisible wire, covering the ceiling, filling the room.* Revisiting the period

of process risks revising the past, regressing into imagination, re-inventing practice and practitioner.



Wilhelm Kühne. 'Rabbit Optogram'.

But, Lola has already made the mobile, creating the image of a large Moreton Bay Fig tree on a convex mirror lens by engraving the negative space around its branches, branches which appear from certain angles to contain the body of a man, painting an enormous version of her own eye on its surface.



Parmigianino. 'Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror'.

The tree is a composite of those that grow in the Adelaide Botanic Park and myriad photographs sourced from the internet.

It is also a version of the trees that line Melbourne's Botanic Road, and a re-envisioning of the fig that appears in Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline*.

NOTE:

This image is included on page 37 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

David Hewitt. 'Reflected Tree'.

It is a beloved image from my childhood, the baobab line drawings from St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince*.

It is the product of my obsessive tracings of those baobabs, perhaps best understood by synaesthetic means, through a meditation on the combined scents of baking paper and HB lead pencil shavings.

NOTE:
This image is included on page 38
of the print copy of the thesis held in
the University of Adelaide Library.

Antoine de. St. Exupéry 'The Baobabs'. *The Little Prince*. (17).

The tree is manifold and metamorphic. One of its many names is Dryope:

... Now let me tell you the curious fate
of my very own sister – although my tears of sorrow
 constrain me
and almost prevent my speaking
.....
her feet were rooted fast to the ground. She
 struggled to get free,
but found she could only move from her waist, as a
 coating of pliant
bark crept up from below and gradually sheathed her
 loins.
She at once attempted to tear her hair in a ritual
 gesture;
but the hand that she raised was filled with the leaves which
 had grown on her head.

.....

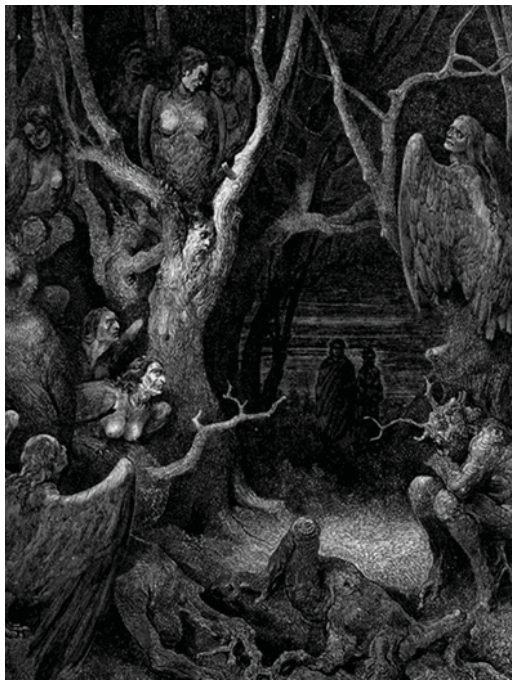
... “Where is your sister?” they asked. I

directed

their eyes to the lotus tree.

(Ovid 9.328 -364)

The tree is a kind of suicide.



Gustave Doré, ‘Harpies in the Forest of the Suicides’.

No green here, but discoloured leaves and dark,

No tender shoots, but writhen and gnarled and tough,

No fruit, but poison-galls on the withered bark.

(Dante 13.4-6)

Sylvia Plath sits in its branches, considering figs and pears, terrorising herself.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (81)

Virginia Woolf looks back at it over her shoulder, wondering what six apples might have been. (Elizabeth Pedersen presents the diary entry in which Woolf recorded her response to Cezanne's 'Pommes' as evidence of the ekphrastic instinct in her thought and writing 1).

There are 6 apples in the Cezanne picture. What can 6 apples not be? I began to wonder. There's [sic] the relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity. To Roger & Nessa, moreover, it was a far more intricate question than this. It was a question of pure paint or mixed; if pure which colour: emerald or veridian: and then the laying on of the paint; and the time he'd spent, & how he'd altered it, & why, & when he'd painted it. (Woolf 140)

Lola imagines her brother cradled by it sometimes, dying an impossible death, not so much taking his own life as gently relinquishing it. Tom's drawing of the tree, the fragile twenty-year-old sketch Lola uses to make 'Optogram', is every now-lost

cartoon my sister drew on butcher's paper to amuse me when I was small, it is, most especially, the felt tip pen drawing of the fairy-queen on the round white melamine plate that hangs on the wall in the kitchen of every house I make myself a home in.

Her name

...

is printed beneath the hem of the fairy's dress in neat capitals.

NOTE:

This image is included on page 41 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

K's Plate

I wonder how painful it was for her to realise that she was not going to be able to colour the skirt perfectly. So that it would look *real*. I have so much admiration for the solution she found. If the felt-tipped pen is going to create patches, use the patches,

make them work, make them as uniform as possible, make it seem as though this was what you intended, make it look correct, right, right and real.

The tree is the waterfall over which she threw her adult self.

NOTE:
This image is included on page 42
of the print copy of the thesis held in
the University of Adelaide Library.

Adam Foster. 'Huka Falls'.

'Gift'

'Gift' has its origins in both the Two of Swords and the Lovers tarot cards. Its subtextual ghosts, however, are as amorphous as the object Lola makes in the novel; as I conjure the image now, the crossed swords held by the woman on the card superimpose themselves, and turn to a pair of six-sided sketching pencils, to primary school lead pencils, to miniature rose-coloured crystal wands, to the plastic-rod bodies of a pair of flying, spinning toys (pink and blue) given to myself and my brother when we were children.

All these coupled sticks arranged into Vs, all of them just visible through the thin paper on which a diagram of the female reproductive organs from a 19th century treatise on the treatment of hysteria has been printed. The soft curves of the diagram straighten and harden and merge into the single line that divides Michelangelo's 'Martyrdom of St. Peter' diagonally, tracing the painter's tri-partite autobiographical self-portrait, the 'ultimate meaning' of which, according to Leo Steinberg, 'flows in the geometry of its structure' (94).



Michelangelo Buonarroti. 'Martyrdom of St. Peter'.

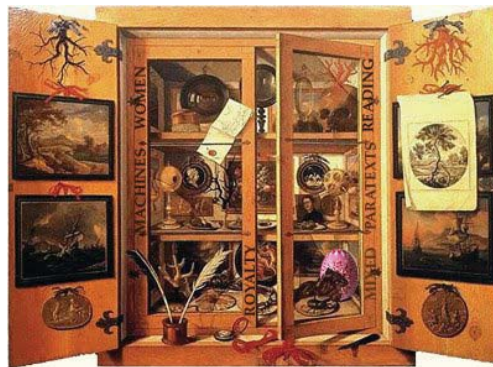
A line from this same family zigzags its way up the Lovers card, illustrating the trajectory of the ascendance of spirit from man to woman to God.

There are the fleshly counterparts of the entwined bodies of the sculpture, the myriad memories that infuse their shapes, the never-forgotten details of a leg, a breast, a shoulder, neck, the specific parts of the ambiguous multi-limbed creature 'Gift'. These will not, of course, be named, a reader will have her own, what matters is the sensory quality of their haunting, the twinges and the heat of muscle-memory felt on imagining the fitting together of certain curves and angles, the low whispers passing between lips

and ear, throat and neck, those transmissions of energy I part hear part see part feel part know flash across the spaces between them.

There is the memory of a candle once owned by a flatmate, purchased in Byron Bay and treated as though it were itself a precious sculpture – two naked figures, male and female, wrapped in a standing embrace, kissing. Sitting unlit on the mantel. My own recurrent fantasy of lighting the wick when she was out; watching their faces melt into one another. There is, always, the Magritte painting which also bears the title ‘The Lovers’ and brings with it its own ghosts, the hidden faces of its subjects, the mythic image of the body of the painter’s mother hauled up from the river Seine, into which she has thrown herself, her features obscured by and pressing through the fabric of the skirt that has wrapped itself around her face.

‘Wunderkammer’



Domenico Remps. ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’.

All three objects have their origins in an early idea of structuring the three sections of the novel to represent a circle, a triangle and a square. This piece, this ‘*Wunderkammer*’ is the square multiplied, exploded. This ‘*Wunderkammer*’ reminds me that the idea of

the text preceded the idea of the objects; the idea of representing art arose out of the exploration of the narrative representation of self.

The artist-protagonist, the writer-antagonist (surfacing in the form of art critic-turned-novelist Remy, and always lurking in the form of the paragonal poltergeist of the author), the postmodern-protagonist might best be represented through the replicatory presentation of ‘the postmodern obsession with litter as lists gone amok’ (Campbell 20), as a collection of auto-biographical and bureaucratic ephemera, the personal and public documentary evidence of self. Early drafted scenes focussed on the particular totemic status given the possessions of childhood, the effects of the dead, and the notes and items amassed during the course of a creative project, career and/or life.

NOTE:

This image is included on page 45
of the print copy of the thesis held in
the University of Adelaide Library.

Joseph Cornell. Untitled (Soap Bubble Set).

I imagined then approaches to structure that were textually fragmentary, epistolary, journalistic, approaches that imitated and represented the evident simultaneities and apparent inconsistencies of the assembled paper self. I developed an incomplete first draft, a discontinuous narrative, an assemblage of scenes arranged to highlight these simultaneities and inconsistencies, incorporating notes, stories, letters,

addressed envelopes, emails, lists, excerpts from a catalogue essay and a series of incomplete drafts abandoned by Lola in the process of putting together a single paragraph-length artist autobiography for the exhibition.

The idea of creating a portrait of Lola out of a multitude of temporally and socially dissociated external perspectives morphed into the idea of the doubled auto/biographical portrait, a novel that alternated between two narrative strands, Lola's internal perspective of self and Remy's attempt at fictionalising Lola's self. I flirted with the intertextual naming of chapters, referencing the titles of novels and of artworks and fantasized about abandoning the still-unwritten *descriptive sections* for short title card or catalogue entry excerpts at the beginning of each section.

These subtextual ghosts may linger in the ekphrastic object '*Wunderkammer*', but they are not visually projective images of the same order as those I have listed as the antecedents of 'Optogram', nor motivating images of the same concrete quality as those I have called forward to speak with 'Gift' are they? Just as I wrote away from the narrative representation of the art objects in the period of producing the first draft of the novel, I now find myself writing away from the description of the visuality of the felt experience of that production. This situation is neither accidental nor incidental, it mirrors process in a way that also allows me to move this discussion towards praxis, and the relationship of counter-influence between ekphrastic theory and ekphrastic fiction.

A Portrait of Lola

The events, experiences, memories, flaws, strengths, quirks, relationships and desires which affect Lola are as unique and as mundane as those affecting any life. I do not

want to argue for the idea that Lola becomes an artist because of the details of her life (a brother missing presumed dead, damaged parents, a difficult childhood, a bisexual identity, complicated personal relationships, conflicting desires, conflicting tendencies towards over-intellectualisation and hyper-sensitivity) but instead that what makes Lola an artist is her drive to transform those details, to re-create them, that she attempts to represent the invisible as well as the visible in visual ways, that she makes personal facts representative of broader ideas, and also that, sometimes chasing the greater truth, and sometimes to escape the truth, she makes them strange, other than themselves. In other words, she makes them art.

By the time I reached the end of the first draft the importance of Lola's parents' story seemed to dictate that the narrative stretch back beyond her birth and with the inclusion of the future tense, it certainly threatened to be heading beyond the time frame of the immediate present, the exhibition opening I had set as a temporal constraint (a flailing attempt to rein in a baggy, sprawling draft). The early draft contained three sections devoted entirely to the description of the three main works of art positioned at the beginning of each of its three parts – these sections, written as if at the exhibition, in the first person plural, from the point-of-view of the viewer/critic, Lola's long-estranged lover Remy, were lengthy, thorough, extensive, and unsatisfying. Their intense detail, my desperation to give the reader no excuse not to "see" the works, slowed the narrative to a standstill, moved the writing so far away from the story for so long that the next shift in point-of-view and thread became difficult to connect not only to where it had been left off, but even to the ideas contained within these extended sections of ekphrasis. Neither were the ekphrastic imagined art objects themselves behaving as I needed them to, they resisted imagining, they proclaimed themselves unfinished, blurry, veiled. These descriptive sections were at once too much and not enough. And the draft

had passed 95,000 words. Time and space were very much at risk. I needed reminding of the exponential power of meaning contained in a single word. As Byatt writes:

I like to say, when talking about writing, “Imagine a woman in a chair. Now imagine that she is about thirty and dark. Now imagine that she is plump, in a green velvet dress, with her breasts showing above a décolleté neckline. Now give her big brown eyes, long lashes and a necklace of emeralds. Make the chair Gothic and put a burgundy-coloured curtain behind.” Everybody who goes through this process will have a more and more precise visual image. They will resemble each other, but, I guess, not much. Everyone sees their own woman. (1-2)

As a writer of fiction, writing about art, or more specifically about an artist, a fictional artist, writing about imagining, creating and exhibiting works of art – sculpture and installation – the desire to describe, perhaps to over-describe the visual, is intense. What I have had to find in order to combat the temptation of visual description are ways of representing Lola’s artworks as impossible objects, in order to allow and to emphasise an approach to interpretation that privileges multiplicity and ambiguity, and ways of producing the possibility of art objects that might be experienced through the breadth and depth of the details of a holistic, cumulative imaginary as opposed to the specifics of a fixed visual and material periphery, seeking by these means to create ekphrasis that works upon narrative time and space in powerful, positive, freeing ways.

Part II: Curation

The Double Helix

The ekphrastic novel

The art objects created by Lola for the exhibition ‘Selves’ give title to, and act as thematic focus for, each of the novel’s three parts; these artworks are also integral to its structural organisation, a narrative framework designed to approach the ideal of the holistically ekphrastic novel, that is, a version of *künstlerroman* to which the art object itself, and therefore ekphrastic description, is both central and essential. Where more traditional examples utilise ekphrasis as frame *for*, or ornamental addition *to* narrative, this ideal, the ekphrastic novel, as ‘work-length’ ekphrasis (Yacobi. ‘Pictorial Models’ 614), requires that narrative serve the object(s). ‘Optogram’, ‘Gift’, ‘*Wunderkammer*’ and ‘M is for ...’, then, provide the key to the novel’s notional framework, a structure that is in concept holistically ekphrasis, quantum and circu-linear.

I use this compound word – circu-linear, meaning to suggest the image of a long spiral, the idea of cyclical momentum, a path that advances by turning back on itself, curving and returning. Imagining this word I picture also the coiling spring, the cyclone, the double helix.

The novel uses this structure to represent the experience of the creative process, and to act as a signal, an always-present reminder of the novel’s approach to issues of spatio-temporality in relation to narrative perspective and the individual consciousness. Whilst I attempt here to examine the intended effects of the novel’s (I repeat, notional or

conceptual) structure individually, to write as though the mimetic representation of the creative process and a ludic narrative exploration of the relationship between time, space and point-of-view might be separated, fully disentangled from one another, I do so always mindful that such a separation is illusory at best and that the categories of process, time, space, structure and perspective will resist these divisions, will re-merge themselves. James Wood describes such categories' tendency to collapse into one another as resulting from their interrogation being 'motivated by the same aesthetic' (3). For Wood, this is 'the real' (3), for me, here, it is the concept of a liminal transformative zone, an area of creative interplay, which drives and inheres.

I write these words – singly, separation, division – I mean each for itself. I imagine myself inscribing two spirals in the air around me. One with each hand. Imagine holding them at arm's length. Spinning in their centre. Feet lifting off the ground. Floating in the eye created. Hovering, both above and at the centre of the text. I know that they are each each other's other. Writing the word eye, I echo myself, I, and I imagine the double helix.

Sally Berridge has written of her own experience of writing a creative PhD:

The process became circular and spiral: the reading and information affected the visual and textual work and the choice of content ... and this in turn affected the direction of further reading and information gathering, so a further dialectic was set up between theory and practice. (5)

She links this pattern to the 'action research spiral' of 'planning, acting, observing [and] reflection leading to a revised plan' posited by Kemmis and McTaggart (qtd. in Berridge 5). 'After and Before Now' seeks to render these ideas implicit in the overarching tale of the inspiration, inception, creation and exhibition of Lola's artworks. Despite this thematic embedding in the narrative and in its narrators' consciousnesses

however, the novel also seeks to demonstrate the inherent instability/fragility of this kind of concretising, diagrammatical approach to the *representation* of the creative process on an experiential level. The formal constraints, set up to convey a perceived disconnection between the experience of consciousness and its representation, are overturned and transformed within and by the narrative itself. The temporal/spatial positioning of the narrative consciousness is central to this approach; the day of the exhibition opening is a threshold position at the end-point of the cyclical research path.

I say narrators' consciousnesses, and give the impression of multiple voices, and with the next breath I say narrative consciousness. Make no mistake, I mean these things when I say them. I stand by my use of the plural and of the singular, in their individual contexts, and in the context of the project as a whole.

If not the neat diagram of the action research spiral, then what cyclic pathway is the novel attempting to trace? The earliest full draft of the novel attempted to represent the experience of multifaceted selfhood by disrupting, undermining and at times eliminating the customary markers of narrative stability and allowing the narrative consciousness to range freely across time and space – the story was anti-linear rather than non-linear with perspective often completely indeterminate. The only major manifestation of structural intent consisted of those three sections subtitled ‘Notes towards new ekphrasis’. These lengthy detailed descriptions of Lola’s artworks were positioned so as to divide the draft into three sections approximately equal in length. Each functioned not only as an ekphrasis of the object but also as a self-contained set of fictocritical notes, and as part of an externally imposed structure, a kind of triangular retaining wall built around the organic mass that was the first draft. The series of drafts to follow were a process of absorbing this exoskeleton into the body of the narrative, dismantling the material of the scaffold for re-use in the building of an internal structure

that would support the notion of selfhood-as-flux whilst conceding that representation and presentation (of consciousness in this example) are not perfectly interchangeable terms, carrying a lesson from the past into the postmodern chaos:

Fiction teaches us that the sorrows of living are meaningful. Fiction restores them meaning. The experience which is being lived day by day may seem futile, destructive because the vision of its totality is lacking. In the novel it acquires a pattern. It is fiction. It reaches beyond the pain to the pattern of meaningfulness which consoles us for all the agonies, and uncovers elevations. (Nin 33)

But what pattern of meaningfulness? What consolation? What elevations? The struggle (throughout the process and across the project, in dealing with manifold issues including the representation of fluid desire, self-as-flux, the unreliability of memory, and, of course, the limits and possibilities of ekphrasis amongst others) has been that of finding ways to express *simultaneous multiplicity*. In terms of craft and praxis, my approach has focussed on experimentation with tense and narrative perspective. Rearranging the diverse, discrete entries of the peripatetic first draft – multiple, title-less, overlapping, even paradoxical stories about the experiences of my protagonist, narrated from undefined, ambiguous temporal positions and points-of-view – in order to embody simultaneity *as well as* multiplicity (of selves, or of truths, for example), necessitated the creation of a set of constraining structural concepts. These allow the shape of the novel as a whole to affect the implications of its parts which, whilst working to retain a workable level of specificity and clarity each within themselves, might effect polyvocality and encourage acts of multiplicative meaning-making by requiring the reader to make eccentric links between an event and its position in the narrative order. The novel's internal logic relies on these formal constraints, these structural (across the

novel) and infra-structural (as relating to its connected parts) renderings of the workings of time/space and point-of-view within the individual consciousness.

Besides those novels already discussed in part one of this exegesis, we also find contemporary examples such as Jan Otten's *The Portrait*, in which, through a skilful process of prosopopoeia the object is centralised to the point of acting as the novel's narrator. Recent Australian novels *Black Mirror*, by Gail Jones and Claire Thomas' *Fugitive Blue* both approach this ideal. Each has an imagined art object firmly at the core of its narrative, each utilises a range of the ekphrastic strategies and techniques described above to demonstrate the object's centrality, and, most significantly, each creates an ekphrastic object that works upon and is worked upon by, both time and space. Jones' novel does so by creating an elliptical structure that enables multiple stories of the object's creation, inspiration and appearance (from across time and from multiple perspectives) to be told, and to co-exist as truths of its meaning. The centrality of the art object in *Fugitive Blue* is made manifest through its being the focus of both the present-day and historical parallel narratives.

White has commented that the

crossing of the border from narrative to ekphrasis and back again, simulating a shift from fiction to painting, can be a crucial transition that lies at the heart of many works of fiction about artists. The artist is affirmed as authentic if the writer can authenticate her work by means of descriptions that break away from the time-bound sequences of narrative into a replication of the seeming timelessness of visual art. (22)

The aim, in terms of 'After and Before Now', is to experiment with ways that the novel might be made to go one step further than this, to take the reader into a wholly ekphrastic narrative world, one that is *authenticated* not by its demonstration of the separateness of ekphrasis and narrative, but by its capacity to reveal their nexus points.

The ekphrastic novel demands that its structure is one that reflects the centrality of its art objects and their description, one that finds a way to acknowledge the enduring allure of Lessing's 'notoriously restrictive' divide (Yacobi, 'Pictorial Models' 604), exploring the 'spatio-temporal possibilities' (Krieger, *Ekphrasis* 9), rather than accepting the traditionally declared limits of the ekphrastic mode.

Creating a world

Approaching the novel in terms of structure then, necessitated the implementation of constraints and strategies for dealing with time, space and the object. For 'After and Before Now' to function as *künstlerroman*, I needed to create a fictional 'possible world' (Rorer 5), within which Lola's ontological experience, her emotional/autobiographical vulnerability to 'the uncontrollable workings of memory' (Cavarero 35), and the psychic enmeshing of her (inter)subjectivity and sense of being-in-time with the visual objects she makes, would be both experientially ratiocinative – that is, structured in accordance with the kind of intra-narrative spatio-temporal logic that Ruth Rorer argues is key to a fictional world's autonomy (198) – and textually manifest. In agreement with Krieger's argument that the 'ekphrastic principle' is at the core of 'the attempted construction of a literary work' (*Ekphrasis* 8), and Stewart's description of this principle as one of attempting the transcription of the 'experience of a nonverbal artifact' (82, Stewart's emphasis), the novel's spatio-temporal structure centres on and is (ultimately) constrained by the parameters of its protagonist's experience of the opening night of her first group exhibition.

A threshold position in the cyclical creative process, the exhibition opening marks the point of divergence between the life of the artist and the life of the object, an

entirely liminal position, at which, as Carolyn Heilbrun writes, an individual is ‘poised upon uncertain ground ... leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another’ (qtd. in White 19), a point at which the *story* of the object(s), of their inception, facture and meaning is still in flux, still being disrupted, exploded, re-ordered and re-shaped by memory and desire. A chance re-reading of an example of dramatic temporal encapsulation, David Williamson’s play *Don’s Party* attached itself to a comment made by mentor Melanie Ostell that Lola (and with her, the reader) spent most of the early full draft anticipating the exhibition opening only to have the novel end a few pages after the first guests finally arrived, leading to the decision to base the structure of the new draft on the representation of this liminally charged arena/event with its capacity to dynamise space and lend time a ductile quality.

Novel as exhibition

The exhibition opening is now the central event from which the narrative makes its forays through time and consciousness. Bal has described the ‘meaning-producing sequentiality, emerging from the viewer’s walk through an exhibition’ (71), using metaphors of exhibition as narrative (and/or specifically film) in her analyses of affect and curation. Limiting the present-moment/central place of the novel to the exhibition day opening is a reversal of Bal’s metaphor. ‘After and Before Now’ might thus be read through the concept of novel-as-exhibition.

Bal, after E. Van Elphen, posits three ‘principles of coherence’ traditional to the practice of exhibition curation: ‘(1) the centrality of the individual artist, (2) a chronological unfolding of an artist’s or a group of artists’ “development,” and (3) thematic unification’ (75), but proposes that exhibitions might also be created and read

as a narrative produced outside these three principles, a new story “written” by the curator. Like Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and Gale’s *Notes From an Exhibition*, amongst many other fictions that can be read through this framework, the structure of ‘After and Before Now’ engages with the first of these approaches as a legitimate and logical principle for the construction of a novelistic portrait of a working artist, and for a narrative of self.

Cheeke uses Germain Bazin’s description of the act of looking as one that becomes ‘a sort of trance’ fusing spectator and object as a basis for his argument that the representation of that trance

requires a secondary form of verbal mystification for the reader to be able to participate in the original experience. The powerful prose description that seeks to reproduce this kind of experience in a reader might be represented as a form of incantation or evocatory magic that replaces or stands in for the subjective experience of the gallery visitor, instructing that visitor in the correct aesthetic response while mystifying the art object itself. (171)

While Cheeke is describing a process he sees as integral to the writing of art criticism, it is one equally applicable to the *künstlerroman*, and as significant to its structural formation as to its narrative content. In the same way that Carol Shields bases the narrative structure of *Larry’s Party* on the fusing of the idea of the maze to the concept of multifaceted selfhood central to the novel’s plot, ‘After and Before Now’ is structured to represent the novel’s interest in the complexity of the spatio-temporal (narrative) subject / (art) object relationship through the presentation of the experience of the exhibition opening as a point at which the object functions as reservoir of meaning and inter-temporal, inter-subjective conduit.

Quantum Physics and Literature

As novel-as-exhibition, 'After and Before Now' seeks to replicate an experience of consciousness as non-linearity, specifically attempting to create an ekphrastic effect similar to that which Heffernan argues marks the treatment of the ekphrastic object in the *Purgatorio*:

Though the sculptures representing them follow one another in space the narratives do not follow each other in time; instead, starting with the originating moment of the New Testament, they move back to the Old Testament and then forward again to the period after Christ's death. The effect is palimpsestic or pentimental, as if one scene were superimposed on another. (44)

The project, in this way, seeks to connect, structurally, the idea that 'the hypothetical unity we call the mind appears to be composed of many pieces' with the concept of time as an ambi-directional continuum (86). This conceptualisation of self/time made use of in the structure draws on ideas from quantum theory, and therefore this exegetical (re)imagining of that structure utilizes ideas and language drawn on in the theoretical implementation of quantum theory in literary criticism. Sean Kinch notes that contemporary authors of fiction and literary critics 'have begun to formulate literary responses' and 'to adapt the intellectual tools of quantum mechanics to the analysis and interpretation of literature' (289), and both 'After and Before Now' and its exegetical twin 'Experiencing the Ekphrastic Imaginary' make use of these tools, with the view that these are ideas perhaps particularly suited to the task of ekphrastic explorations, a view bolstered by scholarship identifying the expression and incorporation of ideas drawn from quantum physics into the ekphrastic fiction of writers such as Woolf and Atwood (Westling; Deery).

Dennis Bohnenkamp describes physics and literature, particularly fiction and its criticism, as ‘entwined’ disciplines, and lists ways in which they might be seen as connected, including the idea that ‘[m]odern literature is often nothing like life, and quantum mechanics tells us that life, the universe, reality are nothing like we think they are’ (20). Based on this interconnectedness, he suggests

a new way of viewing both literary fictions and scientific theories, one which collapses their oppositions and allows them to illuminate one another. In order to do this it is necessary to suspend the idea that either is an exact representation of the phenomenal world. (20)

‘After and Before Now’ is neither an exact representation of the phenomenal world nor an exact representation of the intricacies of quantum theory. It is a metaphorical representation, an experimental representation of my own individual experiential understandings of being a self-in-time, a representation influenced by an interest in how ideas drawn from the world of quantum theory might be used in the representation of creative process and in the exploration of issues of time and space in relation to ekphrasis. The effect, for instance, of the importation of concepts such as spacetime into the debate over the temporalisation of the art object and the spatialisation of literature in ekphrastic theory.

The workings of both time and selfhood in ‘After and Before Now’ are representative of my desire to explore that which Bohnenkamp refers to as ‘the most disorienting point’ in an understanding of the universe based on the relativistic paradigm:

the discovery that time and space are neither absolute nor separable, but are locked indivisibly together in a continuum generally designated as space/time. These traditionally stable, fixed entities become relative, subjective ... Time does not flow

smoothly from past to present to future; it exists in a block interpenetrated by space or perhaps in a pool or sea – not as a river, the way it is often depicted. The sequentiality and seriality that we experience in it are illusory. Similarly with space. (21)

One problematic aspect immediately obvious is that a reliance on the importation of ideas such as these might add to, rather than bolster the author's attempt to survive or avoid, paragonal anxiety. To ekphrastic fear we could add a concern over how 'a holistic field [might] be represented in a linear flow of words' (Hayles, on Pynchon 27). The contextualising response to this concern I offer here is that of Katherine Hayles, who agrees with Bohnenkamp arguing that the field concept 'is as capable of informing literary strategies as it is of forming scientific models' but who offers examples of writers, Lawrence, Pirsig, Nabokov to name just a few, whose work reveals a concern 'with issues that have been brought into focus by the paradigm shift without necessarily being familiar with those sources that most directly brought it about' (25), or I would add, favouring an approach that privileges scientific model over structurally useful metaphor.

Two sources of such metaphors that have had a significant influence on the novel's structural approach to time and consciousness, EC Barksdale, historian and literary scholar whose work *Enchanted Paths and Magic Words*, and the polymath Douglas Hoffstadter, create their own pleasing symmetry. Barksdale explores the usefulness of concepts from quantum physics for the purpose of interrogating time, and in particular time-travel (not only of the science-fiction variety) in fiction, while Hoffstadter's *I am a Strange Loop* reveals a deep interest in the usefulness of metaphor and narrative in the explication of theoretical physics.

Time and chapter structure

It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast.

And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. (Woolf, 'Moments of Being' 75)

The novel is made up of four narrative strands, each with its own chronology and trajectory. These are imagined as periods of:

exhibition/observation – passages of responsive, descriptive ekphrasis detailing

the experience of presenting and viewing the art objects in the present moment of their display in the gallery, that allow the narrative consciousness to access the recent past of the works

inception/facture – those moments (both projective/notional and active/actual in

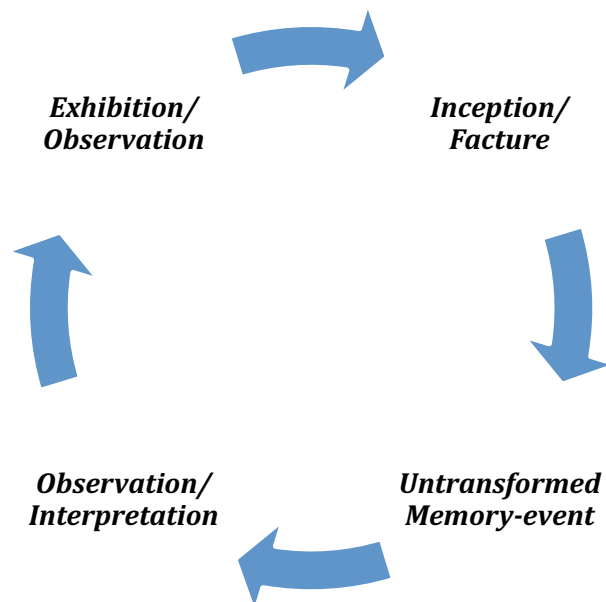
ekphrastic terms) in which the artwork is conceptualised, theorised, and brought into being as a physical entity through a process of transformation, moments which in turn act as entry-points through which narrator and reader might reach the pre-history of the objects, clusters of untransformed

memory-events – the past Lola is inspired to represent within her work, the past Lola

is unable to escape but attempts constantly to transform through the work, the past that is hidden in the work but also the past that manifests itself in those aspects of the work that demand

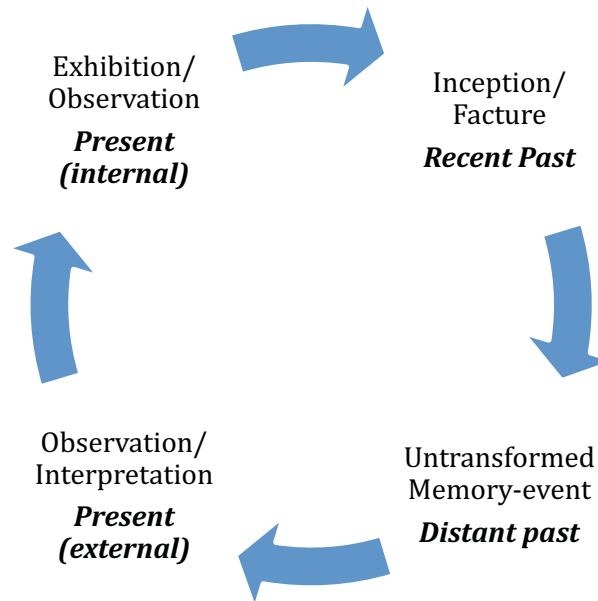
observation/interpretation – the responsive, descriptive ekphrases that make up the

series of critical/creative interpretative notes considering the *finished* objects, a return to the gallery exhibition that facilitates temporal re-synchronisation.



Time #1: Event-time/Creative Process

These strands underpin the internal chapter-structure of the novel. This structure cycles through four distinct but connected scenes and voices representative of the four narrative strands described here, with movement between these narrative strands/events governed by a concept which imagines the art object as conduit.



Time #2: Biographical time/Life-story

Portals and wormholes

As the focus point of the construction and interpretation of narrative meaning, encompassing elements of memory, experience and desire, the art object is a useful means of presenting the reader with constant textual reminders of the idea of the simultaneous aspect of time as it might be seen to exist in relation to lived experience, what Rita Felski, in a discussion of the relationship between narrative time and feminist theory, describes as ‘the rich residues and layerings of past time in the present moment, the complex interplay and disjuncture of’ the old (27), the new and, I would add, the *not-yet* – that is to say contingencies and possibilities anticipated. The circu-linear structure of the novel is both illusion and allusion. Barksdale argues that certain examples from literature are able to be read as engaging with time and selfhood in ways that utilise and/or exemplify quantum concepts such as space/time, wave/particle duality and, in particular, the ‘theriopowerful’ form of time travel practised by the human

individual on a daily basis (37) – the constructive and (re)constructive superluminal accessing of what he describes as our ‘active past’ and ‘memories of the future’ (61; 68). His use of this metaphor of travelling through space/time by means of the quantum tunnel or wormhole, directly corresponds to the core frame of reference for the structure of ‘After and Before Now’, an attempt to make the connection between the art object, time, space and the self textually manifest.

This narrative structure is based on the idea of the art object functioning as a portal to a literary wormhole through which focaliser and reader travel back and forward to multiple, co-existent temporalities, the artwork’s power to function as portal being conferred on it by the capacity of ‘the past [to gather] in words and objects, making them ... sites of memory and repositories of the past’ (Lloyd 135). This enables ekphrasis to begin to escape the bounds of the idea of the finished or fixed, plastic object, demonstrating

the poet’s liberty of extending his [or her] description over that which preceded and that which followed the single moment represented in the work of art; and the power of showing not only what the artist shows, but also that which the artist must leave to the imagination. (Heffernan 99)

This is not a straightforward capitulation in paragonal terms, in part because the before-ness and after-ness of these moments are undercut by the panoptic use of the present tense across all the narrative threads. Rather than succeeding its inception and facture, and preceding only its exhibition, the ekphrastic object signals its cross-temporal existence and through this signalling attains multidimensionality. Early in the writing process, I imagined the narrative performing a Woolfian burrowing into time and consciousness, taking the reader ever further into the past. As the draft stands now, I picture the novel’s discrete scenes, each an event in Lola’s biography, overlaying each

other, with each narrative position allowing the reader to access that biography through the object as access point. Bal uses the term ‘incurved’ in part to point to

a baroque conception of point of view derived from ... Deleuze’s works, according to which point of view enfolds the viewer rather than allowing him to take in a spectacle at a distance ... The point of view of “the fold” compels the viewer to enter the fabulation of the artwork, to travel inside and out again, and emerge transformed by the experience. (84)

The use of the present tense as an expression of the idea of time as simultaneous is, of course, connected to one of the core research problems. It is a creative response to the risk of perpetuating rather than challenging the perceived temporal/spatial divide between literature and the visual arts within ekphrastic theory. Writing in the present tense is an attempt to express within the novel not the spatial aspect of literature but the temporal aspect of the art object in line with TJ Clark’s argument that meaning-making necessitates serial viewing, his questioning of the belief that ‘images happen, essentially or sufficiently, all at once’ (8). The novel seeks to test, by attempting to create a sustained work of dynamic ekphrastic narrative, Clark’s suggestion that ‘we fear that the work we depend on images to do for us – the work of immobilizing, and therefore making tolerable – will be undone if we throw the image back into the flow of time’ (8).

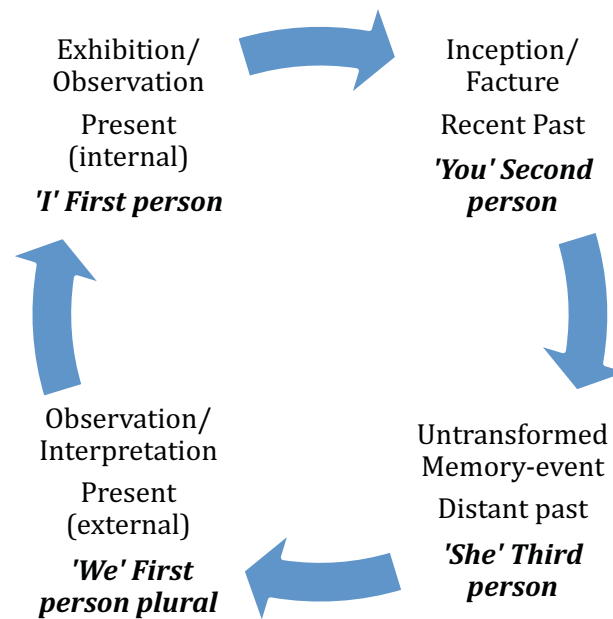
This use of present tense is an attempt to create a structural experiment designed to explore narrative's capacity to explore the concepts described here by Rorer:

In physical terms, the present defines the objective temporal coordinates identifying the constantly changing zero reference point: everything that precedes a given point is past, while everything that succeeds it is future. In phenomenological terms there is nothing but the present time. The present is indivisible and ceaselessly vanishing. According to Augustine, for instance, the three dimensions of time – past, present and

future reduce themselves to one, the present, in which the past survives as a memory, and the future exists in the form of anticipation. (203)

The transposition of person for tense, is, on the one hand, a practical solution to the problem of needing to demonstrate the idea of temporal co-existence, and on the other, expresses the impossibility of this concept on an experiential level. As Bachelard writes in *Poétique de l'espace*:

We sometimes believe that we know ourselves in time, whereas all we know is a series of fixed points in those spaces where our being is stable, a being that does not want to flow away, that even when it sets out into the past in search of lost time, seeks to suspend time's flight. In its thousand honeycombs space holds time compressed. (qtd. in Lloyd 135)



Perspective #1: Person

Intersubjectivity and the object

I want to emphasise that the circu-linear structure of 'After and Before Now' is a *notional* one, one that is established in concrete terms in Part One only to demonstrate

the impossibility of its own tidiness through the disruption of the cycle in Part Two and its eventual demolition in Part Three. The early chapters follow the ideal of this imagined structure, ‘flagging authorial’ intentions concerning form (Wood 7), by tracing the cyclical pathway described above. This pathway is based on the idea of the art object as ‘theriopowerful’ time machine (Barksdale 37), or portal through which the narrating consciousness enters a metaphorical wormhole and tunnels through narrative space/time, to access Lola’s ‘active past’ (Barksdale 61). The structure also relies on the concept of the object as a conduit between narrative subjects, a bridge to the twin world of another consciousness, that of the author of the ekphrasis notes, Lola’s ex-lover Remy, also present at the exhibition opening. Paul Ricoeur describes the process at the core of *Mrs Dalloway* as one that ‘serves to refigure time itself in our reading’:

[T]he narrator ... is provided with the ability *to move* from one stream of consciousness to another, by having the characters meet in the same places ... perceive the same sounds, be present at the same incidents ... A bridge is built between these souls both through the continuity of place and the reverberation of an internal discourse in another person ... A point in space, a pause in time, form the footbridges between two temporalities foreign to each other. (105)

In ‘After and Before Now’, it is the art object, in the context of its exhibition, that is made to function as bridge between consciousnesses. After all, as Denis Dutton writes:

Every work of art is an artefact, the product of human skills and techniques. If we see an actor or a dancer or a violinist at work, we are constantly conscious of human agency. Less immediately apparent is the element of a performance in a painting that has hung perhaps for generations in a museum, or a long-familiar musical composition. Yet we are no less in such cases confronted with the results of human agency ... The ultimate product is ... an object of particular interest in its own right,

perhaps in isolation from other art objects or from the activity of the artist. But this isolation which frequently characterizes our mode of attention to aesthetic objects ought not to blind us to a fact we may take for granted: that the work of art has a human origin, and must be understood as such.

Hustvedt agrees, and extends this idea, arguing that the exhibition of an artwork is based on

the silent encounter between the viewer, “I,” and the object “it.” That “it,” however, is the material trace of another human consciousness. The artist, who is missing from the scene, has nevertheless left us a work, an act of pure will, which has no practical purpose. The painting carries with it the residue of an “I” or a “you.” In art, the meeting between viewer and thing implies intersubjectivity. (xix)

The relationship between artist and viewer, mediated by the object itself, is made manifest in the ‘endopsychic conflict’ (Rogers 4), played out through the lateral shifting between Lola and Remy as narrative focaliser.

Quantum entanglement and shifting focaliser

Each of us is *narratable* by the other; that is, we are dependent upon the other for the narration of our own life-story, which begins from birth. (Adriana Cavarero ix)

The observation/interpretation thread is marked by a shift in narrative perspective. These sections take the form of a series of descriptive, interpretative notes written by Lola’s ex-lover, art-critic/fiction writer Remy Allen at the exhibition for use as inspiration for her own novel. Remy uses the first person plural, or, ‘we narration’ as Richardson would have it, a perspective he argues is ‘especially effective in juxtaposition to other, traditional modes of narrating’ (56), and one imagined here as a

conscious attempt by Remy to emphasise or perform the intellectual, emotionally distanced position of the art critic, an attempt destined to fail by the fact of Remy and Lola's shared past: 'As all ekphrastic mediators re-present the visual according to their lights and for their own goals, they often reveal their subjective viewpoint in the process ... The re-presenter gets represented in turn, the original re-re-presented for our benefit' (Yacobi, 'Interart Narrative' 720).

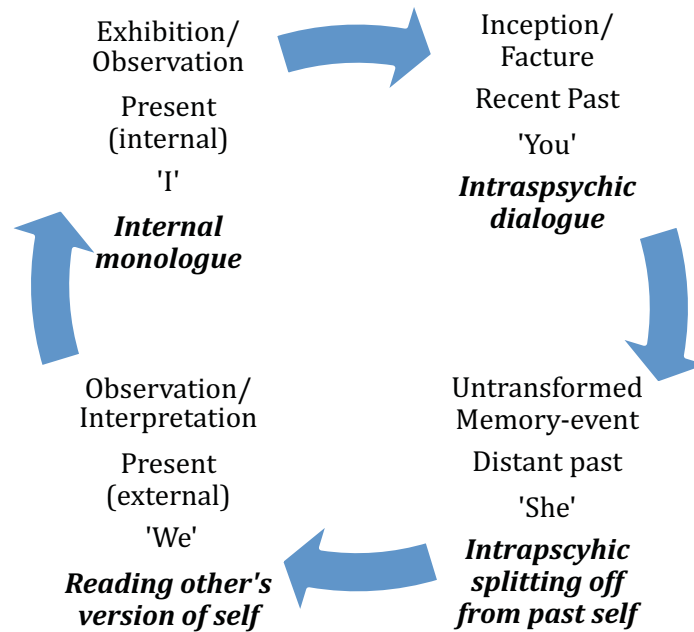
Douglas Hoffstadter has described the self and the other as not only multiple but interpenetrative entities, interconnected in ways that mimic, metaphorically, quantum entanglement:

A person is a point of view – not only a physical point of view (looking out of certain eyes in a certain physical place in the universe), but more importantly a psyche's point of view: a set of hair trigger associations rooted in a huge bank of memories. The latter can be absorbed, more and more over time, by someone else. (234)

Quantum entanglement, non-locality, or action-at-a-distance, are terms used to describe a form of 'superluminal connection', a concept summarized by Nick Herbert:

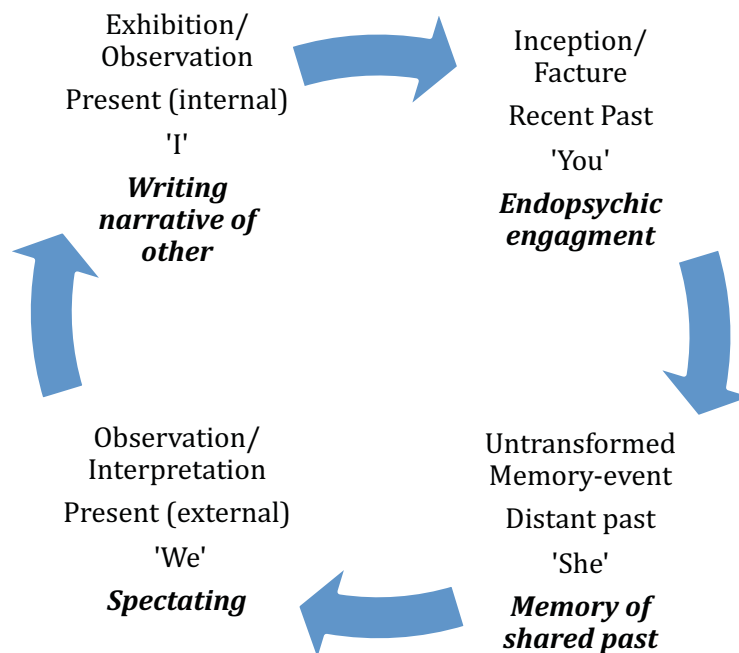
when two quantum particles, A and B, interact briefly ... then move far apart ... the mathematical probability waves that represent particles A and B do not separate cleanly. Instead these waves remain "phase entangled," stuck together in such a way that when the wave that represents particle A is changed, a corresponding change occurs instantly in the wave that represents particle B. (qtd. in Kinch 301)

This is an idea that resonates with the conceptual doubling of narrative consciousness/focalisation within 'After and Before Now'. The text as a whole might be read as Lola's experience of herself as 'narratable' subject, 'immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory' (Cavarero 34), during the process of reading Remy's notebook, left behind at the end of that opening night:



Perspective #2: Lola as focaliser

It is equally plausible that the novel traces Remy's attempt to create a portrait of Lola, a biographical fiction based on the notes Lola returns to her, their shared past and her memory of Lola's life stories.



Perspective #2: Remy as focaliser

These two focal “possibilities” might be imagined as a verbal version of the Necker cube, or duck/rabbit, ‘pictures whose primary function is to illustrate the co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in the same image, a phenomenon sometimes called ‘multistability’ (Mitchell, ‘Picture Theory’ 45). The movement between the two women’s consciousnesses signalling the deep ambiguity in the text in terms of focalisation is made possible by their interconnected pasts, embodied in the object-as-repository/conduit, and also by the idea that can be taken as a functional rule of intra-narrative logic, that ‘[s]pace is different for different observers. Time is different for different observers. Spacetime is the same for everyone’ (Taylor and Wheeler qtd. in Hayles, 47).

One way of imagining this doubled perspective is to substitute the names Lola and Remy for the terms wave and particle. Or to place them either side of the slash that at once joins and separates space and time in the term space/time.

Quantum entanglement and fugueing ekphrasis

One exegetical example is a description of the process by which pictorialism is *transformed into* ekphrasis by its textual connection to the imagined art object. This process is one of entanglement and ambi-directional transformation. Entanglement in the sense that an idea from quantum physics, that of *quantum* entanglement, might be used in a metaphorical description of the effect of the relationship between the ekphrastic object and the imagery of its origins.

I am linking this idea to that of the category I have called before *fugueing ekphrasis*, a concept arising from the convergence of two areas of interest within the research – the verbal representation of visual art objects and the novelistic

representation of the creative process. The fugueing object is the projective notional object liberated from the conscious processes of its fictional creator; the notional object and its subject unshackle themselves from a linear path towards manufacture and materiality, instead travelling throughout narrative, acting as that which Byatt describes as ‘an imagined icon or unifying motif’ (2). This process opens description and representation up to the world beyond the material artefact, the made object, enabling ekphrasis to burrow into the pre-history of the object, to access multiple points of genesis, and hover over manifold potential futures.

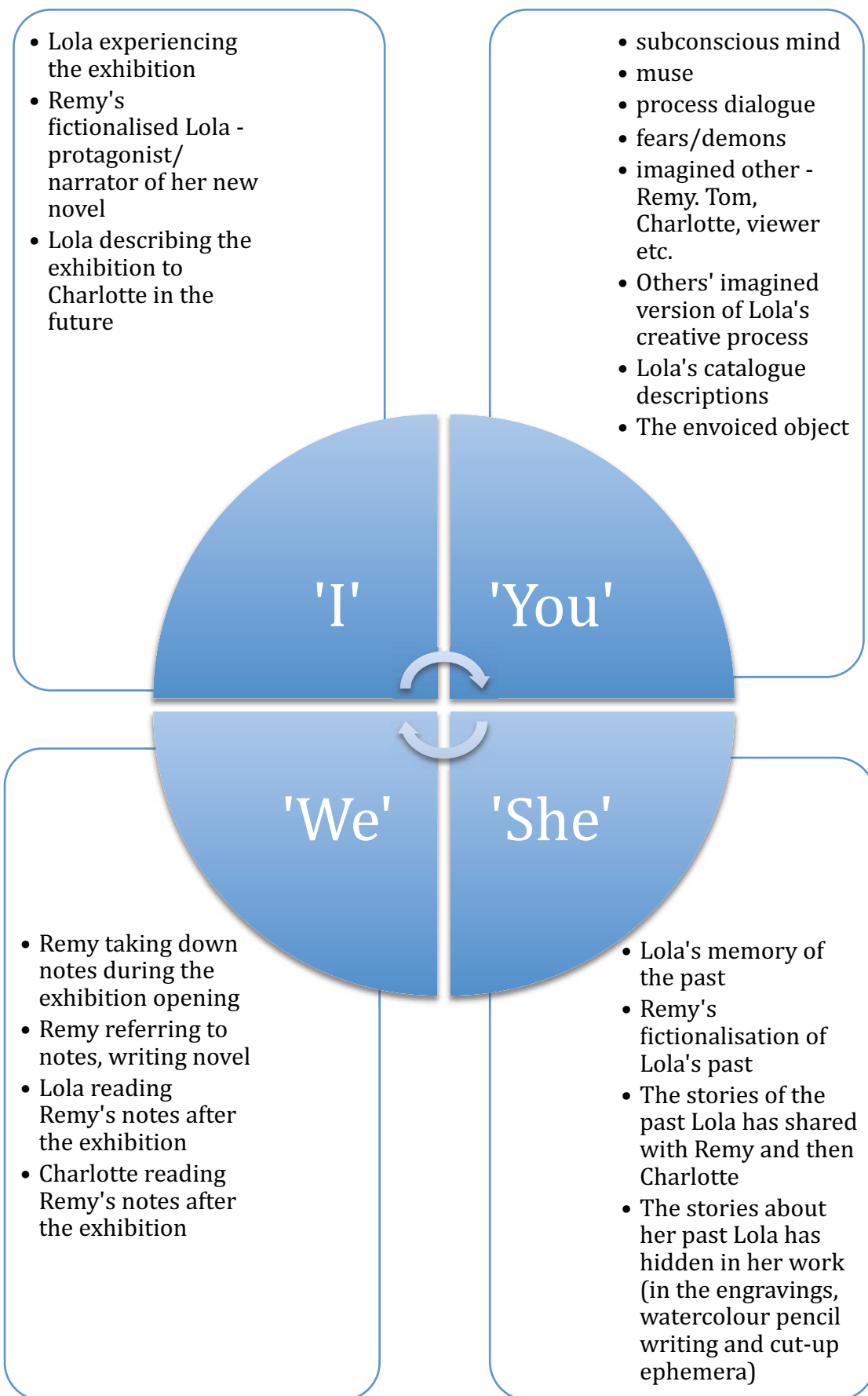
Lola creates a mobile, ‘Optogram’, a convex telescopic lens painted to resemble a disembodied eye, engraved with the image of a Moreton Bay Fig tree the branches of which appear, from certain angles, to contain the body of a man. The physical appearance of the object is described in detail in the notes taken by her ex-lover Remy at the exhibition, while other scenes dealing with ‘Optogram’'s creation describe the process of its becoming. The imagery of the tree and that of the cradled man, embedded in the object, can be mined for meaning through the imagery relating to trees and to Lola’s older brother who is missing, presumed to have committed suicide, that recur in analeptic scenes that follow Lola’s transformation of inspiration into object.

The reverse is also possible; once the object itself has been described, once it has been created, the tree imagery, the physical descriptions of Lola’s brother, the imagery embedded in scenes from Lola’s childhood, from art school, from her relationship with Remy, with other lovers, friends, family, the physical world, earlier moments of artistic practice, aesthetic contemplation, emotional confrontation, collapse or epiphany are connected to ‘Optogram’ through the act of artistic creation. The bringing together of separate modes of representation in the description of creative practice, enacts a process of image/object entanglement that enables the pictorial imagery to behave as a dynamic

form of ekphrasis.

Fragmentation of narrative consciousness

Even without introducing the idea of shifting narrative focaliser, narrative consciousness is complicated by shifts in aspect or person. The multiperson narration formalises Lola's intrapsychic fragmentation. For Chris Wallace-Crabbe '[i]t is the divided self mobilized into facets or fictions, masks or episodes, that we respond to in much contemporary writing ... The manifestation of division makes for a desirable narrative' (194). If not always desirable, perhaps representative of an important truth of the human experience? Adriana Cavarero, discussing the idea of the narratable self and the life story, argues that the contents of the life *text* are 'necessarily discontinuous – fragmentary, fleeting, and even casual – because the weaving work of memory is itself discontinuous, fragmentary, fleeting and casual' (35). A similar argument can be made for the formal manifestations of psychological fragmentation evident in the structuring processes of narration in the novel of consciousness. Ricoeur, again on *Mrs Dalloway*, describes Woolf's focus as being centred on 'the incompleteness of personality, the diversity of levels of the conscious, the subconscious, the stirring of unformulated desires, the inchoative and evanescent character of feelings' (10). The diagram below is a visual map of the multiple possibilities of implied perspective imagined by each narrative person over the course of drafting the novel. Many of these possibilities are no longer close to the surface of the text, some have disappeared from view, many others co-exist in the novel as it stands today.



Multi-focaliser narration map

Fragmentation and suicide bereavement

The fragmentation of Lola's consciousness is a formal expression of her psychological state or phase of being that is also connected to the probable suicide of her brother. Suicide bereavement has been described as qualitatively distinct from 'other types of losses', engendering 'prolonged reactions of grief' (Lindqvist). Those bereaved by suicide have described the grief process itself as moving through five stages, two of which have remained a steady background thought throughout the process of structuring Lola's consciousness: namely, *dissonance* (the shattered world/self), and *differentiation*, as one survivor puts it: the point at which the consequence of loss is realised and '[s]uicide griever grasp a change in their core personal identity. Value and belief systems are recast. This is not healing. It is an accommodation involving a new sense of self' (Salvatore). While the exact structure of the suicide bereavement process is the focus of significant debate, one common theme in the literature is the idea that it can manifest in 'complicated' grief (Wertheimer 24). This version of the grief process is cyclic, non-linear and on-going, with 'each stage within a cycle can be repeated, bringing the [survivor] to a new level of integration' (Leenaars 411). Despite the years that may have passed between the time of her brother's disappearance and the period during which Lola creates the objects for the group exhibition, her consciousness, and her idea of her narratable self is still affected by this loss and its capacity to plunge her back into the dissonance stage of her grief.

Fragmentation and self-creating transformative acts

Who is that woman in that portrait (that mirror) purportedly myself? How did she come to be that just-recognisable person, arranged into that anticipated and still surprising pose? When did these things happen, these moments of becoming, these mouldings, these determinations, rejections, internalisations, these wakings, these seductions and surrenderings, these metamorphoses, these decisions?

The work of creating ‘Optogram’, ‘Gift’ and ‘*Wunderkammer*’ is for Lola the work of grief, work *towards* differentiation. Part of this process is an intense focus on the self that manifests in narrative terms in the fragmenting of consciousness and the relinquishing of a stable, linear flow of time. Irigaray has spoken of the effects of prolonged analysis and the importance of transformative acts of self-creation:

If Freud considered the psychoanalytic cure to be interminable, it is because he thinks and interprets in terms of *analysis*, not discovery or creation. Defined in this way, analytic work, as I see it, seems to occur *outside of time* and to expose the subject to destruction by producing an artificial time frame subordinate to the spoken word and to transference. An exclusively analytic frame of reference stands in the way of psychic discovery, synthesis, and integration. The work of analysis destroys, deconstructs, and allows no room for resynthesis. *Synthesis can come only out of the imagination, not the faculty of analysing* [my emphasis this line only]. If the imagination is cathected solely in an effort of analysis, the subject’s time-space is destroyed, annihilated, perverted. It is forced to undergo infinite sections and divisions, sometimes it is sidetracked, but it can no longer live in itself because it lacks a subjective synthetic function. When, with the help of various appropriate techniques, the subject is reduced (pricked, punched, perforated) to an infinite heap of fragments, a supposedly unlimited collection of dots, subjectivity is destroyed, sensitivity and affect yield before the simple *urge* to know *more*, before a *belief* in

knowing more, which is shared by the analyst. (162-3)

Lola's creative process entails a lengthy period of introspection that brings with it an element of risk; her self-analysis allows her to explore multiple aspects but also emphasises the fragmented nature of her subjectivity and seeming impossibility of her search for a way to experience or express herself as a whole or stable subject. Only, it seems, in the moments captured by the artworks themselves, can any kind of stability be found. Poised on the threshold of past and future, Lola might ask, like Christa Wolf: 'And the past, which can still split the first person into the second and the third – has its hegemony been broken?' (qtd. in Brenkman 286-7). Perhaps not, since the third section of the novel, the extended prolepsis that attempts to gather the fragments of consciousness back into a single united narrative perspective, expressed in the third person, admits the idea of wholeness, but a wholeness that exists only and always in the future.

Future-memory and the possibility of wholeness

'When you have come to the end', writes Cixous, 'only then can Beginning come to you' (41). Part Three of 'After and Before Now', utilises Barksdale's concept of future-memory, allowing the art object as temporal portal to shift the narrative into the future tense. This is a section of prolepsis that merges third and first person perspective in a kind of idealised, utopian re-forming of Lola's ideas of self, based on the image of the mosaic. The self here, is at once fragmented, in the way that White notes is so often the case in terms of the representation of both art and artist in the 'female *künstlerroman*', and also whole (24).

Cixous exhorts:

Search yourself, seek out the shattered, the multiple I, that you will be still further on, and emerge from one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law. Let it fall with all its weight, and you, take off, don't turn back, it's not worth it, there's nothing behind you, everything is yet to come. (40)

Describing the 'extreme metaphoricity' of her own subjectivity imagined through versions of self-as-other, Heather Kerr emphasises the idea that the 'fantasized splitting up and doubling does not tell a story ... Instead, it writes a kind of poetry of the self ... [expressing] simultaneous but distinct and utterly contradictory self-perceptions of the woman who writes herself' ('Trembling Hyphen' 220). In the three sections of '*Wunderkammer*' called 'Before You Go', 'After You Leave' and 'Now You Are Home', Lola imagines a self that is whole. This fantasy of the stable self that *will be*, however, neither negates nor is negated by the fragmented self of past and present – these versions of Lola are co-existent and manifest in her creative process and the resultant object.

The use of future tense here allows the narrative to continue to move forwards even though the reader's access to Lola's first person perspective at the exhibition ends with her speaking the words 'I love you', to Charlotte before heading off to find her father. Narrative time remains at once forever suspended in the liminal space of the exhibition opening, and forever potentially open to the possibilities of the future. Despite this, the story continues, relying on a conceptual understanding of plot and action informed by Ricoeur:

As the breadth of plot increases [within the novel of consciousness], so does that of action. By "action" we have to understand more than the behaviour of the protagonists that produces visible changes in their situation or their fortune, what

might be called their external appearance. Action, in this enlarged sense, also includes the moral transformation of character, their growth and education, and their initiation into the complexity of moral and emotional existence. It also includes, in a still more subtle sense, purely internal changes affecting the temporal course of sensations and emotions, moving ultimately to the least organised, least conscious level introspection can reach. (10)

The shift in tense also reveals the text's attempt to overturn the narrative rules that have been established in a more profound way than the disruption of circu-linearity. 'Optogram' and 'Gift' speak to the idea of time as simultaneous, but also 'irredeemable' (Eliot 13). In these present-tense sections the events described within the four narrative strands are not only all occurring at once, but they are all always and forever happening, the narrative consciousness always and forever fragmented and multiple, diasporic. Only within '*Wunderkammer*,' Lola's future-memory that both happens and does not happen, and 'M is for ...', the product of her creative process, is even the most contingent wholeness a possibility. If Lola has a whole, stable core selfhood, it is to be found in her role as artist, in the relationship between self and object, in the spaces between event and transformation, manufacture and revelation.

I try again: the structure of 'After and Before Now' is helico-linear, seeking to make reference to the cyclical nature of the creative process, but more especially to enable the text to take as given the concept of time as an ambi-directional continuum along which the individual consciousness is always travelling towards both past and future, in order that the formal arrangement of the novel might represent the looping patterns described by the time-travelling mind attempting to make meaning in the liminal moment of being, to make sense of itself in the present.

Circu-linear, she says, I like that. But, that shape you drew for me earlier, that diagram, it's more like an ellipse than a circle, surely?

Ellipse? Ellipse ... what about orbital?

Orbital! Yes, she nods. That's it. An orbital structure.

But orbital implies a substantive centre, a stable core, a planet, a sun.

Well ... Lola. Doesn't it orbit Lola?

No, Lola is travelling; her consciousness is travelling this path. This path that cycles from the present into the recent past, and deeper into the more distant past, the past-past, and from there makes a return to the present, the future-present ...

... path, path, what was that I was reading about paths?

Of course, H el ene Cixous: But there is a path. It makes us go around the world to regain the second innocence. It's a long path (114).

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