GriffithREVIEW 33
A QUARTERLY OF WRITING & IDEAS

SUCH IS LIFE

Debra Adelaide
Peter Bishop
Raimond Gaita
Marion Halligan
Kate Holden

Shakira Hussein
Lloyd Jones
Frank Moorhouse
Carrie Tiffany
Maria Tumarkin
AND MORE
Praise for Griffith REVIEW

‘The best literary journal in the country.’
*Sydney Morning Herald*

‘An always vibrant mix of creative writing, essays, photography and ideas, Griffith REVIEW has gone from strength to strength.’
*Adelaide Review*

‘A varied, impressive and international cast of authors.’
*The Australian*

‘Griffith REVIEW represents “the long game” in journalism, providing quality analysis in an age of diminishing journalistic integrity.’
*Walkley Magazine*

‘Griffith REVIEW is a wonderful journal. It’s pretty much setting the agenda in Australia and fighting way above its weight... You’re mad if you don’t subscribe.’
Phillip Adams

‘It’s a cracker, a reminder of how satisfying on every level good quality non-fiction can be.’
*New Zealand Herald*

‘An outstanding example of what “zeitgeist” means... uncannily prophetic. Griffith REVIEW seems to get better with age.’
*Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Griffith REVIEW is the best literary journal in the country. Editor Julianne Schultz attracts writing of superior craftsmanship, intellectual and creative depth. If you care about writing, this is compulsory reading.’
*The Age*
SIR SAMUEL GRIFFITH was one of Australia’s great early achievers. Twice the premier of Queensland, that state’s chief justice and the author of its criminal code, he was best known for his pivotal role in drafting agreements that led to Federation, and as the new nation’s first chief justice. He was also an important reformer and legislator, a practical and cautious man of words.

Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city’s second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

Like Sir Samuel Griffith, Griffith REVIEW is iconoclastic and non-partisan, with a sceptical eye and a pragmatically reforming heart and a commitment to public discussion. Personal, political and unpredictable, it is Australia’s best conversation.
Such Is Life
Edited by Julianne Schultz
**INTRODUCTION**

7  Storytelling, sense-making  
JULIANNE SCHULTZ: Past, present and future

**MEMOIR**

10  Looking back  
LLOYD JONES: A self-portrait

27  On self-knowledge  
ANDREW SANT: A ring and its keeper

30  Striker  
CARRIE TIFFANY: Looking after the heart

38  My last-ditch attempt  
REBECCA EPSTEIN: Notes on getting by

61  After the words  
KATE HOLDEN: Writing and living a memoir

66  Not for official use  
DEBRA ADELAIDE: Finding a name

94  The cigar box  
MARION HALLIGAN: Opening the treasure trove of memory

104  My mother and me  
ANNA DORRINGTON: A reacquaintance

115  Nine-eleven-itis  
SHAKIRA HUSSEIN: Crossing the borders of belonging

133  Going to Washington, DC  
MELODY L FULLER: Crying for Oscar Grant III

141  The true history of the Circus  
DAVID CARLIN: Bluff, lies and feats of skill

148  The veiled bride  
CAROLIJN VISSE: From Nazi Germany to Bondi, via Shanghai

161  Never stop looking  
VIRGINIA LLOYD: Photographing the dead and dying

168  Denzil  
BRIAN GEACH: Father to the man

178  Family  
JOHN TRANTER: Looking forward, looking back

182  Waking up  
TONI JORDAN: Counting my blessings

187  Deep connections, artistic inevitabilities  
RAIMOND GAITA: The journey from book to film

194  Child’s play  
MEERA ATKINSON: The biggest Sherbet fans ever
Subscribe to Griffith REVIEW

Discover the best Australian writers and thinkers as they tease out the complexities of the issues that matter the most.

Each themed edition presents timely and elegant new essays, reportage, memoir, fiction and poetry from a range of established and emerging authors who make Griffith REVIEW the premier Australian quarterly forum of ideas.

Visit www.griffithreview.com to see the range of subscription packages, including Digital, Print or Premium Subscriptions and much more.

You can also purchase Gift Subscriptions for your family, friends and colleagues.

Enter the promo code UBS2011 to save 20% off the retail price and receive each edition of Griffith REVIEW before it is available in stores.

‘It cannot be said often enough: Griffith REVIEW is the best literary journal in the country … Each essay and memoir is like a great meal. It fills the reader with thoughts and leaves them deeply satisfied.’

— Sydney Morning Herald
INTRODUCTION

Storytelling, sense-making
Past, present and future
Julianne Schultz

NEVER before in human history has so much been known about so many by so many.

The social media revolution is less than a decade old, but it already has nearly a billion people in its thrall – men, women and children sharing mundane and intimate details of their lives, capturing the moment and sending it into the ether for others to enjoy, comment on, manipulate, recycle.

The speed of this mass global sharing is also unprecedented – so much to say, so little time, so many voices. The quick repartee once prized on the streets of New York has become a snappy global dialogue, witty, quick, no time to waste.

It took three years for the first billion messages to be sent on Twitter; now a billion messages are being sent every week. The number of people with Facebook accounts is tipping eight hundred million, and the Chinese equivalent Renren claims more than a hundred million. Add in the second-order networks, and one in six people in the world are actively and directly connected.

Make no mistake: this is not a commercial aberration, a fashion that will be gone in a blink. This is revolutionary. It will change the world as we know it, and change countless lives along the way. Like all revolutions it will take a while before the end point is clear, but this epidemic of global connectedness, the sharing of information, the surveillance, the display of wit, wisdom, mundanity and banality, will force changes in social, economic and political relations that we can scarcely imagine.

In his essay for Griffith REVIEW several years ago, ‘The writer in a time of terror’, Frank Moorhouse described the internet as providing an unprecedented mud map of the human mind – every dark corner on display, aggregated and available. Now that the internet has been personalised and populated with the public and secret longings, fears, desires and amusements of so many, the analogy needs to be stretched: social media has become an omniscient psychiatrist’s couch suspended in the cloud.
All the noise, all the chatter, the billions of photos, videos, soundtracks and words provide a cacophonous echo chamber. Putting it all together, trying to find patterns and narrative coherence, is quite a different matter. No time to be bored, little opportunity for reflection to make sense of it all; fleeting impressions, layer on layer of quick impressions, half thoughts and searing insights sweep over us, threatening to drown us. Where does it all go? How do we comprehend it? Is the mind a bottomless pit into which more stuff is constantly poured? Will there be a global shout: Stop, I want to get off, no more, enough already? Or will we just keep mining more and more personal information, hungry to every fleeting perception, every fear and pleasure?

I HAVE NO idea. But I do know that the desire to learn from the stories of others, to make sense of our own lives by delving into the detail of the lives of others, is something that is deeply embedded. Storytelling is the heart and soul of civilisation, the glue that binds people to each other and to place.

Before the social media revolution swept the world memoir was the literary form du jour. Memoirs were the publishers’ form of choice: memoirs of famous people telling the back stories of their lives and those they crossed, memoirs of nobodies with dramatic stories – tragic stories of loss and miraculous stories of survival.

It was such a boom it was scarcely surprising that some of the most striking of these tales became infamous when they were revealed as fabrications which bent the truth – an unforgiveable sin in a genre that purported to be true, to draw its power from the authenticity of the tale. Yet time and again the details in the most profitable ‘memoirs’ were found to be embellished, or completely made up. The trust between author and reader was destroyed, publishers’ reputations were tarnished.

There is a body of sophisticated analysis of this phenomenon – and indeed it is an area worthy of considered study. The difference between memory and documentary evidence, the perspectives of others, the dispassionate analysis of historians and biographers, the assessment of impact: all deserve to be teased out.

At a more prosaic level the memoir boom made many think that anyone could do this. Living an interesting life was just the beginning; writing about it not only helped make sense of it but provided a valuable record. The task of synthesis, providing a narrative structure, making sense of the minutiae and the immediate is what distinguishes these works from daily chatter.

Thanks to the internet it became possible to winkle out the hidden histories of genealogy (the third-biggest area of internet activity, by some counts) and stretch the back story, and the path for the homemade memoir was paved. Thanks to snazzy word processing and design software almost anyone could make a book look good, and the internet stripped self-publishing of its vanity tag. Anyone with the stamina
to write their life story could do so and find an audience. Many will sit in boxes in
attics and sheds waiting to be discovered, but others will be enduring gifts that bring
great joy.

I AM OPTIMISTIC that the collection and aggregation of so much information, so
many life stories, will add to the sum of human understanding. It will enrich the
virtual world inside our heads. It will make sense of different phases of life, and
with some time for reflection help craft a narrative arc of a life.

Martin Amis summed this up beautifully in the opening pages of his most recent

This is the way it goes. In your mid-forties you have your first crisis of mortality
(*death will not ignore me*); and ten years later you have the first crisis of age (*my
body whispers that death is already intrigued by me*). But something very interesting
happens to you in between.

As the fiftieth birthday approaches, you get the sense that your life is thinning
out, and will continue to thin out, until it thins out into nothing. And you will
sometimes say to yourself: That went a bit quick. That went a bit quick. In certain
moods, you may want to put it rather more forcefully. As in: *OY!! THAT went a
BIT FUCKING QUICK!!!...*Then fifty comes and goes, and fifty-one, and fifty-
two. And life thickens out again. Because there is now an enormous and
unsuspected presence within your being, like an undiscovered continent. This is
the past.

While the over-fifties may have more in their past bank to draw on, young people
have pasts as well, which are perpetually on display, and sometimes, as in this
edition of Griffith REVIEW, make the journey into crafted narratives distilling
important moments of a life.

In the social media age we inhabit, however, the boundaries between past and
present collapse into a perpetual now. With diaries kept online and shared, added to
and annotated, an unprecedentedly rich lode is being preserved in the cloud.
Ironically, the permanent present online may become a tool for the future. New
generations of biographers, historians and memoirists should, in future, be able to
draw on the excessive chat and notation of the twenty-first century to make sense of
this cacophonous connected present.
Looking back
A self-portrait
Lloyd Jones

‘The past it is a magic word,
Too beautiful to last.’
– John Clare

I HAVE stepped inside a replica of Leonardo da Vinci’s cabinet of mirrors, and here I am, as I have never before seen myself. The back of me, the sides, as well as the usual frontal perspective – in other words, the whole of me. I am delighted. I am vainly fascinated. Then, just as quickly, the excitement of discovery subsides. I don’t look as I have always thought I did or, more to the point, as I feel I should. I quite like the reflected image at forty-five degrees, where I look like the start of something promising, and therefore its appeal lies in its incompleteness. But then I notice the back view of my head and that is very disappointing: all that grey hair, and it isn’t just the grey but its fringe which, after a long and critical investigation, I am forced to concede is less the start than the end of something. I look very much like my father, whose side I had stuck to all those years ago on our ritual Saturday afternoon walk from Wellington’s Petone Railway Station to the Petone Recreation Ground to watch his beloved Petone play, and there is nothing quite as dismal as the realisation that you aren’t quite your own work.

On the walk from the station to the Udy Street entrance, little was ever said. Apparently there was nothing to say to a nine-year-old. But there was the smell of his overcoat, of ash and smoke from his rollies; a butt always stuck cartoonishly to his lower lip, even when he spoke. Little was said, but I felt connected by our common destination. We were off to watch Petone, as we did every Saturday afternoon through winter. As more and more people arrived out of side streets, I drew closer to his coat. I didn’t want to lose him in the crowd. All I could see were coated men to the front and the back of me. Little was said, that’s true. But things were still passed down. Things were absorbed. Either you got it or you didn’t, and I got it.
Still some distance from the ground we heard the crowd’s violent roar and I sped up. I didn’t want to miss anything. Soon I would become good at gauging the noise of the crowd. A hilarity around its edges probably meant a dog had run onto the field. Dogs were always running onto the field at the Petone Rec. Or else a low-quality match, or a one-sided one, had been brought to life by an unlikely hero, an overweight prop intercepting a ball and launching himself on an improbable thirty-yard surge for the try line. The crowd wanted such things to happen. It wanted the fat bastard to score the try.

Inside the gate, the world changed to a festive place. I quickly identified the club colours of the two teams going at it on the No 2 ground, and picked up the pleasing aromas of the carcinogenic hot dogs from the van parked at the northern end of the stand, and felt a general sense of uplift and appetite that had nothing to do with wanting to eat anything.

I left Dad to climb the concrete steps to the stand and hurried on to the players’ entrance, where I waited with the other kids. We sneaked envious looks at the older ball boys who were allowed to roam in the unpopulated green verge of privileged access between the fence and the touchline. For the moment, however, all eyes were trained in the one direction. From the dark tunnel under the stand we heard the sound of cleats on concrete. A slow march to begin with. The sound of cleats gathered, it grew heavier until faces up in the stand were drawn to the balustrade to look down. Then out of the gloom the giants emerged – huge, bandaged men reeking of liniment. There was the colossal figure of the All Black and Petone prop Ken Gray. He absorbed our prying eyes. His hands were huge. His eyes stared out of dark sleepless shadows. He slapped his hands, and as he passed through the gate he dropped his head and broke into a big man’s jog. That he did not appear to hear the cheers coming out of the stand always puzzled me.

THAT YEAR, 1965, I travelled up to Auckland with my mother to see off my oldest sister, Pat, on a ship sailing to Europe. On the wharf we stood in a different crowd from the usual Saturday crowd. This one held handkerchiefs and wept and remembered to wave up at the excited and mostly young faces hanging off the ship rail. As the passenger liner moved out from the wharf the streamers broke and fell into the dark harbour waters. We turned away, my mother with a tear in her eye, alone with her silent companion for the 450-mile rail journey home. What an enormous country we lived in. Its grassy emptiness floated by in the carriage windows. We passed out the end of nameless towns. I couldn’t wait to get back home to Stellin Street, Lower Hutt, where everything was perfectly proportioned.

Soon postcards from another world arrived in our letterbox – from Siena, Florence, London, places which didn’t feel very real, let alone relevant. I felt sorry for both my sisters (by now the younger one, Barbara, was living in Rome, and with
someone called Stefano); I felt sorry for them both because they weren’t here. They were missing out on all my fun. They didn’t know about my place on the back porch, shared with the dog, where I polished my boots and rubbed dubbin into my rugby ball. My sisters would not have known this, but in those days no two rugby balls were the same. Unlike the balls spat out of industrial moulds today, these leather balls quickly lost their shape, and their rotundity gave away their vintage; the older balls had the same shape as airships.

The dog must have started to feel shut out of my affections, because, for one thing, I just liked to hold the ball. On a trip up to the corner dairy the ball came with me. I tucked it under my arm. The ball was also something to look after, and unlike my dog it didn’t chase cats or shit on the neighbour’s lawn. It also provided me with hours of joy as I practised my place kicks with monastic application. I would build a mound on the front lawn, mount the ball, and line up the neighbour’s lawn on the other side of the street. The key was to swing through the ball so that connection was barely felt. The payoff was as immense as it was immediate. The perfectly struck ball would lift towards the power lines, spinning end over end to land with a pleasing drumming echo on the neighbour’s lawn. I don’t recall ever kicking the ball from the neighbour’s lawn back towards the house. My mother probably had something to do with that. So I would cross the road, pick the ball out of the neighbour’s hedge, tuck it under my arm and march back across the road to our lawn and make a fresh mound.

In a world where I had little control – someone else decided when I went to bed, what I read and ate, what I wore, listened to, looked at and looked like – here was a moment where I could impose myself. By understanding the aerodynamics of the ball I could influence its flight. In factoring in these things I was building a critical faculty. I had just kicked the ball beautifully – so effortlessly I hardly felt its weight against my toe. What had I done to achieve this? Or, for that matter, what had I done to make it float so half-arsedly across the road like a wet rag?

Struck the wrong way the ball was designed to pay back in kind; it wobbled and flopped and turned itself into a grief-stricken bladder of air. But when it rose in a perfect arc, spinning elegantly from top to bottom, briefly you felt as though you were playing with the cosmos, participating in the natural laws of gravity and physics. I understood this not in so many words but experienced it as a rush of joy. It lasted until the ball began its earthly descent, but this brevity added to its beauty.

Years later a spiral punt would deliver the same satisfaction. The kicking foot swept under the ball. Instead of spinning top to bottom it spun through the air like a torpedo. Close to the touchline a spiral punt carved off more yards than the naked eye expected, first by moving in-field, thereby adding territory, before curving back towards the sideline.
It’s rarely seen today. Dan Carter, for example, favours the less aesthetically pleasing and lower trajectory of the drop punt borrowed from Aussie Rules. It’s useful enough into the wind, but does not hold the eye in the way of a spiral punt. Mick Williment, the Wellington and All Black full-back, during this period of my apprenticeship, had a terrific spiral punt. He had great hands as well, and a sort of front-of-house managerial air about him. I was in more than one crowd that rose to its feet in a kind of operatic mid-performance applause as Williment caught a towering punt from his opposite and slid elegantly across the sideline. Laughable when compared to the attacking flair of the Hewson-Gallagher-Cullen-Muliaina model, but during my apprenticeship years in the 1960s and ’70s the sideline was the safety rail that the game clung to. A team would be happy to chew off bits of territory along the sideline. A midfield attack was considered pure folly, even irresponsible, as it ran a risk of the tightly controlled pattern of play falling apart. For god’s sake, anything might happen.

The games we played on the front lawn in Stellin Street were much looser affairs. Most afternoons after school we played on the next-door lawn of Mrs White. She was a solo mum, a swollen-faced woman. Although I never heard her referred to as a solo mum, an air of fallen grace hung in her doorway from where I once looked in at a cold and bare kitchen. I don’t remember ever hearing her speak, and at home she was hardly ever mentioned. She was a neighbour but not considered part of the neighbourhood. She wasn’t a gardener and didn’t appear to care (not that we ever bothered to ask) that we chewed up her lawn into mud – which, by the way, of all the lawns in the street was also the one that the dogs had figured out they could shit on with impunity. So usually there was some dog shit to move before we played, and these matches stretched on until well after the streetlights had come on, right up until Mum yelled from the end of the drive to come inside the house, your dinner’s on the table, thus signalling the end of anything good left in the day. There was nothing to do but to wait for morning and the prospect of rugby at lunchtime, then after school on Mrs White’s dog-shit lawn.

When a very famous All Black, Bob Scott, visited Dyer Street primary school, I was invited to the front of the hall in order for Mr Scott to demonstrate the correct way to pass a ball by passing it to me. It must have been during that visit that I heard that Bob Scott could kick a kerosene can from halfway in bare feet and that he did so regularly in order to harden the toes on his kicking foot. That I continued to believe this well into adulthood is embarrassing, but hardly surprising given my susceptibility to myth. (Years later, aged twelve, I visited the menswear shop owned by Bob Scott and Andy Leslie on Jackson Street, Petone. I wanted a Petone club jersey. Bob Scott made it clear he wouldn’t sell me a Petone club jersey because I hadn’t earned the right, since I was still at school and didn’t play for the club. Instead he sold me a Petone Tech jersey, also blue – although a lower grade of blue, without any history, and inferior as such in every possible way.)
In the interests of promoting a broader education my mother had taken out a subscription for me to *Knowledge* magazine. Once a week *Knowledge* arrived in the letterbox, and I flicked through pages crammed with science and history to get to the regular Greek myth feature. It was in *Knowledge* magazine that I first encountered Odysseus, Achilles, Hector, Helen, and Agamemnon, who in my mind joined another list of heroes whose names included Lochore, Conway, Gray, Meads, Laidlaw, Herewini, all key members of the 1965 All Blacks.

That same year the South African Springboks toured the country and my sister Barbara, who had returned from Italy to treat us to risotto night after night, bought me a souvenir magazine. There was a photo of the Boks playing in the snow. Was it Mt Taranaki (Egmont, as it was called then) or Mt Ruapehu? What I remember was the open-mouthed fun of the Boks and the feeling of pride that their having fun at our place engendered in me. What also struck me were their names. They had an otherness that I did not associate with rugby. It was hard to believe that such a strain had taken to the game. It was also beyond the bounds of possibility that they could play it as well as we could. I was quite sure of this. The Boks were here for our entertainment, and in order for us to enjoy our country through their experiences, because look at how much fun they were having playing in the snow.

On the eve of the Fourth Test in 1965 Dr Verwoerd made his famous Loskop Dam speech reaffirming the ban on Maori players touring South Africa. Years later I would read how New Zealanders turned against their tourists as a result of that speech. I don’t recall that happening at all. At least, it didn’t happen in that brick house at 20 Stellin Street. I cannot recall a single conversation about apartheid either at home or at school. I only mention this in order to underline the fortress aspect of my childhood.

Keith Oxlee, the Boks’ first five, visited Dyer Street School. I was a first five-eight so I felt an immediate bond. What I remember about that visit was the particular green of their blazers, unlike any green that was familiar, and the Springbok emblem, and also Keith’s smile – one of those smiles whose owner just wants to be everyone’s friend. About a hundred of us beamed back.

IT NEVER OCCURRED to me that I was from a very small country. I had no concept of my place in the world. The geographical space of New Zealand was hard to grasp. I knew we were surrounded by ocean. I had seen the ocean on a map pinned to the wall in the kitchen. Then there were those cities in Europe from where Pat and Barbara despatched their letters and postcards. By comparison with that world, our neighbourhood seemed vast and complex. Our house sat halfway between the golf course and the Park Avenue corner dairy. Over our back fence lay a wasteland of yellow smelling broom whose black seed cases made a popping sound in the summer heat, as well as an illegal dump which regularly went up in
flames. Once we lit it for fun and hid as the sirens of the fire engines wailed over the rooftops. This wasteland was also a refuge where we hid from the golfers hacking at the undergrowth to find the little bastards who had run out onto the fairway and stolen their golf balls; they later bought the same balls back from the greenkeeper, an unshaven Fagin who never ever climbed down from his tractor seat and who regarded our thievery as a necessary evil to guarantee his own supplementary income.

In my family there was no talk of ancestry. There was no sense of arriving at the tail end of a long and distinguished lineage. At home there was no worldly expectation of any kind; none of that vocational bias that enters the genes to produce generation after generation of doctors and lawyers. There was no profession or art, unless my mother’s knitting and my father’s welding are to be considered. History, expectation, cultural reference points – all of those I was to find on a playing field. And it was there, as well, that I was first allocated a place of my own.

In 1964, I was one of a large bunch of nine-year-olds gathered around the tall figure of the bespectacled Mr Forward in the hope of being handed a position on the footy field. We stood full of longing beneath his outstretched finger, waiting to be picked, to be allocated a place that would offer membership and certain entitlements. How potent that outstretched finger was, how fantastically and perversely arbitrary. How fantastically arbitrary may describe the beginnings of our universe. Prior to our drafting we had sung at the top of our lungs ‘Jamaica Farewell’ and, to Mr Forward’s keen strumming on the ukulele, we’d bellowed out ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’. Now we were being sorted into flamethrowers, archers, foot soldiers and officers.

None of us knew the implications of occupying the position we so eagerly wanted to be ours. We didn’t know if we were volunteering to be a human sacrifice or an officer safely positioned behind lines. When Mr Forward said he needed two props all our hands – foolishly – shot up. I was amazed to see two undistinguished fat boys picked. Now Mr Forward asked for a hooker. Again, along with everyone else, I stuck up my hand. Mr Forward wheeled about with that outstretched finger. He seemed to know who he was after. Again – unbelievably – I was overlooked. He asked for two locks and his eye shifted to the skinny Pawson twins, neither one of whom could take a step without stumbling. He asked for two flankers and a No 8. I had my hand up for all three, but by now without any real hope. Then Mr Forward picked a small kid for half-back. Just to rub it in the kid didn’t even have his hand up. Next, Mr Forward asked for a first five-eighth. This time I didn’t have my hand up. Slowly the finger moved across the tops of our heads until, unbelievably, it stopped at me. ‘That’s you,’ he said.

I remember feeling inwardly bitter and outwardly suspicious. I had been allocated a place that didn’t have a proper word attached to it. It wasn’t even a
whole number, but a fraction, a diminished fragment of the whole. It suggested a
very small place to occupy. I didn’t realise the huge favour he’d done me until our
first organised match against another school and I stood back, safely back, from the
stew of bodies with their fancy positional names which insanely, as it now became
clear, I had stuck up my hand for.

Letters and postcards from foreign places sent by my older sister, Pat, still in
Europe continued to arrive in the letterbox, but curiously they did not extend
my sense of a larger world waiting to be revealed as much as rugby did.

Through rugby I was discovering other corners of the valley hidden behind state
housing. Rata Street School in Naenae, the Taita Rugby Club grounds, and the
plusher treed streets around Eastern Hutt School. I was discovering variety: the
playing surface at Rata Street was soggy, at least it was that day; the vast array of
playing fields at Taita smelt of line paint and serious endeavour and therefore
unburdened itself of some future promise to me. At Hutt Intermediate, where we
played the first fifteen from an intermediate in Palmerston North, those kids seemed
to be completely unknowable. I have a memory of playing Wanganui Collegiate
and sitting next to a pot-belly fire drinking vegetable soup in the house where I was
billeted, but I remember nothing of either the match or the journey there and back.

Much later, at Hutt Valley High School, we travelled into other territories: Titahi
Bay, where we nearly froze to death while playing in a swamp lashed by a winter
southerly with needling rain; afterwards our hands were too numb to untie our
laces and so we stood in the showers in our gear until our blood flowed to our
extremities and we were able to function again. In the city we discovered Onslow, a
mixed high school like ours; its shared male and female pool of pheromones and
skirt-shifted air different again from Wellington College, a boy’s school with a
pharaoh’s army of about fifteen hundred boys, drawn from a more cosmopolitan
mix than out in the valley; some of the boys we played against were already shaving
and had chest hair sprouting out of the collars of their jerseys.

When we played at Wellington College we were aware, I think, of journeying
back to the source. It felt established, the way the fields were framed by old school
buildings and a turret jutted from neighbouring Government House. There was a
sniff of authority. Even the grass felt different. There was more of it, and it was
mown and groomed with enviable care. The goalposts stood taller. Our opponents
were no more skilful but they had something we didn’t have or had even known
about until the first time we confronted its starchy presence, and that was
confidence. Confidence in their own selves that seemed to be fed through some root
system connected to these surroundings, which we gawked back at like stupefied
tourists.

In the valley our fathers hardly ever came to the games. We didn’t expect
them to; our lives and theirs didn’t have much to do with one another’s now
that they had shown us the way to the park. But in town, at Wellington College, and especially at Scots College, we noticed the sidelines populated with knitted male brow and coat. At the end of a particularly ugly game against Scots, a private boys’ school, a father of a boy in the team we had just dismembered entered our changing shed to say what a disgrace we were to the spirit of the game. We rapists and murderers sat in a row of mud and listened dumbfounded and sort of amused that someone’s father would go to this trouble.

But the point is, these matches took us into new regions, and into areas of cultural uncertainty. We were easily intimidated by the smell of money and authority. No one told the father at Scots he was a cunt and to get out of our changing room. And that was a surprise and we seemed to sit there with the surprise of our own muted submission. Possibly because we recognised that there was a kernel of truth in what he said: we were a disgrace. Not all of us, and certainly not me. I didn’t go in for the cheap shots or underhand violence practised in the rucks and sometimes in the tackles, which referees dignified with the mild ‘over-vigorous’ charge. Rucking (the raking of sprigs over the body of a player supposedly protecting or obstructing the ball) was encouraged. Incredible now to think it was ever tolerated, because rucking was little more than a legalised form of assault. Few of us finished a game without long red scars down our backs. We accepted the punishment as the outcome of natural justice for the unacceptable and foul thing we had done by somehow finding ourselves between the ball and the drooling mob whose right to that ball was being obstructed.

A team was its own kind of crusading army. We brought our ignorance and prejudices into new territories. Rongotai College was about as strange and far removed from our patch as it could get. The hard ground sank beneath a sky filled with the drone of planes from the nearby airport, and air that smelt of bread. We were happier playing other teams from the valley. We knew their groove, knew the homes they lived in, knew what to expect. When we played teams from the city – especially when we travelled there – we wore our shortcomings like a beggar’s rags. We knew that they knew we came from a smaller place, that they were the big fish while we were spawn living in ditch water on a flood plain.

The western suburbs were different again. Mana and Porirua tended to have a large number of Polynesians. We could expect at least one guy, if not two or three, built like a truck, and that we would be trampled near to death, but in spite of that we would triumph in the end through prissily occupied territory and solicited penalties which sometimes were handed out to us at an embarrassing rate. Whenever these teams played us at home their out-of-townness stuck to them, their colours looked wrong, completely out of place, like a mistake to do with the natural order. After the match they would slope in the direction of the railway station, in ones and twos, and larger numbers, walking in socked feet, carrying their boots in
their hands, still in their rugby jerseys and filthy shorts, and silent, like the remnants of a shattered platoon returning to home base.

I NEED TO back-track here, because just before I started at Hutt Valley High School I experienced a dramatic off-field change that weirdly coincided with a positional change on the playing field.

My parents decided to retire to a small cottage set in the bush in Mahina Bay. Overnight, as it happened, it was as though we had tumbled out of the known world. There was no street. No neighbours living cheek by jowl. Instead, we lived apart, surrounded by bush, overlooking the harbour across to the western hills and the city. For some reason Dad bought a telescope. It sat on the front lawn, massively engineered, and as settled as a public monument.

At night possums clawed their way across the roof. Little blue penguins crawled up a pipe from the beach to roost beneath the water tank. On still nights foreign voices reached us from the decks of the oil tankers tied up at Point Howard wharf. My connection with place wasn’t quite the same as before. A distance opened up between my life at school, my life in the Hutt and my life in the bay. A distance that was to find its equivalent place on the rugby field with a shift to full-back.

A full-back is free to come and go as he pleases. What’s more, a full-back’s lone-ranging is shaped by spatial considerations. He is in the team but remains outside of the close intimate chain of hands. The sudden shift of attention to him is the price a full-back must pay for his go-it-aloneness. Such examinations come three or four times in a game, more if a failing (such as an inability to field a high ball) has been ruthlessly exposed. The rest of the time the full-back is left alone, appreciated and valued as an expression of the game’s capacity to accommodate a singular and free-thinking element. So, temperamentally, I felt at home. I was both part of and apart from. I could insert myself into the game at a moment of my own choosing.

There is no need to spell out the vanity of this position. At the time, though, I lived in the way that most teenagers do, unconsciously, and unaware of the shaping influences. Just as it never occurred to me to wonder why I always had to occupy a desk in the last line beneath the windows. Or to wonder why I was happiest when participating from the edge of things. I played a position where at times I was stationed half a playing field away from my teammates, behind the lines as it were. I attended a school in a community in which I no longer lived. In the hardwiring of neural pathways I was being fitted into becoming (happily) an outsider (though not a loner). The other thing to know about full-backs, as far as types go, is that they harbour ambitions that the more civic-minded prop would never entertain. It’s true – I thought I was pretty good.

It wasn’t until high school that I got a true idea of my abilities, and then, to my dismay – no, wait, it wasn’t that, hell no, because in fact I was wide-eyed with
admiration – I saw a slightly built boy a year or two older do something I had never seen before. It was the lunch hour, a few weeks into the start of the third form; my school uniform still smelt new on me, the shorts still bore their ironed crease and the newness of the elasticity in my socks left red marks around the tops of my calves. I was aware of something itching the back of my neck. It was the nametag Mum had sewn into the collar of my brand-new shirt.

Now, in the lunch hour, about fifty boys were playing missy on and off. For the uninitiated, it is a modified game of cricket. No cricket pitch or wickets are involved. Someone throws the ball to you and if you miss it or are caught then you are out and the bat changes hands. It’s a simple and efficient way of involving a large number of participants. As I’m watching, the batsman swings wildly, the ball flies off the edge, and from impossibly close range a hand shoots out and snaffles the ball.

The catcher’s name was Allan Hewson. Little more than a decade later, in 1981, he would kick the All Blacks to victory over the Springboks at the famous ‘Flourbomb Test’ at Eden Park. (The incident is so called after Marx Jones – no relation – buzzed Eden Park in a light plane as part of a protest against apartheid. On one of his sweeps he dropped a bag of flour which struck the All Black prop Gary Knight on the head. The big prop staggered, his knees bent, and he sank to the ground. A bag of flour dropped from that height ought to have killed him. Possibly it would have killed another. Knight got back to his feet, rubbed irritably at his head, and played on.)

Until high school, I had never seen so much athletic flair and ability packed into the one person. By his fifth-form year, Hewie, as he was known, was full-back for the first fifteen. Any full-back with a nose for flair at this time wanted to play like the brilliant Welsh and Lions full-back JPR Williams. Hewie was a slighter-built version, running wingers into space for try after try, catching the ball on his fingertips, raking off territory with his elegant left foot. By his final year at high school Hewie was the best full-back in the country, and that included, as far as many of us were concerned, all levels of the game.

Hewie left school and I took over at full-back. The nicest thing anyone said about my game was to confuse me for Hewson. It was after we played Hutt Old Boys. A spectator came up to me, and said, ‘I thought that was Hewson, then I thought it can’t be, he’s left school…’ Forty years on, I remember the moment. I had reached up and pulled down onto my fingertips a failed field goal attempt that dropped just below the bar, and set off on a counter-attack. I knew exactly what to do. My instincts were sharp. But the attack went nowhere. The excitement of the crowd rose and fell with humiliating haste as I kicked off the side of my foot.

Hewson would have found a door open in that closing defence. He would have made its line look ragged and full of holes. Whereas I saw a wall of furious faces and
so kicked. Another thing about that moment which seemed to crystallise all that was good and at the same time deficient about my game was my lack of inner calm. Also, I didn’t have Hewie’s loose-limbed speed. He never seemed to be moving at more than three-quarter speed, either. It was so effortless.

I wasn’t so bad. I was good enough to win the trophy for the best back that year. But it’s not quite as good as it sounds. Ours was a dysfunctional team, a mid-cycle first fifteen. The stars had left the year before. As the new incumbents, we were a bit young, a bit raw. Also, the great legacy we were meant to fulfil did not touch us all equally. A month into the season our fastest wing, Andrew Kear, decided he wasn’t interested in playing rugby anymore. I couldn’t believe it. None of us could. How could you not want to? Perhaps the answer lay in our incredulity. He just didn’t feel the same as we did.

Tuesdays and Thursdays we practised after school – drills and wind sprints that left our lungs burning and us, hours later, high on endorphins. At practice we were brilliant. We ran off one another’s shoulders, we dummied brilliantly, we changed the angle of the attack. The last man on the end of another sweet move dropped the ball on the deck with a light-fingered flourish, or slid stylishly to ground. The loosies arrived like an ambulance to the scene of an accident; next the locks, our big guys, bent over with famished eyes. Now the backs fanned out and the ball was quickly transferred. We had gone from our own line to dotting down under the sticks in a matter of twenty seconds. Hell, we were good. Of course no one ever said that aloud. But it was there, nonetheless, stuck to our faces in a film of happy sweat. We were brilliant, and never more so than when there was no opposition. From full-back I could see the problem. The open space once so accommodating to our genius was taken up by the inconvenient presence of the other team.

Actually, my start to the first fifteen was delayed a year. During my season in the second fifteen I was called up, but instead of releasing me to the firsts, John McKinnon, a gentle and thoughtful man off the field, sent my friend Paul Kerr-Hislop instead. John had propped for Hutt Old Boys; when he coached us he ran from his Point Howard home into the Hutt along the stopbank to our practice. He was still jogging into his late sixties, though by then he was a terrible sight, as he staggered with his shambolic gait into the wind on the bends around the Eastern Bays.

There was (I like to think) general surprise at Paul’s call-up. Well, I was amazed. Paul was athletic, but not as gifted as I was. Touchingly, I don’t think he actually realised that, and I imagine the moment he reads this he’ll be on to the phone to argue the point. But the truth is, what came naturally to me, honed in hours and hours on the front lawns of Stellin Street, was more of a mechanical challenge for him. Yet the coach sent him off with the firsts messenger instead of me. A good thing, as it turned out, because physically I would not have coped. I was a bit slight – in the Hewson mould but without his speed to get me out of trouble.
That year I went to live in the city with my sister Pat and her new husband, Bob Brockie, a zoologist studying for his PhD, in a wooden shambles above the Karori Tunnel. Bob had lived in Sicily, could play the piano, speak Italian after a manner, and was a brilliant political cartoonist. Different worlds, new worlds lapped up to the doors of that house in Karoa Road. I brought a different world altogether to it.

Paul Kerr-Hislop was the only other boy from a student population of two thousand at Hutt Valley High School who lived in the city. Actually, there was another but we didn’t count him. He didn’t play rugby and was possibly agnostic about the game, like my sister. He tended to sit by himself on the train with a transistor glued to his ear. We didn’t see him on the return trip because when school finished we went on to practice. Afterwards, in the dusk, we stood on the platform at Woburn Station, positionally at odds with the flow of school uniforms dispersing to different areas of the Hutt, waiting for the train into the city. After practice you found yourself in a sort of out-of-body state, barely able to talk, but as happy as a monk. In Paul’s case, his lightness of being was further heightened by his parents’ starvation policies. Devotees of the self-styled School of Philosophy, they followed a strict diet which called for weekend fasts. So on the railway platform Paul sucked hungrily at the fruit lozenges I bought if I had the dosh. I remember him eating a home roast with a relish that made him almost incandescent by the time he had banged down his knife and fork. Fortunately the starvation policies at home didn’t affect his form. On the other hand, he wasn’t asked to do much. He was a gatekeeper, a looker-after of the turnstile, a necessary but un-flamboyant link in the chain of events that would result in Hewie splitting the opposing backline to send the winger scorching over in the corner.

Travelling out from the city each morning, I had the full-back’s exalted feeling of running in from deep. The abattoir workers in their white gumboots, most of them Maori, got off at Kaiwharawhara. After that stop the train ran alongside the harbour, and gazing across the harbour in the direction of our cottage in the bush of Mahina Bay produced the new sensation of seeing a past life neatly bookended and preserved, like something apart that I could pick up and study and put down again. The train sped on, until I was staring down into the shabby backyards of Petone and Moera and ready for my other life to reclaim me.

Saturday was the point of the week existing at all, and each one followed the same beloved routine. The joy of waking to match day. A quick look out the window at the weather. The cleaning of boots and packing of gear. Then around noon the train out to the Hutt. The pre-match routines. The miles of bandages we loved to wrap around our limbs and heads. The heart-fluttering moment before kick off. The match. The after-match – sausage rolls and beer. Then the party after the after-match, always at someone’s house, and often it was someone we didn’t know; word of a party had gotten around. Late on the Saturday night, and often in the
early hours of Sunday morning, Paul and I would find ourselves trudging along the stopbank with our gear bags. Sometimes a fog lifted off the river but always drunken noise rose from the tin roofs of Whites Line West and the rugby league clubrooms on Strand Park. We’d missed the last train from Woburn. Now we had to walk to Petone Station. We left the stopbank to climb up onto the railway bridge to cross the river into Ava; the cold air was beginning to break down the false protective layers of alcohol; forgotten bruises were beginning to make themselves felt. Both of us were silently absorbed by the what if scenario if we had missed the last fucking train into town. Then what? In town, the last bus had left hours earlier. Near the cenotaph we took off in different directions. Paul up Molesworth Road to the fasting household, while I headed for the tree-cast shadows along the Tinakori Road stretch of the Botanic Gardens, fifteen hours after leaving for the match, bushwhacking the last twenty metres to my squalid hole beneath the house.

My sister Pat never knew the time I arrived home. She didn’t know the routine. She never asked about the game. Nor did it occur to me to tell her. That she didn’t comprehend the cultural pathways into my game was a given. Although, in my early days of autograph collecting (I was never an enthusiast; the autograph book had been Barbara’s and passed down to me filled with its meaningless names of pole-vaulters and long-jumpers and walkers), she did manage to get me Mick Williment’s signature. On other occasions she used to tease me with a boast that years earlier some famous All Black had pursued her, but whenever I demanded names she could only come up with, ‘Oh, I can’t remember. Don somebody...’

The violence at the parties would have horrified her. On the other hand, sharing a confidence about the casual sex available would have seen her shift to the edge of her seat to show an uncommon interest in her little brother. On one of the long marches home along the stopbank in the fog Paul had kept at bay the usual anxieties surrounding the last-train scenario, with a vivid recounting of the two hours he’d spent locked in a cupboard with someone called Jane. This is the sort of thing that would have interested Pat. But if I was to recount a sweet moment in the game where I had burst onto a ball to split open the defence her eyes would have dulled over behind a cloud of cigarette smoke that formed a dense cultural barricade. Her conversation stopper was, as it is now, to grind out a cigarette and gaze out a window.

Raroa Road wasn’t a rugby household. How strange. How completely weird that they didn’t know what I knew. The same applied to my older brother, Bob. He wasn’t into the game. I don’t know how he escaped its clutches because rugby in those days reached into the pores of everyone’s existence. Bob was a boxer. He loved boxing and I’d grown up with a portrait in the sitting room of him peering over two gloves. He left home and left behind his gloves. John Gilmour and I would put on a glove each and club one another to death. I could see its attractions, but Bob didn’t really know my game. Once, when I stayed over at his house, in a spur-of-
the-moment sort of thing we drove over to Wainuiomata to watch Wellington Maori play Wanganui Maori. I ended up ball boy after Bob appointed me in an ex-officio capacity, and when the half had clearly run overtime he pushed me out onto the field to tell the ref to blow the whistle. For him that had been the most entertaining part. Otherwise, he didn’t get it. Maybe because he was a foundation pupil at Naenae College and there was no legacy to absorb. Whatever the reason, he’d tapped into a different mythology. He knew about great boxers just as I knew about great rugby players.

As for the household on Raroa Road, it was agnostic. My sister Pat and Bob Brockie were the worst kind of agnostics. They hated the game. Allocated the priest hole under the house I was able to keep my faith a secret. It must have worked for them as well, because with my form of ardent faith I was a potential embarrassment. There were always people coming and going in that household, writers, political people, important people, I gathered, and hippies.

One night, when I was fifteen, my sister sent me off with a beautiful dark-haired hippie called Felicity. I don’t think I knew where we were going until we were there – at a demonstration outside Parliament protesting against the players who were participating in the All Black tour to South Africa in 1970, an event I was hugely looking forward to. The players were all there. And of course I knew the name of every one of them. Felicity and I found ourselves standing near the frontlines, in pole position I secretly noted, to get a glimpse of my heroes. As they appeared at the top of the steps the crowd found its voice. I was amazed by its rage. I knew about the energy of the crowd from big matches. But I’d never heard rage from a crowd, apart from a chorus of indignation that follows a dubious refereeing decision. Soon the All Blacks’ bus pulled up at the bottom of the steps and one by one the players climbed aboard. I remember Jazz Muller sitting down looking out of one of the windows to the rear with an uncertain smile. He wasn’t a player I identified with (Jazz played prop, and so was a mere rampart beneath the glorious arches, as far as I was concerned). His face didn’t quite know which expression to hold. It was caught between a rueful grin and a sadness, possibly disappointment.

As for me, the part of me I thought most secure felt smothered and abused. Worse than that, I felt as though I had been kidnapped and enlisted into a calling that was not my own. And as the crowd bayed I felt a shame that I had last felt standing on the fringes as other kids tortured ants under a magnifying glass. I could just understand the crowd’s argument. It was its anger that I didn’t get. Forty years on it is hard to prise open that young heart and mind in order properly to assess the pity I felt for Jazz Muller. I wonder if in seeing that trace of sadness on the All Black prop’s face I sensed something had passed, something ineffable, a there-forever feeling as we might think of it at the time and in one quick unexpected moment it had passed before our eyes. Perhaps the word I am after here is childhood.
I loathed the mob. If it had real rage it would have smashed the bus. But it was a safe kind of rage, safely and cleanly exercised behind the railings, toothless finally. I could not believe in its anger. I knew about anger, but in my experience I knew it exclusively as a physical phenomenon. You hit me – I’ll hit you back. That’s the stuff of the street and lunchtime scraps. I didn’t connect anger with intellectual indignation. At the time, I said nothing to my sister’s hippie friend. We drove back up to Raroa Road in silence. I remember my sister meeting me at the door, practically glowing: ‘So, how was that?’

Eleven years later, at the very moment Hewie was lining up his famous penalty against the Boks at Eden Park, I had a clearer understanding of the anti-tour protest. Its rage was as much against the place of the game in our lives. It had too much say. Also, its voice or at least the tone of its argument was scarily similar to a rugby team’s inner voice: either you are with us or against us. I could no longer range on the edge of things. Some sort of tribal affiliation was being asked of me. Was I for the tour? Well, yes, and no. I supported the rights of those who wished to watch the Boks play. So did that mean that I aligned myself with the pro-tour lobby? No. Was I against apartheid? Of course. But could I join the anti-tour ranks? No – because by now the argument had become overheated, to the point where it had lost its shape. The real fight concerned the intolerance of one sector of the community for the seemingly intractable position of another. The charges relied too much on hectoring and bullying. Its language was too deliberately blunt, too falsifying and hyperbolic…its fidelity too demanding.

Interestingly, these are the same reasons why I walked away from the game as a player. I had reached the point where I only wanted to play full-back. I had turned into a sentry who cannot be trusted to patrol the castle walls. I might fade away and disappear into the forest where the enemy lurked. The enemy? It is a strange word, but the right one, because what I had in mind or vaguely aspired to was a full return to the dominion of selfhood. For that to happen I would need to leave the team environment. I would need to place myself outside of that which I had always felt a member of.

At the time I was unable to articulate any of this. It wasn’t until my mid-twenties, when I was employed by a very good bookshop in the Hutt to sell books to schools, that a copy of Greg McGee’s Foreskin’s Lament fell into my hands. I remember reading it in a van pulled up to the banks of the Hutt River and feeling as though I was dipping into a language that had not been written before, and that in the character of Foreskin, a university student playing for a club, I was reading about myself. The recognition was jaw-dropping. In the final scene of McGee’s play Foreskin rakes his foot back and forth as though rucking for something hidden (the rugby ball) and repeats Whadarya? Whadarya? Whadarya?
IN MY LAST team photo, in 1973, one year out of high school, I am clearly one of the younger ones playing for Eastbourne Seniors. From the bemused uplands of middle age, I am surprised by the surliness of that unfulfilled face. I can’t imagine that I actually felt sour. What was there to feel sour about? I suspect it was a default expression – in the absence of other knowledge or experience of how to present myself to the world. Perhaps I resent the intrusiveness of the moment, and I am intent on meeting head-on the prying of the camera, suspicious, as I imagine I am at that moment, of this formal request to pass myself off in a plausible way. The older players look more sure of themselves. Some are smiling, and it is clear from the photo that they know the drill and display a dignified belief in these proceedings. There is Blackie, for example, arms folded, a rock in the scrum, who a few years later would slide off a roof to his death. There is Dickie, looking like a young pirate, whose funeral I attended just a few years ago in the clubrooms where this team photo hangs today. One or two at the back grin at all the trouble gone to. Forwards, of course, and all of them decent men. And there is old sourpuss – the youngest player, sour as a lemon. There is a late-adolescent puff about that young face. It doesn’t know what it wants of the world, and it sure as hell doesn’t want to give anything back, least of all a smile, and certainly nothing that might set fast into a character-defining tic.

The young newt must eventually shed its skin. The club jersey I had wished upon myself passed. A whole new representative possibility would eventually blossom from unexpected sources. I had outgrown my various jerseys; each one now felt like dead skin and shrinking by the day. It sounds immodest, even ungrateful, to plot the changes in this way, especially as modesty was drummed into me from the earliest days of my apprenticeship. You did not caw. You did not put the boot in or seek to take unfair advantage. I was taught this and other gospels by a man at the Naenae club (since absorbed by Avalon, which absorbed Taita) who used to say Sid day when he meant Saturday. As adages to live your life by they may not have the high-mindedness of Rousseau or Emerson, but they have their own truth.

LIKE MOST EX-PLAYERS of my generation I remain in touch with the game. There are very few Tests that I have missed in the televised age. There was a time while living in France and again in America that I relied on newspaper clippings sent from home to keep me up to date. I still scan the weekend’s club rugby results, even though the only one that mildly interests me is Petone’s. The All Blacks are a different matter.

In 2010, when they played the Wallabies in Hong Kong, I happened to be on a flight between Pisa and Berlin. It was unsettling to know that they were playing and I wasn’t glued to a screen. Somewhere over the Dolomites I figured that as soon as the plane touched down at Schöenefeld I would catch the express into the city and at
Hauptbahnhof switch tracks to pick up the S75 and get off at Hackescher Markt. I knew from past experience the filthy Irish bar beneath the tracks would be showing the match and that it would be packed with expats and stray Berliners. With a bit of luck I’d get there in time for the second half. By the time we’d started our descent I was happier. But I had failed to take into account the International Date Line. My calculations were out by a day.

There are others like me, who grew up with the same proportioned world, on the same playing fields, conscripted at a similar early age. I’ve seen them in cafés and bars all over the world, in Villefranche, Toulon, Lisbon, Amsterdam, London, in Avaru in the Cook Islands. They enter the establishment and cast a wild eye up at the overhead screen, puzzled at first, and now looking terribly concerned. They approach the bar with a kind of high-strung look to buttonhole the barman, who, incredibly, does not appear to share the same sense of alarm or potential for grief should the game have been missed. This fan usually comes armed with information. The game is on channel such-and-such. I want to watch it. I have to watch it. Sometimes the barman will pick up the remote and scroll down upcoming sports events, and there it is, the All Blacks match, wonderfully eye-wateringly listed, still to come. All is right with the world. Smiles all round. Blood pressure plummeting back to normal levels. And that is how it is. That is how it will always be, I imagine, to the end of my days.

When my own children were born I resolved to baptise them in different waters. I didn’t want my journey to be theirs, and not because of any disappointment in my own. Rather, I thought that the place I had arrived at might be the starting point for them. I thought if they knew about the sea, how to play in it and enjoy it, and if they knew about art, books, reading, those things would be enough. And so it has proven to be. But weirdly, now that I think about it, I am guilty of displaying my own sister’s snobbery towards the game. By pushing them in a different direction am I guilty of denying them the experience of the other?

My sister Pat, by the way, is now a fan. She will often try and argue with me. For example, she has a soft spot for the Wallabies. I let her go on at the other end of the line. I wait patiently, as Murray Deaker must, to endure the most rabid and misinformed of his talkback callers, before starting on my educated explanation as to why she is wrong, completely wrong, in every single thing she has just said. And then, if she persists, I reply with a stoic’s silence.

Lloyd Jones is a Wellington-based writer whose books include the novel Hand Me Down World (Text, 2010); the short-story collection The Man in the Shed (Text, 2009); Mister Pip (Text, 2006), which won the 2007 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and was shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize; and The Book of Fame (Penguin, 2000), about the 1905 All Blacks tour of the British Isles. ‘Who’s that dancing with my mother?’ appeared in Griffith REVIEW 25: After the Crisis.
On my left index finger is a ring that fits snugly. It’s been there for a decade. I began to wear it several years after my father died. Then, a few days ago, I was washing my oily hands in hot water – I’d been cooking a fish dish – and the ring slipped off. This had never happened before. I’m staying in lodgings in London – though they go by some flashier name – and the basin I was using lacked a plug, the metal sort you manipulate up and down via a lever behind the central hot and cold tap. The ring shot straight down the plughole.

It is a gold band joined in a buckle, known as a keeper ring. I didn’t think this would happen either: I am the third member of my family to wear it: first my grandfather, then my father, now me. Or should I say, then me. The last. The ring had gone. I looked down the plughole and saw only darkness, imagined the heirloom plummeting down the narrow pipe – I’m on the third floor – into some tributary, water rushing through it towards a main artery in the vast subterranean network of London’s sewers. The only hope of its rescue – but not by me – being that it might stall in one of the old Victorian pipes undergoing seemingly endless replacement, and be prized by its sweating finder, though most likely he’d have thicker fingers than mine. Otherwise, it was as good as vaporised.

What struck me was that I accepted the loss. I’d inherited the ring, worn it for a while, now it was gone. History. What happens. At most, I felt a bit forlorn. This is not what I would have imagined feeling had the incident been hypothetical. I’d surely have conceived then that my mind would start racing, as fast as the ring, towards upset, distress. A flood of feeling. Who was this person, six decades alive, Endeavouring to be commonly wise, a representative believer in self-examination, for myself and for the sake of others – indeed, a believer in knowing myself, lizard brain included, its existence the reason why we are so riveted by wild fellow creatures, birds or reptiles, whether threatened by or attracted to them – who was this cool, civilised stranger staring dumbly down a dark plughole where something significant had dropped?
I assume my father began to wear the ring, also on his left index finger, in 1953, the year his father died. I think he admired him. The men in my family have the hands of clerks, not labourers, slender index fingers to relay the gold band. But I always thought, with its buckle, it looked masculine, not an ornament – exhibiting strength, not foppery. What it first represented for my grandfather – assuming he was the first wearer – I don’t know. He was a major in the British army on the administrative side, an accountant: not the only buckle he would wear. The one on his finger was part of a man’s solid ring, of its time. Over the years countless molecules of gold have been rubbed off, and even when I was a boy the delineations of the buckle were smoothed. Soft gold. I wanted to hold it. On my father’s finger it represented continuity, even authority, when there was family turbulence.

Now I had lost it, not far from where I spent my childhood. When very young I could not have conceived that I’d never want to wear it; that after my father died, in 1996, I’d reject its weight on my finger, having tried the ring on, as a thing I’d have to shake off. The weight of decades, for the widower and his son, of mutual impatience and blame, erosion of respect, words not said, kindnesses not built upon – mutually tough dependence, like the tongue of a belt in its buckle. Or, perhaps, mutual need of each other, blood-tied in a psychological grapple, no time limit, age eventually on my side. How could such a survivor suddenly wear the very thing that would signal a victory?

Eventually, I did wear it. It happened this way, unexpectedly. Do we best discover knowledge of ourselves when caught unawares? I’d returned the keeper ring to the small blue pull-top bag supplied by the funeral director, stored it in a drawer, and mostly forgot about it. Later, because I was going away for a long time, the ring and countless other items were stored in the roof of my house, prior to it being leased. When I returned, five or six years after the funeral, down came the stuff again – and I spotted the little cloth bag. I opened it, inspected the ring, tried it on, idly, index finger, left hand. It felt right. I left it there. Why? What had happened? I slowly realised that I’d changed but hadn’t kept up with the pace. The change was subterranean, faster flowing than I could have conceived. Proof the self can be ever transforming – shadows capable of changing to shine. It struck me: I had become reconciled to my father without really knowing it. Now it was my index finger that burnished the inside of the ring.

Those years when the ring had been stored in the cloth bag, a forgotten thing, I’d been leading a partly secret life: conversing with myself about my father, indeed, sometimes internally talking to him. Long ago I’d realised that I was never going to treat my own children in the way my father had treated me. Cut out the fear, nurture the seeds of encouragement. Let affection bloom. Now I’d begun to see him, from a distance in time, in his own right, free of what I’d encouraged in him – so different to what my daughters have encouraged in me, and who loved him, that isolated, stoical man who never complained about his lot. Who could drown
overcooked meat and two veg in a lake of gravy and be convinced that no finer meal could be ordered in any restaurant; who on a par three sank two holes-in-one in a single week but spent much of his time in the rough; who considered the hand-sized huntsman spiders he shared his house with to be his ‘friends’; who smoked a pipe; who lived, after I left home, ever alone; who, being a fit, determined, punctual man, never took a day off work during his forty-four years as an actuary, except for my mother’s funeral, in 1962; who had been a prodigy in mathematics; who, a lone campaigner for correctness, made lists of words whose pronunciation Australians, in his view, mangled; who wrote published letters to Melbourne’s Age; whose eyebrows were long and wild; who once drew a wounded bull on a Cabcharge receipt and said to my daughters, That’s how they charge; who was a whiz at cryptic crosswords; who loved whisky; who lived, and wore, on his left index finger, a gold keeper ring.

It was gone. I thought the upset must surely come later. The loss. I looked down the plughole again, then realised that in my pocket was a keyring torch. I was glad nobody chanced to spot me so carefully examining the facilities which, if the owners are honest with themselves, require some capital outlay. To my astonishment, I spotted the glinting rim of the ring – saved from a freefall by an obstruction, a nail or something. I was no longer fatalistic or forlorn but, seized by the need for rapid action, ran to get that most protean artefact, a coathanger, unwound the neck, stretched the length of the wire straight, made a crude hook at one end and, nervously, lowered it. I’d been fooling myself when I accepted the loss: shocked. Now I was attempting surgical precision, a make-or-break raising manoeuvre, wire in one hand, tiny torch in the other. The ring shifted promisingly, then slipped past the obstruction. But not, amazingly, out of sight. It hadn’t occurred to me that the downpipe would be U-shaped – what ignorance we can live with! Now, should any witness have been about, I was a novice plumber, crouching, engaged in frantic dismantling, heavy breathing. The ring! Soon I had it in my hand, and a lot of water on the tiled floor – had what the ring represents, and a reassertion of the importance of it. In the future I hope one of my grandsons will choose to wear the gold keeper and, hey, even flash it.

Andrew Sant’s latest collection of poems is Fuel (Black Pepper, 2009). He is currently Writing Fellow at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Other prose pieces by him have recently appeared in Antipodes, Island, Meanjin and Best Australian Essays 2010.
In late October I collapse while checking my post office box. A scatter of mail across the footpath – mostly bills – and a lot of scuffed shoes in close-up. Fifteen minutes later I am in the emergency department of my local hospital listening to the car-alarm beep of my heart and watching it spike across a monitor. Who decided on the universal sound for the heart in distress? And why is the spike green – shouldn’t it be red? My heart rate climbs and climbs. Two hundred beats a minute. 220. 230. The beeping machine is an effective siren. Every doctor in emergency gathers around my bed. The nurses rip off my shirt, remove my bra with more confidence than any man I’ve ever known and stick sheets of clear plastic across my chest.

‘What’s that for?’ I ask.

‘Protects the skin from burns when we shock you.’

An electric shock. The underside of the defibrillator is smooth like an iron. I remember a homework project I did in grade four: ‘The Wonder of Electricity.’ Any minute now I am going to be jump-started with a slab of iron. I wish that electricity had never been invented.

I have a fault in the electrical wiring of my heart. A heart defect. The faulty circuitry creates a feedback loop with the healthy circuitry producing bursts of tachycardia. In a matter of seconds my heart rate climbs from seventy to 250 beats a minute. The pain is similar to a heart attack. It feels like a steel javelin has speared through the left side of my jaw. I imagine pieces of my face flying off and scattering at my feet, and I’m pleased about it – as long as it relieves the pain. My skin blanches. I whimper. I run around stupidly. I lie on the ground and rock backwards and forwards. I swear. And then, as suddenly as it has started, it stops.

The heart itself feels no pain. In much the same way as your doctor sends you off to a specialist, the heart refers pain to other parts of the body. In men this is usually the chest or the left arm; in women, the neck and the jaw. After one painful episode of tachycardia I raked the flesh off my jaw with my fingers and wasn’t even aware
that I was bleeding. Don’t assume that when you are subjected to severe pain, in a car crash for instance, you will pass out and wake up remembering nothing. The body is not designed to protect you from pain, but to insist that you feel it. And experience with pain doesn’t improve your ability to bear it. I am no braver, no stronger, no more able to endure the pain than the first time it happened. If anything I am warier, my pain memory is finely tuned. I wince every time I inject myself with the smallest gauge needle. A minor knock or fall is enough to make me shake. There are drugs to help control the condition, and I have gone on and off them. The drugs slow the heart rate but they slow everything else too. Life on the drugs is a slow waltz performed under plastic wrap. I don’t like them and mainly I don’t take them.

I have lived with tachycardia all of my adult life. Some of my sharpest memories are not of specific attacks, but of the humiliation of being seen in pain in public. I remember travelling on a train in Greece, the smell of olives on the breath of the boy sitting next to me, and his cry of surprise as I fell against him. Returning from that same trip I saw my mother at the airport holding a bunch of flowers in her outstretched hand like a club, while I was frozen some distance away, sunk by the weight of my backpack and the sudden pain. And in Central Australia I shared a sleeping bag with a man who assumed my pale and trembling state was the result of his skills as a lover.

Ten days after the post office attack that put me in hospital I am out again and in the office of a cardiologist talking about my heart. He is a mild-looking man in early middle age: balding, a pinstripe suit. He asks me how my heart feels in the few beats before an attack. I tell him it is like a bell ringing in the distance or the strike of a large clock. He blinks and writes something in my file. He recommends an operation. Catheter wires will be inserted in the veins and arteries of my groin and neck and threaded into my heart. A number of different veins and arteries will need to be opened and tracked until the ones going to the location of the fault are found. It sounds a bit like navigating the arterial roads into Paris, never really being sure that you are going to get there.

Once inside my heart the cardiologist will ‘play around’ and decide what to do next. Most likely he will burn my heart using radio frequency. If it goes well the tachycardia should be cured. If it goes badly he might accidentally burn a hole in my heart, or accidentally burn the wrong set of electrical circuitry and I will need to be fitted with a pacemaker. Whatever the outcome, he says that my heart will be a bit upset for a while. Do I have any questions?

It is a lot to digest. I ask if he can burn away the piece of my heart labelled ‘past loves’. He frowns, closes my file and stands to shake my hand. We walk through to his secretary’s office to arrange a date for the operation. I hear the secretary remind him about his upcoming week in Hawaii and I think how strange it must be to have someone know exactly where you will be every day of the year. She has
shaded his diary with different blocks of coloured pencil, like a bar graph. Even
the secretary is good, I tell myself. She doesn’t rush things. She doesn’t let the
pencil go outside the line.

THREE WEEKS OF waiting. The drugs must be out of my system before the
operation and I am not sure how my heart will respond to this much freedom. I
unload various commitments. I don’t go out much. I spend whole days in bed. I
read a stack of yellowing Georgette Heyer novels featuring gentlemen heroes in
well-cut breeches and swooning maidens that I expertly diagnose with
supraventricular tachycardia. If only cardiac catheter surgery had been available in
Regency England. But mainly this time of waiting is a good time – an enforced
strike. Something is about to happen to me, but I am not responsible for it. I feel
more important than usual. My friends tell me to be kind to myself.

A newer friend, Liz, insists that I visit her a few days before the operation. On the
afternoon I go to her house she is standing, tall and girlish in her weekend jeans, at
the front door. She takes me out the back to meet her husband, who is making
jewellery in the shed. We stand and watch as he solders some silver on a brooch.

Bob, Liz explains, has been taking things easy lately. This is because he had a
heart attack three months ago. Bob and Liz exchange a meaningful married glance
and we walk through to the kitchen together. Bob brings me a mug of tea. Then he
kneels beside my chair, undoes the buttons of his shirt and slips it off. His skin is a
boyish pink but his chest hair is white. He looks middle-aged. He looks vulnerable.
He looks like someone else’s husband. I am surprised and confronted and I look
away. Bob is undeterred. He takes my hand and places it on his chest. Not over his
heart, but higher up, almost to the shoulder where his pacemaker sits like a
miniature spaceship that has landed at a tilt beneath the skin.

‘Come on, Carrie. Feel it. It isn’t so bad. Nobody even notices. Not with clothes
on, anyway.’

I nod and murmur. I try to say the right thing, and it isn’t hard. The pacemaker
doesn’t look or feel too bad. Bob tells me that it sets off the security alarm at Kmarts;
that his welding career is over; that he can’t stand too close to the car alternator with
the bonnet up; and that there are the predictable problems with airport security. He
stands up and strolls around the kitchen bare-chested. He tells me how in the first
few weeks the pacemaker had to learn the rhythms of his heart. Getting out of bed
was tricky until the pacemaker learned to put in a few extra beats to compensate for
the change in effort and gravity. It reminds me of teaching a computer to recognise
your language so it can type for you, except in Bob’s case the pacemaker had to
learn the language of his heart.

Bob washes his mug at the sink, puts his shirt on and goes back to the shed. Liz
watches as he walks through the garden. He’s doing well, she says. There has been
some emotional upheaval and some depression, but soon he will pass the magic six-month mark. If you’ve survived six months after a heart attack your odds are the same as everyone else’s. Her voice swells with concern for him.

Liz hugs me farewell at the door. She is kindly and full of good intentions. She knows that the worst outcome of my surgery will be a pacemaker, so she arranged to show me one. In her mind I have confronted my fear and come through.

We wave goodbye. I hold it together until the end of the street. Then I slide my hand under my shirt and feel the place where the pacemaker would go. I think about Bob. It isn’t the same. It isn’t even close to being the same. The pacemaker will not go into the firm muscle of a masculine chest, but into the first softness where my shoulder becomes breast. I am an ordinary-looking woman in my forties. It shouldn’t matter; but it does. My real fear, the fear that I can’t raise with Liz, or any of my other friends, is that with a pacemaker inside me I may never feel sexy again.

SOME HOSPITAL PROCEDURES are baffling. On the morning of the operation I repeat my name and date of birth to seven different people. Bored, I think of making something up. A nurse shaves my pubic hair. I’d done this myself the day before, but a number two isn’t short enough. The nurse says she likes the look of a number one.

It is a very long operation and there is no medication before the surgery – this could interfere with my heart rhythm. The anaesthetist waits until the last moment to put me to sleep. I argue with her. Why do we call it sleep? As if you could sleep through a heart operation? But then I feel ashamed. She’s just doing her job, and I like her. She is an older woman with thick glasses on a plastic chain around her neck. She shows me her daughter’s master’s thesis – she is going to read it while I am ‘under’. The cardiologist arrives and rows of machines are immediately switched on. I refuse to be lifted onto the operating table and climb up myself. The cardiologist gives me the thumbs-up, as if he’s about to take off on an important mission. He looks jaunty in his hospital greens although the hair net strikes me as optimistic. The anaesthetist shunts a clear liquid through the cannula in my elbow. I watch the underside of her arm thick with goose pimples as she reaches across for the intubation pipe. They shut me down. I remember nothing.

Fritz is there when I wake up. He is a medical exchange student from Germany. Every day he watches someone’s operation. Today he chose to watch mine. I struggle to open my eyes against the pull of chemicals. Fritz blinks happily. He looks inordinately pleased with himself. As if he’s performed the operation himself – single-handedly, free of charge and in the open air.

‘You will veel a leetle drowsy.’

He has lettuce between his teeth. I fade out again into a pharmaceutical half-dream where Fritz is helping Heide tend her goats on the glossy green slopes of the Alps. They are talking about cheese.
When I wake again I am in a different room but Fritz is still there. He wants to ask me questions, but intubation has scraped most of the lining off my throat and I can’t speak. He asks to inspect my ‘groins’, to check that the veins that were opened for the catheter wires aren’t bleeding out. I am powerless against his cheer. He smiles and nods and bustles and writes notes to himself. He hums a folksy little song under his breath.

The next slab of time is thick and lumpish. I sleep and sleep. Whenever I wake it is a struggle to get out from underneath something heavy and smothering – the blanket of anaesthesia.

A great deal of medicine in Australia is administered by sporting analogy. I wonder if it is the same in other countries? Nurse Gary wheels the blood pressure monitor over to my bed. He puts his fists up, spars with it, then reels back pretending he has taken a nasty blow.

‘What are you reading then?’

‘Chekhov.’

‘A thriller?’

‘No. That’s more the other bloke, Dostoyevsky.’

‘Righto. I’ll look him up. I like a foreign thriller.’

Nurse Gary says I’m looking pretty fit. He says I’ve clearly put in some solid work pre-season and I’ll soon be taking my position on the field again. He cautions me about the difference between general fitness and match fitness and says it might take some time before I harden up enough to play the full four quarters. He takes my pulse and blood pressure. He’s impressed. Just by lying flat out on a hospital bed I’ve impressed him.

‘Yep, you’re looking pretty damn fit.’

He writes something on my chart and walks away, playing a few block shots with an air cricket bat as he leaves.

While I am in hospital the Pope dies and is replaced. Saul Bellow dies too, but he is irreplaceable. A few months earlier I had read Bellow’s last book, Ravelstein. I hadn’t thought that much of it at the time. But after the operation, tied to a bed, I desperately want to look at it again. Tomorrow isn’t soon enough. I want it now. I imagine myself walking barefoot on the gritty floorboards of my house and running my hands across the books that line the walls. I can feel the spines undulate beneath my fingers. I repeat the title under my breath, Ravelstein, Ravelstein. I’ve had enough. I beg to be allowed to go home. They won’t let me go. Instead I am transferred to a ward in another part of the hospital. The women’s ward is full, so I have to go in with men. Five men and me, trussed up like dolls in our icing sugar beds.
This is a public teaching hospital. Each day begins with a posse of boy doctors doing the rounds. They wear Donald Duck ties and tap away at electronic note-takers. They practise examination by patchwork, doing things with sheets so that your body is never wholly on display, just a section of you is exposed – an abdomen, a torso, an arm, a groin. I’m tired of this circusy fumbling. Is it not better to see the body as a whole? To see how it fits together with it various harmonies and disharmonies, its points of grace and frailty? The boy doctors are uncomfortable with the body of a whole naked woman. They watch each other’s faces, warily. What are they watching for?

My ward mates are older men. They snore in their sleep and whistle when awake. But mainly they keep to themselves. The Italian man next to me wakes in the morning and waits for his wife. She arrives at breakfast time lugging an esky full of warm dishes and cold dishes and wine and condiments. She tucks a white napkin into his pyjama top and feeds him like a baby. Then she cleans him up and sits holding his hand. I reach for a book and then I sleep for a while. When I wake a hand is closing around my own. I am in some cottony place, not quite this world, not quite the next. I reach out for the hand: a man’s hand. I open my eyes. Nurse Gary is taking my pulse.

‘Steady on, girl,’ he says.

I want to be touched by someone who loves me. I start to cry. Nurse Gary asks if my heart hurts. I wipe my face on the sheet and say yes. He goes off for some painkillers that he says will do the trick, but of course they won’t.

I HAVE MASSAGED the heart of another. I was working as a park ranger at Ayers Rock. The heart belonged to a Texan woman who, against all medical advice, had climbed the rock with her package tour group. Her heart gave up just as they reached the top and I was the first ranger on the scene. The ink on my first aid certificate was still wet, I was barely twenty and my teeth were chattering with fear, but I was expected to take control. The woman was lying close to the cairn where the rock flattens out into a series of folds and swales. She was surrounded by her coach party – twenty large Texans in chequered shirts and jeans and stack-heeled boots and huge silver belt buckles like heavyweight boxing trophies. They stood around her gripping their ten-gallon hats and shielding her against the wind. I remember the wind, the sound of it whipping at our hair and clothes, having to yell through it to be heard. A large man was leaning over the woman, patting at her chest and chanting into her face, ‘Holy Mother, Holy Mother, Holy Mother.’

I thought the man must be her son. I found out later that he was her husband. The woman was tiny – a wishbone in a lavender shirt with pearly pop-studs. Her breathing was shallow and I couldn’t find a pulse. I knelt beside her, laced my fingers together and placed the heel of my right hand over her breastbone. It would have
been easier if she had been lying on a flat surface. It would have been easier if I had known what I was doing... I gave five firm pumps. Her body lacked the firm consistency of the rubber medical dummy I had trained on. I was disappointed. I seemed to be pushing through different strata, firm skin and then a void of air, then something pulpy, then something hard – probably rib. The medic on my training course said we shouldn’t be afraid of pressure. He said not to be squeamish about breaking the odd rib: a broken rib is nothing in the bigger scheme of things. He said we’d know when we had broken a rib because it would sound like a dry stick snapping in two.

The big man was moving around behind me chanting his chant into the wind. He couldn’t keep still. He paced backwards and forwards around the group, each of them reaching out to touch him as he went past. I wondered if they had known each other before the trip, if they were a church group or a farming club or just neighbours. This was years before line dancing, but they had that feel about them – large, clumsy folk who liked to move together as a group.

My arms were tiring. I thought the woman’s eyelids fluttered but it might have been the wind. I knew I wasn’t using enough force. I tried to picture her heart in my mind. I imagined her chest as a lunchbox, with the heart sealed inside it like a sandwich. I pushed harder. The husband was yelling and whooping behind me; a helicopter had landed on a flatter section of the rock further down and a medical team was appearing over the rise. A doctor, the ambulance crew, a stretcher, bags of tubes and drugs. My job was done.

The woman was airlifted to Alice Springs for a bypass operation and then sent back to Texas. The doctor told me that he wasn’t sure her heart had actually stopped at any point, but I certainly hadn’t done her any harm. Her name was Betty-Sue. She was forty-eight.

A couple of months later a parcel arrived addressed to ‘The Girl Ranger’. There was a thank you note inside and a Western shirt with epaulets and pop-studs and some hand-embroidery on the collar. I thought it was a strawberry – something plump and sticky-looking in bright red thread. But the other rangers said no. They said it was a heart.

When I finally get home from hospital I discover that I have become very attractive to carnivores. The operation on my heart was done with heat, and when meat is heated it smells. I have a fit of burping. The dog, a vigilant if unhygienic nurse, wakes and wags his tail with interest. I haul myself out of bed and pad around the kitchen looking for the cause of the burning smell. The dog follows me with more than usual devotion. He pushes his head against me. He is salivating. I realise that the smell is coming from inside me, from my burnt heart. I’m not a vegetarian and I’m not especially revolted. I clean my teeth and gargle some mouthwash. The dog is blissful. He loves me and I have never smelt so good.
A COMPLICATION ARISES. There is another stint in hospital. The cardiologist is overseas, but as soon as he returns he rings to say he is sorry and I am surprised at the unguarded nature of his apology. I am not surprised though, when he describes his mistake as ‘dropping the ball’. He is speaking to me on a mobile phone in his car. The rich trimmings and upholstery modulate his voice. He says it is rare to have a bad outcome. I hear a tram rumble past. He hangs up and I wonder where he is going. To the opera? Wherever he goes, he will be the only person who has seen the inside of my heart.

The complication has essentially replaced one medical condition with another. There is no pacemaker. I look, to anyone who doesn’t know me, intact. In fact, I have swapped an intermittent painful condition for a constant painful condition.

Six weeks later I have a post-operative appointment with the cardiologist. I take my brother with me and, on the advice of a lawyer friend, we secretly tape the consultation. The cardiologist asks about my pain. He says what has happened to me is a shame. I think about the word ‘shame’ a great deal. When I accidentally record a Nick Cave song over the cardiologist’s couched apology I’m barely fazed. The outcome I wanted from the operation was never possible: I wanted the cardiologist to take my shame away. Lying on the footpath outside the post office I felt, more than anything, ashamed. Each time I have cringed with pain in public it has been accompanied by a great pulse of shame. I have hidden my shame in metaphor and euphemism in much the same way as the nurses and doctors who treated me.

MANAGING MY HEALTH has become a full-time job. If I could employ someone to make and attend my medical appointments, sit in the waiting rooms and read the magazines, keep records, pay bills, visit the health insurance office, wait around at the chemist for prescriptions, take my portable sharps container in for emptying, read up on the latest developments in my condition, I could get back to my life. Except that nobody would want this job. It is a crap job. When my friends call and ask what I’ve been doing, I say not much, which isn’t true, but the task of looking after my heart is boring, and ultimately it is thankless.

Finally, I tell lies about my heart. I attend a work social function. It is probably too soon to be out in public. My left arm is in a sling and a man I am introduced to asks me what I’ve done to myself. I tell him it’s a netball injury. I am just nudging five feet tall and have never worn a ponytail. Very astutely, he asks me what position I play. The only sport I know anything about is soccer. I tell him I’m a striker.

He takes a sip of his drink and says, ‘Lady. Lady, you’re a bullshit artist.’

Carrie Tiffany is a former park ranger who lives in Melbourne, where she works as an agricultural journalist and writer. Her first novel, Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living (Picador, 2006), was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction. Her new novel, Mateship with Birds, will be published by Picador in early 2012.
My last-ditch attempt

Notes on getting by
Rebecca Epstein

MY psychiatrist is this pert petite pixie. Excuse me: when I’m manic, and I am manic at the moment, I’m drawn to alliteration like a moth to a flame. Also, to tired analogies. She has a corona of taut blonde curls, perfect teeth, and these clunky brown German-looking Mary Janes that belie her otherwise professional demeanor and let the patient know, let me know, that she engages in hippie activities in her free time: burns sage incense, wears hemp, perhaps dons a patchwork vest. I don’t know why this matters, why she matters at all. Because, despite the fact that I could fold her along her creases, this little doctor of mine, tuck her into a corner of her office behind the red chairs with Nordic names and then take over her life, prescribe my own medications, dictate my own future, I can no longer function as a thinking person on medication.

I will tell you how I came to be medicated, how I came to be unmedicated, and how I came to once again, finally, be medicated. This is my last attempt at writing while medicated: yes, my last attempt to write, because I’m bipolar, and it’s fucking everything up.

IT ALL BEGAN – let’s do it this way – when I was eleven. I’d been festering with Lyme disease for a year by then, but I didn’t know it. But that is another essay I’ve already written, a good one, back when I could write. When I was eleven, jangly joints and supplicating palms, I tended to have these...episodes...wherein my mind would become a starburst of neurotransmitters and dendrites, and I would yammer and tap my feet and clench my fists to my temples, and curl up at the top of the stairwell that led to my attic bedroom. My parents would stand at the bottom of it, craning upward, Dad’s eyes bugging, Mum’s narrowed, and they would, well, yell. Because what else could they do? Bec, if you don’t stop, you’re grounded! my dad said. I remember that. The words twittered into my ear canals and sluiced through my temporal lobes, and around and around they went, parsing into their letters and then into smaller pieces, the sticks and curves that made up the letters, which lodged into my synapses and made shrill siren sounds, and I screamed.
That’s how the bipolar first manifested.

And now I’m twenty-seven, and I have this doctor who urges me to take pills that happen to make me fat, because what does she care she’s itsy, and other pills that make me sludgy: that is, my mind is sludge, my thoughts are sludge, I cannot think, I cannot find the words, the words I want to use to traverse the distance between you and me, and I am stopped in my tracks.

I am struggling in graduate school. I mean, really struggling, in a way I never have before in my education. The words people say are fibrous and twilled and catch in my throat when I try to say them, too. Words like ‘iconoclasm’ and ‘exegetical’ chap my lips. My dearest friends turn to hulking threats when they tease out codified meanings from dense texts and expound on them extemporaneously, while there I am juxtaposed with my lower lip glistening with saliva, my tongue dry with panic, my eyelashes bristling. My thoughts going around and around, as they always do these days.

I am in the doctor’s Ikea-inspired office, the sun licking our respective hippie shoes, and I begin to cry. I never cry in front of the doctor. I am a stoic sufferer, standing on a cliff face, squinting against the winds of my malady with true bravado. She tells me where my life will go, and I go there. But the other day in my readings course, I went under. There’s this chick in that class with trendy bangs and slim arms, and she spouts hyperbole like it’s her fucking job, except she gets away with it, because she’s verbose as hell, and her sentences are striated, and getting to the meaning of them is like digging down to the Precambrian era and finding a hominid skull. It’s just...killed. And it was like that with everyone. Everyone had a schtick. Except me. I hunched over in my wobbling plastic chair that threatened to crack under my new Zyprexa weight and looked from one mouth to the next like a spectator at a tennis match and I might as well have been lipreading, it was all so inscrutable. I was silent. This was surely Afrikaans or Tagalog, not English. The words were meaningless to me. I am not exaggerating for the sake of this last-ditch attempt. I was lost.

So I bend over double in my doctor’s office and cry until droplets of black mascara tears lob onto the carpet fibres, and I toe over them with my moccasins, embarrassed. ‘You know there is another option,’ the doctor says. I look up mid-suff. ‘We could reduce or remove your medications,’ she says. ‘You would have to completely change your lifestyle, but there are a lot of bipolar people who live this way.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘There’s no way.’ I am still in the old mindset, for another five minutes. The must-be-medicated mindset.

‘What you would have to do is change everything,’ she continues. She ticks things off on her small fingers. ‘You would have to take omega-3 fatty acids and B-complex vitamins, you would have to exercise every day, you would have to get at
least seven hours of sleep every night, at the same time every night, you would have to follow a routine every single day, you would have to follow a healthy diet, you would have to avoid stress and employ stress management, and, most importantly, you would have to bring your friends and family in on the plan. You would have them as a support system. You need to tell them what you are doing. Becca: you need to tell them you are going off of medication and ask them to know the warning signs of mania and what to do in case it happens.’

I stare out the window as she talks, at the sun shimmering off windshields in the parking lot, which make these ephemeral nimbuses that rise up and hover there, a few feet above the ground, waiting for me to make my decision. Although it seems I already have. I think about telling Jenny and Amy and Annie and Jess and Sara, my girls, about the dark depths of my bipolar, which we have only really touched on in a delicate way since there has been no need – the medications have kept me rather stable. And once I tell them how bad it really could be, I would have to tell them that I need them to watch for it to get that bad, and take care of me if it did.

‘Fine,’ I say, like a sulking child. But really, I am beyond excited. ‘Let’s do it.’

LET ME GO backwards again.

I was ecstatic about turning thirteen. From what I understood, thirteen was the year I would become a teenager. And teenager meant that I would be driving a car, staying out late and going into Manhattan to crawl the clubs, and having sex. Essentially, I would be turning into the version of my mother from family lore: young but not too young, with long tangled hair, smooth skin, a sad scowl, bellbottoms. Thirteen would be the year of my Bat Mitzvah, which was going to include a party with a DJ and two hundred guests.

But my transition to the land of adolescence was not the fairytale I had been anticipating. On my thirteenth birthday I had a cold that roped my limbs and dripped through my sinuses. The shivers wouldn’t let up. A celebration had been planned: my family was going to go into the city to see Blue Man Group perform their wily intertwining cobalt dance. We had been planning it for weeks, maybe months; it is difficult to remember these details, especially considering what happened afterwards.

So we went. On the dark drive into Manhattan we stopped at a Duane Reade drugstore, at a corner where two overdressed black men screamed at each other, and while the car idled my mother ran in and got some cough mixture – the red, bitter kind.

At the time, the only real damage the syrup seemed able to inflict on my body was its sinister taste, which pricked my taste buds and inspired the greatest gag reflex I’d ever experienced. Everything inside me rushed up toward the surface,
through my narrow throat, gag said my body, and I spat the medicine back out into
the vicinity of the plastic cup. My little sister cackled next to me, totally
unsympathetic only because she knew exactly what I was going through, having
been sick before.

‘Drink it!’ said my mother, who had purchased tickets to Blue Man Group
and god help her we were going to see Blue Man Group at seven o’clock if it
meant parting the seas, realigning the stars or merely curing my fucking cold.

Somehow I got the medicine down my throat, and that is when its true assault on
my body began. I went mad. And let me tell you: the last place you want to go mad
is in a dark room where bald blue men dance around and beat on drums filled with
brightly coloured paint that splashes up and splatters everywhere. The world
swirled. Sounds screeched. My brain spun on its axis. At the end of the show the
Blue Men decided it would be a good idea to throw rolls of toilet paper out onto the
audience, roll after roll, so that we were covered in haloes of translucent white
paper, peering up into the spotlights, which seemed like suns. I screamed – but no
one heard me because everyone was hooting in delight, and applauding – and I
grabbed my mother’s arm, hard. I remember that.

Later, we were pulling out of the parking garage when my father slammed on
the brakes to avoid running over a man who I now realise must have been drunk. I
screamed, shrill and singsong, and began to heave and cry and accuse my father of
terrible driving, and from there the ride home dissolved. There was yelling, and
there were tears, and no one understood at the time that my behaviour couldn’t be
helped. But late that night, maybe at one in the morning, I stumbled downstairs, still
unable to sleep, and found my father on the couch in the den. ‘You had a bad
reaction to the medicine, I think,’ he said. ‘No more for you.’

THERE IS SOMETHING called ‘aphasia’, which is a difficulty in speaking or
understanding language. Doesn’t that word sound like a fairy child’s name?
_Aphasia_. The medications give me aphasia. Here I am, writing this last-ditch
attempt, and I am scrabbling to find words that elude me, right-clicking on the
menu bar to get at the synonym list whenever possible, and walking away from my
computer frustrated for snack breaks more often than I should. One of my
medications, Topamax, which I also take for migraines (the kind that, in a creeping
crawl, edge a filament into the right side of my face and then begin to drill with a
high-pitched drone), is colloquially known as ‘Dopamax’ because it is so notorious
for its aphasia and other cognitive deficits. The words are _out there_, I can almost see
them, like opalescent shimmers on the air currents, like the tail ends of dreams, and I
reach out with my fingers, I open my mouth to catch them on my tongue, but they
swim away, giggling. Instead I settle for the stocky words, the thick black words that
have floated down through the ether to the bottom of the world, and sit where even
the least educated of us can kick through them with our bedroom slippers. Words like ‘management’, and ‘hammer’, and ‘truncate’. Blah, blah. What I want are the classy words, the words that convey the meaning in one syllable and throw it into doubt in the next. Hip-shaking cadence. A mouth-feel. Gimme those words.

AND WHEN I was fifteen, a big scary boy locked me in a room and molested me, and after, I became severely depressed and couldn’t get off the couch for months, and fuck school, fuck that, I watched the sun filter in through the window for two months and thought it was the darkest thing I’d ever seen. The doctor put me on an antidepressant and diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder and I laughed, because I did feel like a veteran, oh goodness, yes, but it had very little to do with being sexually assaulted. Nothing had felt right in five years. I was not the golden child anymore. I was hurtling toward some fucked-up end and everyone in my family knew it and when my dad looked at me it was with dismay and that just made me feel more fucked up and angry. My thoughts went around and around and I wanted to rip my own hair out and sometimes I did.

So the doctor put me on Zoloft, which was kind of like the Dextromethorphan in Robitussin but a hundred times more potent. Zoloft is an antidepressant, an upper. What happens when you give an upper to someone who cannot regulate his or her ups and downs, someone who is prone to being up in the first place? (Because even though I was depressed at the time, I am primarily a manic.) They go speeding past okay and into happy and sometimes past happy into manic and even past that into psychotic. Which is what happened to me, except the depression decided to linger too, so I was in what is called a mixed state. Though no one at the time saw it for what it was.

Forget the science of it. I gave low, gritty screams that ripped up my throat, and I threw dishes at the walls, and then screamed some more when they didn’t break. I took an old screw and carved up my arms. My intellect was bright and blinding, my thoughts were loud and staccato, and the insides of my ears hurt from the volume. I think I tried to kill myself. Or I tried to try. Or I tried to pretend to try. Or I just gave up and let my mother take me in to the mental hospital.

I SEND MY friends an email that includes the following:

The Mayo Clinic website should give you a lot of information about what kind of stuff to look for in terms of mania, but here are some other personalised clues that I might be manic:

– Dressing inappropriately or wearing shirts that show off my boobs
– Laughing excessively
– Extra witty and funny
– Talking very quickly/excessively or interrupting a lot like I had lots of coffee
– Being up all night (so if you get emails from me in the middle of the night, that’s a clue)
– Writing/creativity
– Going on lots of dates/flirting with everyone in sight
– Hygiene out the window or, alternatively, excessive make-up
– Becoming obsessive about something
– Decreased appetite.

Okay, that should give you a good idea. But I think we’re going to be okay. I’m hypomanic right now and I’m doing fine. It’s just a matter of watching out for real mania that’s the problem. I think everything will be fine, really! But I just wanted this all to be set up, just in case. And again, I thank you for being so supportive. Love you.

I am already hypomanic when I write that email – that is, I am all jazzed up, all thrumming limbs and humming heartbeat, helpless grin turning up the corners of my lips, thoughts whittled down a little smoother and cleaner than usual, but it is nothing compared to what is coming.

What is coming is mania, which is like eating spicy food too quickly, or running down a steep hill. It’s fucking fantastic at first, the wind in your face, the sun in your hair, the seat warmers on in your car. It’s like being buoyed up on the Dead Sea. Floating, when you should be sinking. I laugh a lot when I shouldn’t be. I make a lot of inappropriate jokes that seem hilarious to me. I insult my student (‘when you are older you are going to be so solipsistic that all your friends will leave you’). I am disrespectful to authority, to doctors, to my bosses. I am crass and don’t cringe. I am oblivious. I am acutely aware of every dust mote in a beam of light and every hair on a peach skin.

And what’s more, my coat rack transforms into a sweet Virgin Mary. Violet and magenta light streaks banter in the air and chaff me, flitting away into the night. My dead Uncle Irwin appears in the hallway while I am on the toilet, beckoning to me through the doorway. I blink, hard, and he goes away.

IT WAS 2005, November, and I was working, in all places, in a lab that studied the precursors of schizophrenia. My job was to call potential crazies and ask them questions from a diagnostic questionnaire: ‘Do you ever feel strange bodily sensations, such as your head floating above your body?’ ‘Do you ever feel like people might be out to get you?’
The subjects for the most part laughed and said no, and I moved on to the next question, but with each interview my guts clenched tighter, until I was a walking fist, a gritted thing waiting for some answer as to why I was thinking yes to the questions even as I asked them to the sane strangers on the phone. With the diagnostic powers granted to me by the esteemed principal investigator, I diagnosed myself as schizophrenic. I spent my Fridays in the lab and I went home and I wept into my dirty pillow and I lay in bed while my uncle talked to me from the corner of the room, where he was all black like a silhouette, and I couldn’t hear him but I could hear him, and I felt paralysed. I felt like I could not move so much as my lower lip, my little toe, a dilated pupil, because I was and always would be a catatonic failure. My uncle told me the story of all the bad things that had ever happened to me, and I listened, and I waited for hunger to fade into nausea to fade into nothing.

This is from an email I sent the principal investigator:

Since you are the expert on these things, here goes. I think I’m starting to go crazy...let’s just say I would have been very positive on the screener I was giving to the study subjects over the phone. I’ve become very paranoid and withdrawn, and I very often feel certain about magical things, like moving things with my mind, or people controlling my thoughts and actions. I guess the fact that I can say it here is a good sign. I don’t know how I didn’t see this before. Whatever it is, it’s getting worse. Every month it gets a little harder to function normally...It’s getting fairly difficult for me to know if something’s real or not. Anyway. I hope you don’t think this is inappropriate. Honestly for most of the past year I’ve had trouble gauging what’s appropriate, which is absolutely out of character for me. Something is very wrong.

He called a psychiatrist for me. It wasn’t schizophrenia, but it was something. And thus I was finally diagnosed a bipolar.

AH, MY LAST-DITCH attempt. I just want to write well. That is what I want most in life. To write the sentence that aches in your molars because it is so, so sweet, and so, so bitter, too. I want to capture the shine off a candy wrapper and the taste lingering on the foil. I want to write the satisfying pop of bubble wrap and the sigh of a dog going to sleep and the smell of just-boiled pasta and all those other disgustingly lovely truisms that we want so much to capture and pin down to the paper, yes, I want that, I want that.

Here’s the thing. My doctor entrusts me with discipline. She tells me to change my life. And I do, I swear it, for two weeks. I walk my dog, Lux, for an hour every day along the bike trail near my house. I eat only nutritious food. I don’t drink, or smoke, or do drugs. I avoid stress. I meditate. I sleep at night. I am good.
And when I see one of my girls at coffee shop and she asks how I am doing with a hand on my shoulder, I pat that hand and I say, ‘I am fine. I am a little manic, but I am okay.’

She says, ‘Are you sure?’ maybe because I am talking fast or something, I don’t know, and I nod and smile my too-big smile and order a Strawberry Sunrise smoothie. But like I was saying, here’s the thing: once I become slightly hypomanic from the lack of meds in my system, all discipline goes out the window. Fuck the smoothies – I get coffee! And I can’t get enough chocolate or fried foods. I grow lazy from all that grease and dairy and I stop walking Lux on the bike path. I start smoking again. There I am, a bipolar with almost no medication, out on a tightrope with no supports and a high wind blowing in from the west.

I remember my sister driving me to the emergency room once because the psychiatrist I had then had put me on something that made my whole body stiffen up. I jerked around my kitchen like a puppet on strings, my mouth a grimace and my tongue coagulated in my throat. I called my sister and slurried my way through ‘Take me to the hothospital.’ Once there, I saw Mickey Mouse wave to me through a privacy curtain and a man gleaming with productive sweat race by in nothing but iridescent blue jogging shorts. It took several starts and stops of cognition before I could make myself understand it wasn’t real.

I remember her taking me again to the hospital because, because, I don’t know why, I don’t know anything about that time except I remember being up on the cot, like up on a stage, and the nurse was on a stool so far below, and my sister was off to the side somewhere, sitting low, talking deliberately to the nurse about my situation, trying to get me admitted. The psychiatrist, this totally inappropriate woman who keeps in her office a Goliath of a dog that makes me sneeze, that makes me edgy, this doctor who gives my mother attitude for asking questions when we have an appointment together in later weeks (‘Well, now, if you’re going to ask questions, I just don’t know how this conversation is going to get anywhere…’), who goes behind my back and tells the hospital to admit me should I appear on their doorstep, had spoken to my sister on the phone and told her to do as much. And all I really remember of that visit is the nurse talking to my sister, while I looked around the small room at the cabinet with the glass front full of medical articles, tongue depressors and gauze, all useless items to a manic, and laughed hysterically at some internal joke only discernible to me. Laughed so hard I almost choked. And I remember being acutely embarrassed, but unable to stop. The nurse and my sister stopped their conversation for a moment to look up at me on my cot, and then continued with their murmurs. Somehow, I was not admitted, but released back into my little sister’s helpless care.

I remember the police taking me to the hospital another time, because I had been calling my best friend Erica over and over again, the phone piercing her night maybe twenty times in an hour, and all I wanted to do was tell her how angry I was at her, and who knows for what. For what, I don’t know. We were bitter friends. And I was manic. So she called the police. The police came, and I pretended I had
been asleep, and when the policeman came into my room to wait for me to collect my things so he could take me to the hospital he charitably ignored the open beer bottles on my desk (which weren’t even mine, in fact), even though I was only nineteen or so, and helped me get my things together in what resembled an organised way. ‘I’m fine,’ I said to him, and laughed. ‘I was sleeping! This is really rather ridiculous.’ I think he believed me. I think he believed me when I said that my friend Erica was just a malicious cad. The people in the hospital believed me too, and an hour later, the policeman drove me home. Sometimes, I’m a good pretender.

Most of my visits to the hospital I don’t remember. Sometimes I’m admitted, mostly not. Mostly when I’m admitted, it’s like a holding cell, a place to cool my heels while the bipolar shakes itself loose, unmoors itself, the hinges creak shut and my mind closes itself with a sigh. And then I sleep for a long time, the drugs whispering through my blood-brain barrier and hushing into the folds of my grey matter. And that is what happens now.

SO THE DOCTOR put me back on medicine.

I just reread my last-ditch attempt so far, and it occurs to me that maybe I am totally full of shit, maybe I am as verbose as I wanna be, maybe I am using words like ‘extemporaneous’ and ‘juxtaposition’, and what the fuck do I need with a thesaurus? I’m fine. Maybe this isn’t so much a last-ditch attempt as a reclaiming of what is mine, my ability to write, my proclivity for words, the compulsion that moves me forward in life and forward in this document at the same time.

Well, but I’m not on the kinds of meds I was on for the past three years. I’m off of them mostly, now, and on the rare occasion I have to take one of them I notice the effects in a mighty way. The chemicals tug on my eyelids and flick at my fingertips, yank at my wrists so my hands flail this way and that. They weigh on my heels so I shuffle everywhere I walk, and my mouth hangs open and my puffy tongue threatens to burst out like a worm from a rotten apple.

And everything I am eludes me sometimes, even with all the medicine in this world, or maybe because of all the meds, and I sit down at my computer to write about it, yeah, yeah, and nothing comes out. I won’t go so far as to say it is writer’s block, because it’s not. I’ve never had writer’s block and I never will. I don’t even know what writer’s block is, really, because as long as I love to write, and I do, I will never suffer from that malady. There are times when I sit down at the computer and nothing comes out, as I said, but hell, I just come back a few hours later and the words trickle from my fingers and onto the screen. Trickle is the wrong word. It is more of an onslaught of words assaulting the keyboard. I’ve written in the presence of other people and I’ve gotten funny looks, comments like, ‘My, you type fast, don’t you?’ But, like I was saying, sometimes nothing comes out because I don’t even know who I am anymore. And how can you create something from nothing, if you don’t even know who you are? How can you start from scratch if scratch is you and you are empty?
This is who I am: I am four years old, a colicky, finicky, neurotic four years old, surely pre-bipolar, and I am writing. I am taking coloured pieces of construction paper and gluing them together at the edges so they form a booklet, and I am writing my first novel. It is called Dog Dots. It is about a Dalmatian who loses his dots. The book is complete with an author bio and photo, reviews on the back, and a blurb. All done in crayon.

And this too: I am in eighth grade, and our assignment is simply to write a short story. I write one about a girl who gets lost in a blizzard on her way to school and finds herself at a magical cabin with a magical old man who grants her wishes. My teacher reads it and, aesthetically sated, begins to sob, fat tears rolling down her heavily made-up cheeks. I stare at her, stunned and empowered. Hmm, I think. Writing.

And finally this: I am twenty-one, and I have returned to my parents’ house for a year to convalesce. I have Lyme disease. I have a tube in my left arm that wends its way to my heart, and is attached twice a day to a bag of antibiotics, which drip into me over the course of thirty minutes. There is not much to do while the antibiotics enter my bloodstream, except stare into the blue glow of my laptop and let my fingers flicker over the keys. In the background, someone on television says something snarky about having pizza for breakfast and just like that, my career as a writer begins.

That’s it, I think. Or rather, I don’t even think. I move. I type, ‘In our house we ate pizza for breakfast and painted on the walls when it struck our fancies.’ That becomes the first hundred pages of a novel, which I ultimately trash, but who cares? I wrote it.

Being a writer feels so good that my joints are swollen with joy, blood sloshes thickly through my vesicles; even when I’m absolutely miserable, I grin at awkward moments, I think I’m lucky, I’m blessed, I’m a-okay. And so, when I take stock of my situation in early 2009 and realise that I haven’t written anything exciting in more than three years, in exactly the time that I’ve been diagnosed as bipolar and, more importantly, been medicated for bipolar disorder, my heart twirls around in my chest because I realise that somewhere, hiding deep inside of me and also so far out that it’s lingering where the stars are hot and fiery, so expansive that it is twined around the sun like a lamp cord, is my talent, just waiting for me to remember its existence and call it back to me. So I do. And I’ve told you that part of my story – the grand plan to go off of the meds, the return to the meds, and here I am now, lightly medicated, and writing okay, decently, if I do say so myself.

It will have to do. Because this is the thing of it: I cannot be any less medicated than this, and I cannot bear to write any worse than this. Dearest Universe, I need things to stay exactly like this, please. Okay? Okay.

Rebecca Epstein is a master of fine arts student in non-fiction writing at Iowa State University.
Adventures of the letter I

Reading and writing in the first person

Peter Bishop

In the town of Odessa
there is a garden
and Dvonya is there,
Dvonya whom I love
though I have never been in Odessa…

MORE than thirty years ago, the Jamaican-born American poet Louis Simpson came to Australia and was for a time in Armidale as a guest of the University of New England. He talked to me about being a poet in America in the years of the Vietnam War, how before the war he had written a poem that began with the line There’s no way out, and how during the war he came to know the truth of the line – for himself, for America.

His mother’s family came from Russia, from a province in the south named Volhynia – known to medical students for the water-borne disease Volhynia fever. To escape America he would imagine this place – mud and boards, poverty, the snow falling down the necks of lovers – and remember how he first heard about it, his mother’s voice in the tropical night, a sea breeze stirring the flowers that open at dusk, smelling like perfume:

The voice that spoke of freezing cold
itself was warm and infinitely comforting.
So it is with poetry: whatever numbing horrors
it may speak of, the voice itself
tells of love and infinite wonder.
And this was the way out, the only way: poetry, Russia, Dvonya with her
black hair and eyes
as green as a salad
that you gather in August
between the roots of alder…

To follow the adventures of the letter I – the imagination. To create the language of
the letter I – the language that can speak of numbing horrors with a voice of love
and infinite wonder.

IN TAKING MY title from Louis Simpson’s 1971 book Adventures of the Letter I, I’m
honouring a long reading friendship. Reading is a matter of friendship, as music so
often is. There are songs that are acquaintances, and we nod to them as we pass in
the street – and there are songs that belong to us, and often we know this belonging
from the moment we first hear them, and from then on we know them in our
deepest selves, and we interpret our lives through their sound.

Andrei, all my life I’ve been haunted
by Russia – a plain,
a cold wind from the shtetl…

The letter I sometimes speaks from the deepest self – and sometimes from a sly,
entertaining self, and sometimes the letter I doesn’t speak in the first person at all.
The poem ‘A Friend of the Family’ begins:

Once upon a time in California
the ignorant married the inane
and they lived happily ever after.
But nowadays in the villas
with swimming pools shaped like a kidney
technicians are beating their wives.
They are accusing each other of mental cruelty.
And the children of those parents
are longing for a rustic community.
They want to get back to the good old days.
It was the time of flower power and the Vietnam War, and the first person starts to peep out when the poet thinks of Chichikov, the hyperactive hero on a bizarre mission in Gogol’s novel *Dead Souls*:

*These nights when a space-rocket rises*  
*and everyone sighs ‘That’s Progress!’*  
*I say to myself ‘That’s Chichikov.’*  
*‘Hey Chichikov, where are you going?’*  
*‘I’m off to the moon,’ says Chichikov.*  
*‘What will you do when you get there?’*  
*‘How do I know?’ says Chichikov.*

And then the poem plunges – an abrupt change of tempo, tonality – and the voice speaking from the depths of the letter I:

*Andrei, all my life I’ve been haunted*  
*by Russia – a plain,*  
*a cold wind from the shtetl.*  
*I can hear the wheels of the train.*  
*It is going to Radom,*  
*it is going to Jerusalem…*  
*In the night where candles shine*  
*I have a luminous family…*  
*people with their arms round each other*  
*forever.*

So many personalities of the letter I can be contained within a single imagination – an endless conversation, sometimes a fight, a hubbub… But always there must be an encompassing I, an I that holds together these multiple and often contradictory personalities – and sometimes we hear the voice of this encompassing I: *Andrei, all my life I’ve been haunted by Russia…*

SHE SAYS: I want to write a book.  
Her friend asks: A book? What about?
So she inhales thoughtfully on her cigarette and says: About the world as I see it.

Of course – she concedes – I need a few pointers about how a book gets written.

You can find this exchange in Milan Kundera’s novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. You could find it in many other places too, but let’s join Kundera in calling this hopeful writer Bibi.

It’s years since we were all reading The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and maybe by now Bibi’s become a celebrity. Maybe she’s running her own course – You Too Can Be A Published Genius, Tomorrow – and hopeful writers are flocking: if everyone else can be a writer, why not me?

Bibi doesn’t read, and why would you read a book that’s about someone else when you can write one that’s about you? No, you only need to read other people’s books so you can get a few pointers about how a book gets written – and then off you go, like Chichikov in his troika.

Readers, naturally, will want to read your book – that’s what readers are for, after all: you write the book; they read it. Readers – well it’s all in the name isn’t it? Readers – a vast mass lining up to buy your book, and not one with the slightest desire or ability to write one of their own… Writing’s for us, the writers…

Naturally, Bibi will write her book in the first person – that’s all there is in her world, so how can she do anything else? I, she will say – I did, I think, I want, I’m cross about, I like, I feel miserable when…

There’s the encompassing I, the I that holds together a constellation of personalities of the letter I – and there’s the narcissistic I. I’m thinking of the kind of dressing table where you can angle the mirrors so that you are repeated many times – a whole corridor of yourself looking at yourself in the mirror: there you are – the back of your head, your face, the back of your head… I did, I think, I want, I feel, I believe…

LOUIS, SO MUCH of my life, too, I’ve been haunted by Russia. It began with the calls of clarinet and horn in Borodin’s B Minor Symphony – and then it was a story of Turgenev, King Lear of the Steppes, then Crime and Punishment, the plays of Chekhov – and Pasternak: Doctor Zhivago, Zhenia’s Childhood, The Last Summer…

It’s a strange thing – to be homesick for a place whose earth you don’t know, a place that belongs to you only because at an early time in your life your imagination took root there, and fed and grew. My people were English, generations from Lincolnshire, Surrey, not a Russian breath or sound native to my body.
In your poem ‘Why Do You Write About Russia?’ you give me that breath, that sound:

*When I think about Russia*
*it’s not that area of the earth’s surface*
*with Leningrad to the West and Siberia*
*to the East – I don’t know anything*
*about the continental mass.*
*It’s a sound, such as you hear*
in a sea breaking along a shore.
*My people came from Russia,*
bringing with them nothing
*but that sound.*

Music came first, then Russia, then poetry. It sounds organised and purposeful, to put it like that. And that isn’t how it is at fifteen. I’m thinking of you in Bournemouth, Jamaica, how for a while American sailors had filled the island – the world and its possibilities, the women who went up to the sailors and engaged them in conversation. And afterwards:

*I sat by the pool at Bournemouth*
*reading Typhoon.*
*I had the pool all to myself,*
*the raft, the diving boards, and the rings.*
*There wasn’t a living soul.*
*Not a voice – just rustling palm leaves*
*and the tops of the coconuts*
*moving around in circles.*
*In the afternoon a wind sprang up,*
*blowing from the sea to land,*
*covering the harbour with whitecaps.*
*It smelled of shells and seaweed,*
*and something else – perfume.*
In her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (HarperCollins, 2010), Hilary Mantel writes: ‘If people ask my advice about writing I say, don’t show your work before you’re ready… I should add, don’t do your work before you’re ready. Just because you have an idea for a story doesn’t mean you’re ready to write it. You may have to creep towards it, dwell with it, grow up with it: perhaps for half your lifetime.’

When I was seventeen I was already writing a novel – about the world as I saw it. My mind tumbling with reading and music, and my writing self – of course! – uniformed, chaotic, incompetently imitative, narcissistic. Several years later I opened the handwritten manuscript and thought: Suppose I should die, and this was actually *read* by someone.

I’m thinking of a hospital ward, Armidale, 1968, the night of the nurses’ ball. I’m sixteen and it’s my third stay in hospital that year – this time, acute nephritis. Hospital is reading – all day long, *The Brothers Karamazov, The Good Soldier Schweik*. And nurses – how does an awkward boy get to feel at ease with women? Three weeks in hospital isn’t bad. Looking out over the hospital roof into winter evening light, the darkness of pine trees.

Cynthia Matheson and Pat Thomson, trainees, and not much older than I was, were friends – the serious one and the teasing one, and both able to see the funny side, of each other, of all that happens in a hospital. They would make my bed – I sat and watched – and sometimes they would talk to me and sometimes to each other. One day they were talking about a girl my age who was dying. They apologised: *we don’t want to be morbid*. But having to lay her out…not so good.

Cynthia wasn’t going to the ball – she seemed happy to talk about it, happy not to be going. But they’d be short-staffed, so could I help her with the register that night? And Pat would show herself off to us, before the ball…

How much time can be spent fretting, dreaming of inaccessible and – who knows? – maybe unwanted fire and passion. And yet to be in a quiet hospital room, with a serious girl, doing something together… Wasn’t that the ease I wanted?

She would give me a name; I would read the details; she’d write them down, sometimes coming over to look if she was puzzled by something. I didn’t breathe, listening to her breathing.

Then there was a buzzer. I looked through the register while Cynthia was away. There were entries for blood pressure, pulse rate… And then the word *deceased*.

Of course. Death happens in a hospital…fluctuations of blood pressure, a racing pulse rate suddenly plunging to something sporadic and uneven, and then – *deceased*. The word had never meant what I knew it meant before.

Afterwards Pat came in, dressed for the ball, and we said the things you say when someone is pleased with how things have turned out, and she did look
pleased. Pat doesn’t look as good as she ought to, Cynthia said when we were back at work, and it was true. I thought of the ball – the noise, the dancing, how sometimes you can believe that the happening you dream of could become reality.

At 1 in the morning and again at 3 the night nurse would come round with a torch. I couldn’t sleep, and would have liked to talk, but it was too complicated, so I shut my eyes, pretending. How to say: I’ve discovered death, I’ve heard the voice of death in me… Everyone knows about death… I’ll give you a sleeping pill…

Many years later – a high school reunion. Even at the first one there were deaths, just quietly, at the edges. Thirty years on and you know there’s no way out. Talking with Diane about Cliff, who has died. Something about the way his death has come to us tells us it’s suicide, but we don’t ask. Diane speaks about Cliff’s struggles, his Aboriginal heritage. So many conversations that we will not have, so much that is too complicated. As Sonia says at the end of Uncle Vanya, we shall go on living…

None of this was in my novel – only the noise of my adolescent self trying, too soon, not hard enough, to claim a voice, succeeding only in striking a pose, uncertainly, all the time checking himself in the mirror. Maybe I’m ready to write it now.

I THINK OF this essay as a constellation of things that belong to me. Through language and structure – a tissue of relationships. This is one of the joys of writing: to explore what is thought to be known, to discover the new in the known, to make connections that are suddenly dark – joyous, furious – with blood and energy.

Walking in the grounds of Katoomba Hospital, I come across a chimney. Looking up I see how the chimney seems to move, though I know it’s the clouds that are moving, and I’m back in my childhood, six, and walking fearfully past the chimney in the grounds of George Watson’s Boys’ College in Edinburgh, the chimney that might fall on me – how vengeful it looks, how the scudding winter clouds urge it on – how I’m frightened by the tip of the lightning conductor, like a snake’s fang, the lightning getting ready in the sky to pounce and bite… I walk quickly, and my father is waiting for me in the Austin A30, smoking his pipe. Safety, so that I forget the chimney. There’s the smell of the pipe, my father’s smile as he drives, the companionable feeling of not speaking, but not because there’s nothing to be said…

That paragraph was an improvisation – something a writer does all the time, like piano practice – to keep the hand in, to see what the mind’s getting up to when it thinks you’re not watching. At first, this time, I think: Oh, that chimney again. But later I realise it’s the image of the father that’s live and haunting – the father who is safe, reliable, the father who is an infinite blanket of protection and comfort. And is it that way for fathers, in themselves – what to do with our uncertainties, our own growth that won’t stop presenting us with awkward choices, ways forward that might tear the blanket from us, shred it, leaving us exposed to the shock of the world and the shock of our children – the shock of the children we have been?
Bibi, you’re yawning. You wanted to know how long a book should be, whether you should use people’s real names, what words are okay to use if you’re talking about sex… But she’s not just yawning, she’s angry, she’s sick of me – I’m not doing my job: I know the book I’m writing – no problem there! All I want from you is a simple how – a few pointers – and don’t talk to me as if there’s anything complicated about the word ‘I’ – the shortest word in the language and you have to have problems with it! Everyone’s got an I! Get used to it! And get yourself a life to go with it! The problem with you writers is that you make problems where there aren’t any – now at least answer me this: do I need an agent or do I go straight to the publisher?

PIANO LESSONS. WHEN I was eleven I’d been writing string quartets and piano sonatas for two years… Something, obviously, ought to be done about it, and my mother had heard about Mr Dauber.

Sometimes as a reader I have the beautiful feeling that a book has been written for me – that the writer has somehow written the book with the impossible knowledge of the deep longings of me which up to that point have been inarticulate. This is a book that can teach me that what I discover through the book already belongs to me – how this belonging in becoming articulate can create patterns and certainties and adventures.

It’s one of the most precious experiences of reading – to know yourself completely at home in the words and vision of another; to find your own encompassing I deep in conversation with the encompassing I of a writer, using language and knowing things you did not know you knew…

‘I tell you secret about Chopin,’ Mrs Sivan confided in me. ‘Piano is his best friend. More. He tells piano all his secrets. He put hand on the piano like this.’

I braced myself as she reached for my shoulder, but her touch was warm and affectionate.

‘Enormous trust. No resistance: nothing between himself and piano. More than that, even.’ She transferred her touch to the keyboard. ‘Hands completely melted down. He embrace the piano.’

She dropped her voice and glanced round the room. ‘In my opinion, George Sand not the true love of Chopin’s life. This is. This instrument. Even he feel physical love for it. We have this absolute incredible – how do you say? – intimate physical knowing. In Chopin, the what and the how are one, not two. Not one mechanical sound ever. Will kill Chopin immediately. Once more, this middle section.’

– Anna Goldsworthy, Piano Lessons (Black Inc., 2009)

What happens – what can happen – when the space created by teacher and student is live with joy and knowledge… I remember a concert at the university, 1964: Mr Dauber entering and bowing, sitting down at the piano and arranging
himself. He’d been introduced – Jan Daubé, as if he was French – as a pupil of Helmut Walcha: Wolka, the announcer enthused; Valsha, I corrected sotto voce, a know-all twelve-year-old. Mr Dauber had told me how Walcha, who was blind, would learn or re-learn a piece – voice by voice, nuance by nuance, the patience, calm, the insistence on absolute fidelity to the composer’s intentions. Mr Dauber only permitted me to play from Henle Urtexts – he looked at my Schirmer editions with mystified shock: But we are playing Beethoven, not Hans von Bulow…

I wondered for the moment of silence before the hands flung themselves at the keyboard whether Mr Dauber would sing: that deep approving moo he made when he was demonstrating posture and wrist position, the transfer of energy from the shoulder to the fingers, through the arms – feel it at the wrists, press more firmly, feel… He was to play his own compositions – ‘The Song of Twin Rays’ and ‘The Sound of Mystic Wheels’ – and yes, my heart did sink at the things I guessed were being said or hinted at by eyebrows, behind hands and smiles. And the music. I remember only tedium and embarrassment: this was my teacher… It was as if he was launching into an enthusiastic lecture in Greek to people who had no Greek, but who sat politely and – when it seemed to be over – applauded. Well...most interesting…a bit long…

Next week Mr Dauber had a recording of his part of the concert. I saw him telling my father that it would cost him three pounds; my father, caught off-guard, fending him away – and I withdrew to the music room – this was a catastrophe… Mr Dauber speaking primly all through the lesson; the rejected record unbearably sad in his lap… How one day soon after he didn’t come for the weekly lesson, and no one ever knew – or ever let on that they knew – where he had gone or what had happened to him.

‘Like Shostakovich says, we are all soldiers. But of course is good to want to be a general! I never say no to ambition. We all go, step by step, but our aim is always creation, never ego or narcissism.’

Anna, all my life I’ve been trying to find language for the tumbling music inside me. I was never going to be a pianist, and as a composer – as Stravinsky says, a composer is or isn’t, and it wasn’t composer that I was, only in moments, nothing consistent…a phrase, the imagined sound of low flutes, a single viola, horns pealing like bells… It wasn’t so much that I needed to be – performer, composer – I had to create language for that tumbling being, for its continuing evolution…

It’s strange – two of the Russian poets who have long been in my life had mothers who were pianists, that tumbling music all around them. Boris Pasternak’s sister Lydia said of their mother: Mother was music. And Boris was a composer, idolising Scriabin and keys like G# minor, before he was a poet. When he began to correspond with Marina Tsvetaeva he discovered that her mother too had been a highly trained, admired pianist. Marina, who loved the deep sea of music heard
from under the grand piano and hated the metronome, the hours of practice ruled by that ticking.

Both wrote about music – there is that passage in *The Last Summer* where Mr Y begins to play. And Marina’s essay ‘Mother and Music’. But I hear music in everything they do – reading their work, their letters, reading about them. A sea breaking along a shore – voicing the human soul, with its infinite capacity for the unknown, for the nuances of the everyday, for longing and sadness.

How to speak this music in the first person?

Such longing for a teacher…not to give pointers for limited goals, but to learn that doors open and that we ourselves can learn to open them, stepping confidently. *We all go, step by step, but our aim is always creation, never ego or narcissism.* And perhaps my favourite quote from your teacher, Anna, who gives so generously and with such life and chuckle: *Only what you give is yours.*

When I think of Mr Dauber as my teacher I become confused. I find myself imagining him somewhere in country New South Wales or Victoria, teaching beginners after school. He tells them music is the language of love. He tells them it’s always at the final rehearsal rather than the concert that the learning happens. He quotes the conductor Furtwangler and the theorist Schenker. And the children are bewildered, not knowing how to answer when their parents ask: How was the lesson? Practising their scales, the minuets from the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* in the Henle Urtext edition. And maybe still the twin rays sing and the night and stars carry the sound of mystic wheels.

You had the great gift of a teacher who didn’t bewilder you, who was not herself confused… I remember reading of how the American poet James Wright said that he wanted to write the poetry of the grown man – and I think of your teacher telling you: *We have huge responsibility to future! Of passing this spirit to next generations. Always remember: only what you give is yours.*

And only what you truly own can be given… And teaching is often like fathering; so often the desire to be strong with well-founded knowledge and experience, and yet – the reality of uncertainty and panic.

SO I WILL say to Bibi: the best book about writing may not be a book about writing, the best writing teacher may be speaking about music – *Chopin always talking about emotional response, which absolutely everyone has and can recognise. But his own particular experience, behind this response, is secret. This is the mystique of his music. He has a lot of love, but who he loves and how he loves – this is again secrecy.*

But she is asking: Do I have to tell the truth? I mean – well, some things are a bit embarrassing… And some things aren’t – well, interesting enough…
Ah Bibi... I was going to say that there's only one rule about the truth: if you're bearing witness, don't bear false witness. But if you're talking about a life – why not the possibilities of a life, the adventure of imagining a life? Why be bound to the one life you happen to be living? But instead I pause for a moment. For the first time it occurs to me that Bibi might be *listening*...

*There's a poem, I begin...*

A poem?!

Bibi's had enough. She's off. The sound of angry footsteps in the corridor, getting to the stairs, fast on the stairs. It's the end of Chekhov's *A Boring Story*... The young woman has demanded that the old professor tell her what she can do with her life – *you're educated, you've lived a long time, tell me!* And the professor can only mumble *come Katia, come Katia, let's have a cup of tea...* He's been a teacher all his life, distinguished... What can he give? What does he own? *Let's have a cup of tea...*

*The young girl stood beside me. I
saw not what her young eyes could see.
A light, she said, not of the sky
lives somewhere in the orange tree.*

A form of punctuation unique to poets: lines. Where the line breaks creates so many possibilities of nuance and meaning. In this poem, 'The Orange Tree' (1919), the first break comes after the letter I.

John Shaw Neilson was my first poet. And late at night, when I was sure everyone else was asleep, I would stand at the window and recite into the moonlit or dog-howling or sometimes cock-crowing suburban stillness – tentative, ecstatic: *'Song Be Delicate', 'Love's Coming', 'Schoolgirls Hastening', 'The Orange Tree'...*

When a poem is about a young girl and an older man – and the older man is almost blind in the way Shaw Neilson was – there's the temptation to look for autobiography, and it's been suggested that maybe the young girl of the poem was a relative of Neilson's who belonged to a religious sect and was known to have visions, that maybe the two of them had actually stood one evening in front of an orange tree and when he'd talked for a while about luminous boys and mad escapades of spring, she had turned on him and said:

*... for all

your hapless talk you fail to see*
there is a light, a step, a call
this evening on the orange tree…
– or words to that effect.
But the poet just kept on asking:
Is it a fluttering heart that gave
too willingly and was reviled?
Is it the stammering at a grave,
the last word of a little child?

And then he came in and wrote it all down…his story for the day.

When I was young, I heard only melody – and my own noisy romantic yearnings
confided to the night through that lovely melody. Many years later, I hear the chuckle
of the poet – how he is both the older man making up fanciful stories to describe the
light he can’t properly see, and the young girl becoming increasingly annoyed at the
substitution of beautiful words for the direct experience of a light, a step, a call so
evident in the orange tree… The poet so humorously and harmoniously balancing
youth and age, innocence and experience, voice and silence, seeing and telling,
beauty and truth, story and song, story and vision…

And I follow the adventures of the letter I in the poem – the I in the first stanza
belonging to the older man:

…I

Saw not what her young eyes could see
…and then in the last stanza:
Silence, the young girl said, why,
Why must you talk to weary me?
Plague me no more for I
am listening like the orange tree.

How beautiful! The position of the letter I in the line is identical to its position in
the first line of the poem, but for the first time the letter I belongs to the young girl.
And it’s given to the young girl to make an exquisite modulation: instead of looking
at the orange tree, and seeing rather than telling its story of light and being, she is
listening like the orange tree… Listening…
It seems to me that the poet’s encompassing I contains multitudes, a constellation of shining things: the young girl, the older man with his failing sight, the light that lives and plays and steps and calls in the orange tree, the orange tree itself, the warmly touched-in melancholy of the older man’s stories with their deepening shadows, the rising annoyance of the young girl as the older man persists in weaving beautiful stories rather than seeing what is to her so plainly there, the delicate and perfect metamorphosis of young girl into tree through the modulation of the letter I in the final line break:

…for I

Am listening like the orange tree.

And that was my first title for this essay about reading and writing and friendship, and how the letter I might place itself adventurously in the world: ‘Listening Like the Orange Tree’.
MY past has not quite perished, nor would I want it to. The events described in my second memoir, *The Romantic* (Text, 2010), took place years ago and in another country – but the wench is not dead, only changed. There is a woman in that book called Kate, who I once was. There is a woman writing this reflection on it, who I am now. This is the moment when they – we – converge.

But as I write a memoir, though I am pulling together past and present selves, I find that I am no more unified. There’s the person, me, who had the experiences being described. There’s the I who wrote it down at the time in a diary, or bears the story in my memory. Then there is the writer, the memoirist, who puts it on the page; her successor, the critical writer who looks at that page and shapes the text to be read by others. The book is published, then I become the author, who does interviews and talks. Later I will be the person who once had the experience, once wrote it down, once used to talk about it to audiences – and I have come full circle, back into the realm of experience. Throughout, I am still the person with the original memory, who originally ‘did’; but who, curiously, may come to remember the story not as it truly happened but as I wrote it. In the search for authenticity and resurrection, we deal in contrivance and entombment.

And last, there is the character in the book, who is me, but not quite. She is the most mysterious, the most elusive and ghostly, but also the most real, at least for the readers. We bear a resemblance to each other. We inhabit the same mind. We are all called Kate.

In *The Romantic* I wrote about myself in the present tense and in the third person. I could see ‘her’ better than I see myself, with less pity, and more mercy. ‘She’ says things that I said, and like the other characters, she behaves as we really did. It is a cheat, of a kind, and I probably sound psychotic when I talk about ‘her’ in relation to the book, but the girl in my memory is so distant, now, that she may as well be another person. ‘How much sweeter it is to forgive weakness, than despise it,’ I write in the book. But how interesting it is to write about weakness, as well as forgiveness.
My first book, *In My Skin* (Text, 2005), told of the five years I spent in my late twenties as a heroin addict and a sex worker in Melbourne. I found myself stronger, more terrible, more mysterious than I had ever imagined I could be. It was a time in my life I had never anticipated and its aftermath left me exhausted. In the last months of my addiction I discovered the Romantic poets and when I saved enough money to flee for my recuperation to a year in romantic Italy, it was those bright, bold spirits I wanted to follow.

From the wreck of my past, which hath perish’d,
That much I at least may recall,
It hath taught me that what I most cherish’d
Deserved to be dearest of all:
In the Desert a fountain is springing,
In the wide waste there is still a tree,
And a bird in the solitude is singing…
– Byron, *Stanzas [to Augusta]*, 1817

It was a time when I searched. For sex, because it had become a familiar, useful currency. And through sex, for love, because I had not loved myself sufficiently in those five years, and now I so much needed tenderness. Finally, I was searching for the bright flame of wonder I had almost extinguished.

The story of this search burned in me for years after the events, and yet I resisted it. I succumbed to temptation and wrote the first part of my experiences as *In My Skin*. I wrote that book in the blessed innocence of the unpublished author – ‘You only get the first book for free,’ as Helen Garner remarked to me on its publication. The public attention that greeted that book was wholly unexpected, at least by me; dizzied by its reception, spinning further tales for numberless interviews, moved beyond capacity by readers’ letters, I was swept up in a thrilling, frightening, fast-moving wave of unnerving celebrity as I blundered into the author industry that attends publication. I learned to give succinct, quotable answers in interviews, and to stand on stages and speak of terrible private things. I posed for photographs and worried over my archives of this heady moment; I learned to deal graciously with the public and to phrase my own biography for bylines. My book had found readers and critical acclaim: disorientated as well as grateful, shy Kate took refuge in imposture, and I became her representative in public, and her custodian in private. The splitting was apparent now, if only to myself.

It is a peculiar experience, to write a memoir about being ordinary and find yourself regarded as extraordinary; to resist the enticing persuasion that, indeed, you are special. You have to believe you’re a little special in order to write a memoir, after all; and yet I remain quite ordinary, even embarrassed by the presumption held in writing the book. I was aware that there might be mutterings: best-selling
debut sexual memoirs are an easy target for resentment. Then there was public opinion: for every ten letters or blogs praising my book, there would be one calling me spiteful names, aiming personal insults and offering unsolicited judgement on the life I’d lived – the obverse privilege of reader-memoirist intimacy.

I received letters that said my book had changed someone’s attitude, or life. Overwhelmed by all else, I was unprepared for the momentousness of this effect, or the role of counsellor to the drug addicts, mothers of addicts, and sex workers who responded to the book’s candour so movingly with their own. I grew used to parents of friends meeting me and exclaiming that they’d read my book, and its brutal descriptions of my naked body, sex and humiliation; and making light of this strangeness even as secretly I was mortified.

For a long time I announced loudly that I was grateful for what In My Skin gave me – a career in writing – but that I would never do another memoir. The other half of my story remained mine. I intended to write it, if ever, as a novel, keeping only the basic trajectories of the story and transforming all the characters. But when I tried that, it faltered: to change one part of the story skewed the whole thing; it lost its integrity and purpose. Yet what would I do with these memories?

THE MORE I have thought about memoir, the more delinquent and unreliable the form seems. Sometimes I would describe memoir as repulsive, in its self-absorption, its violations and its conceit. It takes ruthlessness to write one; it requires a calibrating of conscience. Memoir is perhaps the most conflicted of literary genres.

In the first place, it is necromancy. Its characters come out of the grave, squashed and pale, speaking in the croaky ventriloquist’s voice of the author. What right does a writer have to take people’s lives and reanimate them for her own purposes? Does that right alter if, for example, the other person is asked for permission, if the writer no longer knows him, if she only describes what happened in her presence, if she doesn’t think he’ll ever read the book, if she only means to say nice things about him? Or if she doesn’t? What about the truth? There are no easy answers to these questions. I have never settled them for myself. They bring home to me the difficulty of separating myself from the world in which I exist, and there is no calculus for that line.

Then, memoir is supposed to be ‘the true story’. It cannot be. A voluminous life has to be compressed into a narrative: it is deceptive. The writing needs to focus on certain events that are significant in retrospect but perhaps, in the real life, were just part of a continuum of confusion: it is distorting. And it is shaped by a writer who is no longer the same as the character she’s impersonating: it is disingenuous. It is a ‘true story’ because it describes something that happened, though our eyes glaze at the disclaimer in the opening pages; yet we must remember that the writer is working hard to make sure it all appears ‘nothing but the truth’, and to beguile us into believing her.
Memoir elides, it skips over tedious things, like meals and haircuts, and in its forensic focus it has no time for what won’t fit its determined narrative. In The Romantic I left out a crucial visit from my sister, which meant the world to me as the girl at that time but didn’t fit the narrative the woman now was writing. I know that gap is there, but the book has its own logic, and no reader will notice the caesura. The art of memoir is about forgetting as much as it about remembering.

Then, memoir is narcissistic, sometimes monstrously so. There comes a point for a memoirist when she is nauseated by the I, by the focus on herself. How can anyone be so arrogant to imagine their story is worth someone else’s money and time and interest? If you don’t question this, you can’t write a memoir.

In moments of doubt I wonder if my addiction to memoir is a failure of imagination, of the ability to move beyond my own solipsism. But how could I be authorised to write from the perspective anyone other than myself? And surely we write memoir because we believe our specific experience also fingers the universal.

Finally but paradoxically, it is a trespass against the privacy of the writer. My first memoir gave me a great deal, and not the least of its bounty was the trust my readers put in me. I am humbled by such generosity, and could never regret writing that book. But part of me wonders if I cannibalised my own life, made it into a product; whether I didn’t violate some trust I placed in myself; whether I gave something away that I can never reclaim.

So, my misgivings. But I wrote another memoir. Why? Because for all its faults, it is a beautiful form: generous, intimate, powerful; the start of storytelling.

It is impossible to write a memoir without describing other people – or it would be a very boring piece of work if you did. Other people make our stories; they are our life. And though I am always nervous about exposing those I’ve known in the cold white light of the printed page, I tried to do them justice. It would be a boring piece of work, too, if all the characters were incorrigibly well-behaved. I loved all the men in The Romantic, and tried to put that love on the page. If I was harsh on them at times, I believe I was harder on myself.

Some say it doesn’t matter if a memoir is ‘true’ if the emotions in it are. But The Romantic is a true story – I really did live in Italy for a tumultuous nine months, and returned to it in the terrible heatwave of 2003. My diaries are witness and many of the conversations are taken virtually verbatim from my notes of the time. Besides, I am too feeble to invent – or resist – a story as convoluted as that. I chose to write The Romantic in a style that in some ways seems closer to fiction than traditional memoir, because it allowed more critical distance from the coercive I, and so I could borrow some of the amleness of fiction to fill out the literality of autobiography. Though, as I say, there are elisions, I could only try to make up in sincerity what the tale must necessarily lack in perfect representation.
Memoir is self-absorbed, but I write to see myself more clearly, and (at the risk of arrogance) in the hope that others can relate to my experiences. This sharing can be exhilarating, and disconcerting. There was a moment, during the editing process, when my publisher said, ‘Of course, you were a pretty disturbed young woman in those days’ – almost exactly echoing the opinion of Jack, a fairly pompous older lover, in the book. I bridled for a moment: how dare he? What did he mean, ‘of course’? But I am no longer that defensive young woman; exposing this book to others helps me evaluate who I am now as much as writing it in solitude has helped me see who I was ten years ago. I was surprised, with the publication of In My Skin, by how many young women (and even men) could see themselves in my story. We have all travelled in our lives, through relationships and through confusion. I am keenly aware of my privilege in sharing my journey with readers.

To write a confession you must feel you have sinned. But I don’t believe in sin, only in conscience and learning. The yearning to love and be loved – the theme of The Romantic – is one of the most courageous and terrifying gambits of our lives. But it is how life is made. Long before the Romantic era, the poet Thomas Traherne said, ‘Never was any thing in this world loved too much.’ It is what I insisted on believing in Italy. But, Traherne continued, ‘many things have been loved in a false way, and all in too short a measure.’ One of these statements is the lesson of memoir.
WHEN I read Georgia Blain’s memoir, *Births Deaths Marriages* (Random House, 2008), I was struck by the cover of the book as well as by its remarkable contents. The design incorporates a copy of a birth certificate of similar vintage to mine, a document which is more familiar to me than any other I have owned.

My pale pink birth certificate, spotted and torn, is something that I took for granted until recently. Now I treasure it. This was because a couple of years ago I had to apply for a new passport, starting from scratch. The process proved to be yet another ordeal in the bureaucratic silos of government departments – not unexpected. But it was also a salutary lesson for someone like me, who has spent a lot of time undertaking primary research and who appreciates the significance of the original source – the document – when all else may prove inconclusive.

For here is a story of what can only be called official falsification of the records. It began back in 1985, when I changed my surname from my father’s to one of my own choosing. As a feminist, this became important to me, and I chose my maternal grandmother’s middle name. My grandmother’s parents must have had an eccentric sense of humour or were hardcore monarchists, as they named her Queenie Adelaide, and her surname was Hewitt (later, when she married, Speedy – and I’ve often wondered how going through life as Queenie Speedy affected my grandmother, but that’s another story).

On 27 February 1985, at the old Registrar General’s Office in Prince Albert Road, I filled in an Instrument Evidencing Change of Name form, which was witnessed by a clerk at the office, stamped ‘Old System Deed Book’, and given a number. A simple one-page form. Looking at it now, I can identify the pen I used – a Sheaffer cartridge pen, medium italic nib, blue-black ink. I filled out one copy for me, and one for the office.

On this form I was required to ‘abandon the use of the name’ I had not exactly been born with (though that is the common term) but which had been mine since
birth, and ‘in lieu thereof assume the name’ that I had chosen. As I was married at the time I was also required to list my husband’s surname as well as my father’s, among the name/s ‘abandoned’. I explained to the clerk (who would be a Customer Service Representative now) that I did not use this name, had never used this name, was never known by this name (except when my mother-in-law half jokingly addressed me as Mrs C) and therefore had no reason to abandon it. It didn’t matter, she said. As I was married, people would still assume it was used, and I should do it anyway. So that name is listed in parentheses next to my original surname.

To effect this change, I had only to produce my birth certificate and pay a small fee. At the time the procedure seemed to be invested with authority. Nowadays it would be laughable. I could have taken along the birth certificate of any woman of a similar age and officially changed her name. (I can’t see the point, but such mischief could be useful to, say, a spy or a drug courier.) And this was at a time when people were still obtaining false passports by visiting cemeteries and selecting identities from likely candidates among the deceased who’d been born around the same time as them. Armed with details from a gravestone, you could apply for a copy of the birth certificate, and then a passport. Apparently you could get several this way, as many as you wanted. The New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages was three unconnected silos: it did not communicate even within itself, so records of births and deaths were not cross-referenced. You could live forever in that office. Or die without ever having been born.

THE CHANGE-OF-NAME CERTIFICATE was kept in my folder of official documents, along with all the other documents: birth certificate, school certificates, wedding certificate, university degrees and then, later, the birth certificates of my children. I began using the new name straightaway, and barely thought about the process of changing it again until I applied for a passport in 2007.

My diary for the last few days of November that year contains a cluster of appointments centred on the small triangle of Sydney that includes the Australian Passport Office, the New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and the University of Technology, Sydney, where I work. This would be easy, I thought, so I took the application form, along with my birth and change-of-name certificates, over to the passport office in Lee Street, behind Railway Square. After queuing for some time I learned I needed an appointment. I queued again, in another line, and made the appointment for the next morning. When I returned there was barely a wait. How efficient, I thought. However, the Customer Service Representative (how I itch to write ‘clerk’) shifted the application form and the two certificates around and around on his desk like tarot cards, before telling me that there was a problem. The application was in a different name to my birth certificate.
‘I know. I changed my name officially.’ I tapped the change-of-name certificate. ‘That’s why I brought this.’

He picked it up, then placed it down again.

‘This does not count.’

‘Why not?’

He shook his head slowly, tut-tutting. Easing himself off his chair, he took the certificate aside to someone else behind the cubicle, and returned a minute later still shaking his head. He pushed it back to me.

‘It’s not in the system. We cannot recognise it.’

This document, which I’d carefully kept on file for twenty-two years – and which had accumulated its own authenticating brown spots – could now not be used for the very purpose it was intended. The clerk (forgive me) told me to go to the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and obtain a new change-of-name certificate, one that would be in The System, one that the passport office would recognise and one that would be kept in The System forever. He would keep all the other documents, and start processing the passport, while I went to the registry and obtained the new, valid form. I was lucky, he said, for the registry was nearby, just across the road and around the corner. Perhaps I’d be back at work before lunchtime.

At the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages a sign told me to take a number from a machine and wait in a queue for a Customer Service Representative to serve me. There was no queue. In fact, for a government office it was remarkably quiet. Along one side of the floor was a bank of frosted glass cubicles, Interview Rooms 11, 12, 13 and 14. Where were Interview Rooms 1 to 10? And what were they used for? But as I waited, a door to one opened and I saw into a room with decorative certificates arranged on the walls, a desk and woman behind it. A young couple in a black suit and formal cream dress were standing up. Smiling, the marriage celebrant came out from behind the desk and shook hands with the couple, before ushering them out. The bride held a small bouquet. They looked happy but also abashed, as if they were almost embarrassed to be married, or embarrassed to have such a moment of intimacy witnessed by a stranger.

The customer service representative who appeared at the desk took my number, listened to my request and frowned.

‘No, that’s not possible. We can’t issue a new one. We don’t have the data to check.’

There was, apparently, a consolidation of records between the Office of the Registrar General and the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, but that was later in the 1980s, after my change of name. Before that, there was a period of a few years in the mid-1980s when the Registrar General and this registry – two separate
entities – did not communicate with each other and certifications from this time
could not be located, or if they could they would still be invalid. From later in the
1980s, no problem. And, for some reason I still do not understand, had my change of
name been earlier than this bleak window of lost records, there wouldn’t have been a
problem either.

Perhaps I could get some original certification from the old office?

‘Well, that office doesn’t really exist any more. Or it just handles property titles,
that sort of thing.’

‘What happened to the personal records, like my name change?’

‘Oh all that merged with us.’

‘So you could have the information?’

‘Only if it’s in the computer system.’

‘But what about the deed book?’

‘The what?’

I pointed to the stamp on my change of name certificate. ‘The Old System Deed
Book. It must exist somewhere. Couldn’t you – couldn’t someone – go and check it?’

‘A deed book.’

It was the way she said it. Not a question, but a monotone statement. As if a book
alone were contemptible enough, but something called an Old System Deed Book?
It may as well have been called *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* or *The Nautical Almanac.* There
was a pitying look on her face now. What kind of person would want to consult an
artefact as obsolete, as useless, as a record book? A person who probably believed in
eves and dragons too.

‘We don’t have anything like that here. I don’t know where a book would be.’

And it was true: the glassed-in offices of the registry were bare of papers, books,
anything that fluttered in a breeze or tore or became spotted and yellow.

‘All our records are digital now, and I’m afraid if you’re in the old system, we
can’t help you.’

It was as if these two systems were in separate countries, on different continents,
like Mexico and India. Although if that were the case, at least I could have bribed
people like her into co-operating. I did not believe her, in any case. I did not believe
that events as important as births and deaths were only recorded on electronic files.
Behind her were head-high partitions, concealing what I suspected were many
metres of filing shelves.

I was not in The System. I was here, I had been born – there was no disputing
that. But it felt as if the simple narrative of my life was somehow slipping away.
How easy it would be for me to disappear, officially, to unbecome the person I had always been. Aloud, I wondered how I was meant to acquire my passport, or was I doomed never to go overseas?

‘You could get your passport in your old name,’ she suggested, pointing to the pink certificate, which was apparently still valid. The irony was painful.

‘What about all my other ID?’ I said. ‘My driver’s licence, Medicare card?’

‘Oh, you could change those back too.’ As if this were the work of minutes, a few simple phone calls. There would be other cards, bank accounts, utilities, internet accounts, memberships…it was unthinkable. Besides all that, this was my name now, had been for years, the name under which I had published everything I had written. The idea was impossible.

‘What am I meant to do, then?’

‘The only thing is, we issue you with a new birth certificate, in your new name. This will cancel out the other and you’ll have no problem getting your passport.’

So I filled in an application form for a new birth certificate, paid a fee, then paid an extra fee to have it done within twenty-four hours, and made an appointment to return the next day. I also had to provide three forms of identification to apply for the new certificate, and naturally the old one did not count. I had my driver’s licence. I had my university staff card, but without a passport no other form of photo ID. Kindly, she agreed to accept my Medicare card – perhaps, as it was issued by another government department, there was a connection mysterious to me.

And miraculously, the next morning, the new birth certificate was ready. Over the years they have been white, pink, green and blue, according to paper supplies, but now all birth certificates are blue. The new certificate also had a different registration number, as if I had been reborn, and it was stamped and dated 17 Nov. 2007 by Greg Curry, Registrar. Forty-nine years after my birth, I was the owner of a crisp, unspotted, pale blue birth certificate. The original was still on the counter. The same customer service representative as the day before was gathering it up among the many other forms and documents that had effected this remarkable event.

‘What happens to that?’

‘Oh, it’ll get destroyed.’

Quite unexpectedly, I had a rush of affection for my old birth certificate. A sensation almost like panic hit me.

‘Does it have to be destroyed?’

She shrugged. ‘Well, it’s invalid now.’

‘Can’t I keep it?’

‘Yes, I suppose. I’ll have to cancel it, though.’
She picked up a stamp, slammed it down on the certificate, smiled and handed it back. ‘There you go. All done now. Have a nice day.’

NOT FOR OFFICIAL USE. She had stamped it beside the text, not over it, so that my parents’ names and details, my older sister’s name and age, were still intact.

THE REGISTRY OF BIRTHS, Deaths and Marriages is located in a stretch of Regent Street close to Central Station. There is nothing here to improve the streetscape. No trees, no decorative paving. No lights, no potted plants. People do not walk by for pleasure, or on their way to anywhere else – restaurants, shops, museums or galleries – for there is none. There are no bars or cafés. Next door is the local office of Curtin University, a place that could hardly be called a campus. Across the road is a methadone clinic. The closest thing to atmosphere is the old mortuary station, over on the railway line.

What unimaginative committee or individual decided to locate a place of such symbolic importance in this shabby little part of the city? And while applications for birth and death certificates are mostly done by mail, marriages cannot be dispatched quite so impersonally. Couples arrive regularly to have their relationships legally acknowledged, rising to the event in their white frocks and hired suits, like the couple being married when I was there. Just once a year, the registry adopts a festive aspect, displaying red heart-shaped balloons and scattering rice for the weddings that take place on Valentine’s Day, its most popular day for business. Otherwise, the bouquets and veils and photographers and witnesses and dressed-up family members are all incongruous against this backdrop. After extracting my birth certificate, I felt like I was leaving some form of incarceration. What must the newly married feel when they step out into this barren end of Regent Street? And where do they go to celebrate? The mini-supermarket nearby? Michel’s Patisserie, perhaps, back at Railway Square?

But more worrying, as I left, was the feeling I had just conspired in a fraud. In the past, I had spent time looking up official records of dead authors, verifying facts. What might someone – say a grandchild, or other descendant – make of the clear anomaly on my new birth certificate, which was that my family name, my own surname, was not the same as either of my parents’? What purpose would they ascribe to this?

Nevertheless I was also relieved and optimistic, plotting lunch after finally securing my new passport. Ten minutes later, at the desk of the passport office, I was told it couldn’t be processed straightaway. I would have to make an appointment and return the next day. I was already wearing a path between work, the registry and here and, while I was trying to feel grateful that I wasn’t coming in from Penrith for all this, I still felt cheated. And my nagging sense of complicity was augmented by the feeling that all the documentation and officialdom was worth
nothing. It was an illusion, a chimera. Paper chasing paper, or floating away in the wind. I might have been in a Dickens novel. A plaintiff in Jarndyce vs Jarndyce.

When the passport arrived I inspected it closely, wanting value for money, but this sense of illusion was only confirmed. Now that the photograph is embedded within the page like a watermark, not stuck on, and the details are printed in rather than typed on, a new passport appears not quite authentic. The images dance around under the surface of the page, ghostly, elusive. From a technical point of view the whole document would be very hard to fake now, but the strange thing is, it doesn’t *look* original.

Before filing all the documents away, I examined the old birth certificate again, the one that said I was number 695 in the register, whatever that meant. The one produced using a standard typewriter (now known as the font American Typewriter), with its uppercase S stuck halfway up the line and full stops like billiard balls. The one that confirmed my birth was recorded a prompt ten days after the event. The one where my parents’ address is stated as my grandparents’ address, next door to the house where I grew up; we moved into the new house a few months after I was born. The one that has a place to list ‘Previous issue living and deceased’ in language that is biblical, as opposed to the new one which simply asks for ‘Previous children of relationship’. The one where the deputy registrar’s name, Cyril Humphrey Collis, appears at the top, and though I know nothing about the man that name has made him familiar to me, I always picture Cyril Humphrey Collis wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, a clipped moustache and braces. The one dated 23 April 1970, meaning my parents didn’t apply for a copy of my birth certificate until the year we first travelled overseas as a family. The one that I have gazed at all my adult life, wishing my father, the ‘Informant’, had recorded my name as Deborah, the proper spelling of my name.

The one, in other words, that contains questions, partial truths, little stories, narrative possibilities. NOT FOR OFFICIAL USE. Maybe not, but for other uses, of the imagination.

Somewhere, despite what I was told at the registry, there is a book. Many books. I imagine they are ledgers, great black-bound volumes requiring both hands to carry, inside inscribed in sepia ink. Here all these births are or were originally recorded – while we sometimes assume we have obtained our birth certificates, these are only copies of the original certification of those births. This is only some of the story of my birth certificate, which is like every other story, not straightforward and never really complete.

---

Debra Adelaide (‘the full name of the registered person was previously recorded as Debra Kim Walker’) teaches creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her latest novel, *The Household Guide to Dying* (Picador, 2008), has been published worldwide.
Beyond stigma
Musings on the sadness of privacy
Frank Moorhouse

‘Nothing is as revolutionary as candour.’
– Robert Desnos (French surrealist from the 1930s)

I THINK we would agree – in some hazy way – that privacy as a value, and
behaviour surrounding the idea of privacy, are considered fundamental in a good
society and to our sense of self. But the more I’ve thought and conversed about this
haziness the more I have had reason to be fearful about the enterprise of legal
codification of privacy and have, ultimately, come to oppose it.

Some of my thinking is also I suspect wishful thinking springing from my own
unorthodox values about candour, but even wishful thinking is part of the ethos-
making process. The word ‘privacy’ is a conceptual and semantic labyrinth and
while, in some relatively rare situations, it can be used precisely its use generally
requires much discourse to establish that precision.

The multitudinous issues of privacy are now receiving some public discussion: the
Australian Law Reform Commission complains that public debate has been meagre
and Paul Keating says the media is silent about it because it is against their interests.
The report by the ALRC on Australia’s privacy laws was delivered to parliament in
2008 and it has taken a long time to gain wider public attention but even there it is
stalled by complexity. The defeating complexity is illustrated by the physical report
itself. The result of two years’ research, consultation and analysis, it runs to 2700 pages
in three volumes and put forward 295 recommendations for change. In 2009 the
Federal Government accepted 141 of the 297 recommendations – thirty-four with
qualification, and two others were noted. Acceptance does not mean that action will
be taken. That is, less than half of the recommendations were accepted, which itself
illustrates how very far we are from clarity or a consensus on the questions of privacy.
There have been other reports over the years. The new ALRC report is massively bigger than the 1976 Law Reform Commission’s two-volume report on the issues – illustrating how sprawling the issues of privacy have become. In fact, it illustrates how the subject of privacy now is ever more labyrinthine and flooded with theological intricacy.

The intellectual project of the report loses control because it is dealing with a core existential issue: how much of the intricate, myriad detail about ourselves that now swirls through almost infinite channels of communication we can ever control or codify, and whether we should even attempt this control and codification.

Unless you are a recluse, we daily exchange and communicate details of ourselves to others; we spend most of our day in interaction – spoken, written or observed. Interaction requires the transfer of information, wittingly or unwittingly.

We try to control this surf of personal information by daily negotiation. We place injunctions – ‘this is between you and me and the gatepost’; ‘I will tell you a secret but you mustn’t tell anyone else’; or Kath and Kim’s ‘mind your own beeswax’. We try to enclose it in private treaties – we plead that publication not happen, we bribe, we use spin-doctors, agents, publicists and sue if we can. We burn letters and diaries. (One of the sad cases of destruction of a personal archive was the burning of James Cook’s letters by his wife. I feel that there should be a law against the destruction of private papers of people who have played a part in public life, or anyone’s personal papers, for that matter; to destroy personal papers seems to me to be a crime against the human spirit and an attempt to frustrate our understanding of the human condition.)

These informal ad hoc treaties, as with international treaties, dissolve with the passing of time or the changing of circumstances and are breached as the intimacy or trust upon which they are based – say, friendship or an employee–employer relationship, or love – collapses. But we make them – as do nation states – because they sometimes work, at least for a time.

The basic, perhaps uncomfortable existential fact is that we do not, in any secure sense, own our lives: what is said and done between two people, or a group of people, inescapably ‘belongs’ to all those who were part of the interaction or who observed it or who came to know about it.

Any permanent privacy – in its hard-rock reality – exists only in that which we do alone, or say to ourselves (and do not write down or otherwise record), which for most of us is a very small part of our life. This is why after all these years of inquiries and complaint and social friction, all this struggling with the issue, privacy is in Paul Keating’s words ‘still not simplified or streamlined and [the rules governing it] are generally seen to be dated, complex, confusing, fragmented and full of gaps and inconsistencies.’ Our discussion of privacy cannot be ‘simplified or streamlined’ because it is by its nature ‘complex, fragmented’ and inconsistent.
The Law Reform Commission report is so wide it is, in a sense, beyond conversation in any disciplined or controlled way – it beggars public discussion and I think this is why the mass media has had trouble handling it. I am having trouble handling it in this essay – which is not an attempt at a commentary on the report; that is impossible.

The term ‘privacy’ is now a disabled word, and when we pull at bits and pieces of the report it causes a cascade of complexity. This cascade makes the issue of privacy inherently difficult, for focus groups and surveys to make it clear in their questions what they mean by privacy. What a respondent – of different cultural experience, formation and generational experience – means by privacy, let alone what sorts of legal regime of courts and penalties or mediation programs may be needed to protect or preserve this slippery set of values we attempt to assemble under the word ‘privacy’.

Take the word ‘invasion’ – as in an ‘invasion of privacy’ – which is conventionally attached to the word ‘privacy’ without much thought. ‘Invasion’ is a strong military and diplomatic term of doubtful value when used to describe the frictions of daily life that are roughly grouped around notions of privacy. The ALRC has a list of ‘sensitive’ things deserving higher levels of legal privacy protection: for example, health and genetics. I do not fully understand our hypersensitivity about health records; obviously doctors, specialists, nurses and secretaries in doctors’ offices know them – who else is really interested? I suppose insurance companies could scale their risk and charges by knowing them. If we think it important to restrict access to our health records what deception or fraud does this involve us in? What is the purpose of concealing our health status? Or what stigma or shame is being imposed on us to make us feel that we should never expose this information? The ALRC also includes the following as sensitive: racial or ethnic origin; political opinion, say how we voted; membership of political associations; membership of trade unions; religious beliefs; philosophical beliefs; membership of professional or trade associations; sexual orientation and practices; and criminal records. Phew – a lot of secrets for us to keep.

To give a simplified overview of what people other than the ALRC consider privacy matters I have selected some examples from the records of the NSW Privacy Commission when it functioned as an independent agency: the possibility of strangers seeing X-ray photographs (the writer Roger McDonald, on the other hand, included his medical records and X-rays in his archival deposit at the University of Queensland’s Fryer Library); a complaint about doctors having to reveal their incomes; the publication of the photograph of a child of a murdered woman; the right to keep private the address of a holiday home. And on and on.

But there are all sorts of other anxieties which feed like vultures on the over-stuffed word – shame, secrecy, voyeurism, decency, decorum, proper reserve,
appropriateness, propriety, the ghoulish, the prurient, respect for religion, exhibitionism, idle gossip, unseemly gossip, effrontery, Don’t Ask: Don’t Tell.

How to explain that curiosity about taboo material or stigmatised behaviour is so strong that it ‘sells newspapers’? Public interest in information which the above words describe is powerfully illustrated daily. It seems to contradict claims about public concern with privacy. Or is it that we may be concerned with our own notions of privacy, but not concerned with the privacy of others? If so, what to do about this contradiction?

I would like to also examine two recent opinions on privacy from two leaders of public discourse I admire but with whom, on this matter, disagree.

THE FIRST COMES from the former justice of the High Court, Michael Kirby, one of my heroes for his libertarian stands on social issues and because he was our first openly gay High Court justice, which has tangle him in privacy issues.

In 2010 Justice Kirby gave the Victorian Privacy Commission’s Privacy Oration in Melbourne. He titled his theme-setting, introductory anecdote ‘Caught in a Hurricane’.

Last week I travelled to Halifax in Canada to speak at a conference on Family Law. I arrived at New York’s airport on time and waited patiently for the plane to Halifax. Unfortunately, Hurricane Bill had disrupted plane timetables. My flight was cancelled. Wondering how I would get in and out of Halifax… I logged on to the free internet available in the airport lounge… I thought I would see what the profile of my partner, Johan van Vloeten was. So I googled his name. Halfway across the world, up it came with a story in an Australian newspaper. The coverage, in a gossip column… attributed to an unnamed lawyer the remarkable information that, twenty years ago, when Johan owned a newsagency business on the North Shore of Sydney, someone in Mosman had… recognised me to be the ‘delivery boy’ [on the morning newspaper round]… [The gossip columnist’s astonishment was] that, I, the then President of the NSW Court of Appeal, was caught ‘moonlighting’ to help his domestic partner out, and it was recorded in all of its salacious detail.

Over the past decade or so, [my partner and I] have seen this story repeated both in the popular and the gay press. It would certainly be a trifle irregular for a senior judge to be delivering newspapers in the early hours of the morning, even to help a domestic partner… People have come up to us and told us that they found the tale endearing. It was a kind of early morning affirmation of love that one sees in television soap operas. The only problem with this story is that it has not a skerrick of truth to it: endearing or not, the story is just false. But like other stories, it has got into the media and it is impossible to dig it out. People will
chuckle or tut-tut, as they are inclined. But there is nothing we can do to correct the record… Of course, it was intended as a put-down… in that respect, it is like the false accusations made against me by a federal senator in the national parliament. Despite their demonstrable falsity, [the senator’s] withdrawal, his apology… my name will always be linked with those false claims. Can’t get away from them. Damage done. A nasty association. But should I care? Should my partner and my family care? Well, they do. You see, people still value their privacy, their reputation and the way other people perceive them. In the age of the internet, stories that once would have been wrapping the fish and chips and been forgotten a few weeks or months or years later, are preserved forever. Anyone wanting to read them can just google a name at JFK Airport, and there is it, once again. Immortal, invisible, a new God to project personal details worldwide.

Justice Kirby then cited another example involving a member of the US Supreme Court showing how much personal data can be collected from the internet: ‘I just hope that [the dossier] did not contain demeaning and false data alleging that the judge was moonlighting in some unusual way – perhaps delivering pizza for a family business.’

To me, this multi-pointed anecdote reveals the impossible scope we give to the word ‘privacy’ and the near impossibility of generalising about categories and underlying principles. It is an example of how wide the term has been stretched in our discourse – stretched to the point where the meaning shatters. When I raised Michael Kirby’s statements with some of my friends – some legal, some gay – we found it difficult to identify the harm or even embarrassment that would flow from the content of the anecdote.

I think that Justice Kirby is too pessimistic about the situation. As it happens the false story does get corrected – if it needs correction – it is corrected when we go online to read what he had to say on privacy. It is corrected by my repeating that correction and his concerns here.

I suspect that the correction will ultimately overwhelm the error if it hasn’t already and that the internet will ultimately play the major part in the correction. There are entertaining websites devoted to debunking fallacious legends and rumours, especially those surrounding public figures. Yet Michael Kirby felt that for him, as a judge, to do this sort of work would be demeaning – was a stigma.

And finally, how much consideration should we demand – and what legal or other mechanisms do we wish to construct – to protect people who ‘value their privacy, their reputation and the way other people perceive them’? For me, it becomes an example of how once we legally codify what a citizen perceives to be an offence against his or her privacy we sometimes unintentionally codify the stigma.
contained in Michael Kirby’s use of the word ‘demeaning’. I often take the advice of my favourite English novelist from the nineteenth century, George Eliot, who said in a letter in 1856, ‘Life is too precious to be spent in this weaving and unweaving of false impressions, and it is better to live quietly under some degree of misrepresentation than to attempt to remove it by the uncertain process of letter-writing.’

I QUOTE NOW from the opening anecdote of Paul Keating’s address on privacy given at the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne in 2010. He is also a hero of mine for his arts policies while prime minister. He said:

The press is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and of decency. Gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery. To satisfy a prurient taste, the details of sexual relations are spread broadcast in the columns of the daily papers. To occupy the indolent, column upon column is filled with idle gossip, which can only be procured by intrusion upon the domestic circle…

In this, as in other branches of commerce, the supply creates the demand. Each crop of unseemly gossip, thus harvested, becomes the seed of more, and, in direct proportion to its circulation, results in the lowering of social standards and of morality. Even gossip apparently harmless, when widely and persistently circulated, is potent for evil. It both belittles and perverts. It belittles by inverting the relative importance of things, thus dwarfing the thoughts and aspirations of a people.

When personal gossip attains the dignity of print, and crowds the space available for matters of real interest to the community, what wonder that the ignorant and thoughtless mistake its relative importance.

Some of my language is a giveaway. [These words were not] written by me, or written yesterday. The quote is from ‘The Right to Privacy’ by Boston lawyers Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, published in the Harvard Law Review in 1890, perhaps the most famous attempt at a definition of privacy. Warren and Brandeis wrote about the ‘right of the individual to be let alone’, a right they put alongside ‘the right not to be assaulted or beaten, the right not to be imprisoned, the right not to be maliciously prosecuted, the right not to be defamed’. They, of course, acknowledged that the right to be let alone was not absolute, and must on occasion give way to a higher or general public interest.

I wish to make some supplementary observations to those of Paul Keating and about this quotation from 1890. Much of what is complained about or corralled into a privacy offence in this quote has been around for a long time before mass-media technology – it was called village gossip, gossip about the royal family, about
priests, about people in authority. For perhaps centuries, people in public places
have had to put up with it although some have taken extreme measures to stop it,
including the cutting out of tongues.

And again, much of the complaint by Brandeis and Warren is about matters –
sexual, for example – which contain stigmas, say of adultery or sex outside
marriage, stigmas which privacy codification would endorse.

I would like to introduce one or two relatively new claims for privacy in our
society – another oddity in the ants nest of ever growing privacy concerns – the
claims for privacy about incomes and about payment of taxation. Some countries,
such as Sweden, under freedom of information rules and as a strategy against
corruption put everyone’s tax returns in the public domain. Sweden is ranked equal
first (with Denmark and New Zealand) out of 180 countries in Transparency
International’s annual survey of corruption.

In some countries, there is public disclosure of information about tax evaders. For
example, under Greek law the presentation of a new budget is accompanied by the
names of tax evaders in the previous year compiled by the finance ministry. In the
ACT all public servants’ incomes are available to the public and published online.

What is it we fear?

The law concerning letters and written communications between people states, in
most western countries, that the letter or physical communication belongs to the
recipient while the copyright belongs to the writer. But in a wider reality written
communications are equally part of the lives of the recipient and the creator in so far
as they impact or are meant to impact on the recipient. They become part of our life:
they enter our minds; they affect our behaviour; they can change our lives.

Most of us obey certain conventions and treaties about these communications,
that is, until we see that other overriding values would be served by breaking them.
If you believe in a more open, candid society you might argue that there is no reason
why we should be stifled, suppressed, or beholden to the values of those who are
not believers in a more candid society. We cannot live our lives by the shame of
others, by their timidity or their inhibitions.

WHAT INTERESTS ME is the making of the ethos around the word ‘privacy’ as
separate from the making of laws and regulations – the characteristic spirit of a
culture, era, or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations – the spirit
which motivates the ideas and customs of a community, sometimes called
‘standards of behaviour’.

The ethos is larger than the political or legal process, although these can be both
an expression of it and a way of reinforcing it, but they can also be in conflict with it.
The ethos can be revealed, in a rough and ready way, by opinion surveys and polls,
and can I suspect also be changed by polling – for example, people realising that the world has changed around them may recoil from these changes and become energised to oppose and reverse the changes shown by the polls. I sometimes speculate that polls, once published, immediately disturb and fracture the picture they present.

Ethos may change in response to new ideas or forces and is an evolving thing, especially in societies which hold to free public and private discussion and where legislation is democratically enacted and revised. We are all, in everyday behaviour and expression, both demonstrating and acting out the ethos and, in a dynamic society, refining the ethos, even reversing it. The ethos is not solid or permanent.

To inform its report, the ALRC went in search of public standards and attitudes. At the same time the report is part of the making of the ethos but it is not the end of the argument nor is it the arbiter of our ethos – as the rejection of many of its recommendations by the government shows.

The ALRC turned its attention to internet technology, which is seen by many commentators as gradually dissolving inhibitions surrounding self-exposure. The internet along with camera phones and the public surveillance camera creates a social visibility reminiscent of the village. The internet may ultimately show us that many of our anxieties about privacy and self-revelation are empty phantoms and false taboos. It is our first emerging picture – almost a total picture – of the human consciousness and shows us patterns of human behaviour far beyond the revelations of anthropology and sociology.

Mark Pesce, an honorary associate in the Digital Cultures program at the University of Sydney, says: ‘we have some idea what’s coming with the internet. Already, a small number of people are lifestreaming – recording and sharing their lives in their most intimate details, so that anyone, anywhere, can peer in. Within the next few years lifestreaming will become the norm for the younger generation – they’ll be sharing their lives with their friends as freely as they share text messages today.’

He points out that the next generation of smart phones will tie into the network to become ‘our points of presence within a “cloud” of information about ourselves, created by ourselves’. Perhaps what he is forecasting is a form of ‘coming out’ about ourselves as a species?

The ALRC tried to discover the attitudes of the younger internet generations and realistically decided that it could not be sure whether the apparent increase in openness and candour among the young on the internet is evidence of the eternal recklessness of youth or evidence of further significant loosening of attitudes to, and notions of, privacy. The commission concluded, reasonably, that it is too soon to draw a conclusion about this.
A stigma is where significant parts of the public opinion and the media treat certain behaviour as socially unacceptable and in some cases as criminal, and seek to punish this behaviour through exposure and then ridicule and contempt, by ostracising, by abuse, by expressed disgust.

One of the unintended impacts of privacy legislation and codification is that it reinforces some of the stigmas at a time when some of them are fading or are considered irrelevant or unacceptable. Some of the stigmas now withering away include mental health, leprosy, epilepsy, Aboriginal ancestry, birth illegitimacy, extramarital affairs, abortion, and drug problems. In my lifetime some have reversed from being a social negative to a positive, something to be celebrated – for example, the discovery of convict background in family history. Some things once socially amusing or accepted have become negatives – for example, drunken behaviour. Today a person would keep any anti-Semitic or homophobic attitudes secret or would only expose them in very carefully assessed situations, yet these could be openly expressed for much of the twentieth century without censure in most company.

Some existing stigmas are unjust and inhumane: HIV status, venereal disease, promiscuity, cross-dressing, the practise of prostitution both by client and sex worker, prison history, debt (although in some subcultures it can be a boast – ‘if I owe the bank a thousand dollars it’s my problem; if I owe them a million it’s their problem’), excessive drinking, the taking of medication for mental health problems to alter personality, or work which is seen as socially demeaning or of low social status (the Michael Kirby example).

Some stigmas are understandable while having a degree of inhumanity within them: lung cancer from smoking, cirrhosis through excessive drinking, obesity from gluttony, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse of children, and tax evasion (although I have heard people boasting about this).

Coming out was a unique and dramatic social action by homosexual men and women in protest against criminalisation and stigma which used as its tactic the public and private declaration – to friends, work mates and family – of their homosexuality. It is of special interest because it was a strategic abandonment of privacy as a way of confronting and disarming a stigma. From what I understand it is the first action of this kind by the human race (interestingly in 1869, one hundred years before the Stonewall Riots in the US, the German homosexual rights advocate Karl Heinrich Ulrichs introduced the idea of self-disclosure as a means of emancipation).

It shows curious and valuable things about the nature of ethos – and the questions of privacy. This social action was not the result of legislation, although it led to changes in legislation in western countries; it was not the result of a change in public opinion – at the time, in most western countries, opposed to decriminal-
isolation of homosexuality or approval of it. Australia led the way on gay rights – with Dennis Altman’s groundbreaking 1971 book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*.

The first Mardi Gras – or Gay Pride march – was held in Sydney on 24 June 1978 at 10 pm as a celebration of gay identity. It followed a morning protest march and commemoration of the Stonewall Riots. The organisers had obtained permission but this was revoked, and the police broke up the march and fifty-three people were arrested. Although most charges were eventually dropped, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published the names and addresses of those arrested in full, leading to some people being outed and some losing their jobs. Homosexuality was a crime in New South Wales until 1984.

It is an example of punitive journalism aimed at reinforcing a stigma; self-outing turned the stigma inside-out.

Now in political, casual or even humorous contexts, coming out can mean, by extension, the self-disclosure of a person’s secret behaviours, beliefs, affiliations, tastes and interests which may have previously been a cause of shame or may have caused disapproval among friends. Some examples include coming out as an alcoholic, coming out as a conservative, coming out as an atheist, coming out about cosmetic surgery and so on.

There is the question of being outed, that is, not voluntarily abandoning the formerly private nature of a part of one’s life but, instead, having it revealed by the media. Recently, the Seven Network outed the NSW Transport Minister, David Campbell, by broadcasting footage, filmed from the street, of Campbell leaving Ken’s of Kensington – a homosexual meeting place. The channel defended the outing as being in the public interest because Campbell had used a government car to drive to the club. This was quickly dropped when it turned out there had been no breach of any regulations or guidelines for use of government vehicles.

Implicit in the outing is a stigma, one that I suspect is withering, that for someone holding public office going to a gay club is repugnant and the person who does it should be punished. If there were a privacy law which covered this and the Seven Network were found guilty, the legal action would in itself reinforce the stigma. The privacy action would say that this is the sort of private sexual life, if revealed, that would cause the public to lose respect for the victim and to shun or otherwise lower him in public esteem. The privacy action would say the victim is expected to keep this private life secret because of its perceived socially distasteful nature.

We are gradually revealing many more things about ourselves in structured ways than comparable past generations. We expose ourselves now to doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, librarians, in group therapy and support groups, to counsellors, lawyers, journalists, writers, filmmakers, the police, national security agencies, the courts, online chat sites, Facebook, credit card companies and television programs such as *Dr Phil*. We ‘out’ ourselves.
WHAT THEN AM I saying about privacy? Anthropology seems to establish that the desire for privacy isn’t ‘natural’ – not inherent in the species – and is not a particularly old value. There are no universal privacy rules found in the human species – about nudity, toilet practices, sexual behaviour, private spaces, and so on. Privacy matters as we understand them arrived around the late eighteenth century as genteel fashion and, even today, are not universally present in all cultures, subgroups or families.

The further entanglement and enmeshing of the practices of day-to-day life into legal liability with the risk of potential litigation will lead to over-cautious, excessively sensitive, cramped and inhibited social relationships.

As the ALRC says we may have to face the technological reality that more and more information about ourselves is collected and available. I am inclined to think the loosening of attitudes to privacy is a good thing. There was a time in the 1970s when we tried to tell all about ourselves, ‘let it all hang out’, put ‘everything up-front’, and gays created the beautiful expression ‘coming out’ – proud self-revelation. This will continue. I have a theory that more than the internet, late-nineteenth-century realist fiction – with its evolving depiction of the diversity of human behaviour without judgement by the author – has led the way to making us feel more open about ourselves, encouraging us to drop our deceptions and masks. Realist fiction which, in many cases, drew on the author’s private life or the private lives and secrets known to the author, as well as on the imagination, permitted the author to have their characters show their innermost secrets and their darkest souls. At the time, this new fiction was opposed as being amoral for endorsing, or at least accepting, the unconventional or irregular life. Then emerged the genre of confessional poetry and ever more candid memoirs, biography and autobiography.

In turn these literary movements loosened journalism with the emergence of the frank mass-media profile and long interview. And then film and television – documentary and narrative (and perhaps ‘reality’ television) – have increasingly undermined some stigmas through candour. We still have a way to go.

I still think that the use of the age-old interpersonal treaties, however shaky they are at times, are the best way for us to manage information about ourselves. My anarchist self has great empathy with Herman Melville’s wilfully private Bartleby, who gave no reason or explanation for his behaviour but who said simply he ‘preferred not to’. In the broadest sense, privacy for me divides into those things we are frightened our friends will find out and those things we don’t want the government to know, what I would call horizontal privacy and vertical privacy. Bartleby was making his own treaty – the opposite to coming out. That should always be an option for us. The right to be shy. His position is still a sound default setting for us in a complex and centralised world with increasing government – vertical – gathering of personal information. But his position should not be where
we ideally would wish to be. We should ideally try to create a community where fewer things are shameful, embarrassing, concealed – where there is less need for furtiveness. There is a nice line in the film *The Band Played On*, which is about the emergency of HIV. Richard Gere plays an HIV-infected celebrity who when describing his sexual behaviour to a medical researcher says, ‘I don’t mind you knowing all this about me – but I’m not sure I want to know.’

Law reform on the question of privacy should not grant a permanent stigma to conflicts of sensibility and taste and temperament and should err on the side of the freewheeling and liberating. A truly pluralistic and free society permits the manifestation of difference.

I SEE MUCH of the privacy anxiety as a huddling towards an illusionary concept of ‘normal’ – a shameful suppression of difference, the fear of presenting the emotional self to inspection of others, fear of being seen as undignified or shown in an ‘unflattering’ way.

Civil liberty organisations and citizens should encourage an open and candid society as a way of reducing the potency of governments and moralistic media and vigilante primary groups to intimidate and control behaviour through the threat of stigma. We will be free when we are not afraid of what neighbours, friends, workmates, the media or the government know about us.

I stress that I am not for compulsory revelation of self, of a reckless abandonment of privacy, but I lean towards a gradual shedding of the genteel, petty privacies driven by false shame and fear of exposed frailty.

Publius Terentius (195/185–159 BC), better known in English as Terence, was a playwright of the Roman Republic. I use one of his famous quotations as a guide: ‘I am a human being and all things which concern human beings concern me.’ No one owns the record of their life: we all own each other’s life in so far as it has touched us – that is, the lives of those who have been involved with us in our life. They are our life; we are their life.

25 May 2011

---

Frank Moorhouse’s new novel, *Cold Light*, will be published in November by Random House. His Griffith REVIEW essay ‘The writer in a time of terror’ won a Victorian Premier’s Literary Award, the PEN-Keneally Prize and a Walkley Award.
'BUT could you do it warts and all?'

When in 2002 Michael Kirby greeted my proposal for a biography with this response – in writing, very helpful for lawyers and historians – I was doubly sure this was the makings of a great life story.

As some colleagues said at the time, his was a life still unfolding. But even with six years left to run in the High Court of Australia, Kirby was Australia’s most famous and controversial judge, and a world-renowned figure for his work in promoting universal human rights, bioethics and effective policy responses to challenges such as HIV/AIDS. I knew that sooner or later someone was going to write a book about his life and career.

Three years before, at a dinner to celebrate the retirement of one of my academic mentors, I first heard Kirby say that a number of journalists wanted to write his biography, but he didn’t think the timing was right. Besides, to be a true judicial biography it needed to be written by a lawyer.

The need to do this grew. In 2007 Kirby suffered a well-publicised attack in parliament by a senior Liberal senator, essentially for being gay, implying that this biased him towards paedophiles, and even more outrageously that he might be one. These smears were supported by a single – fabricated – document appearing to suggest that Kirby had used an official car to transport a ‘young male companion’. The different reactions to this proved to be, as commentators said at the time, a defining moment. But defining what? In the shadowy years of the Howard government, it was difficult to discern. But someone had to have a go.

There was also a bigger story in the life and career of Michael Kirby. His fame had originally been won, in the 1970s and 1980s, as one of the world’s most effective legal and judicial communicators, before he became a ‘real’ judge. This in itself was full of paradoxes. How could a young man win fame as a great, socially important judge, when most of the legal and judicial profession did not see him as
a judge at all? The conventions of the judiciary spoke of reticence to get involved publicly in social and political issues, so how had Kirby managed to do it on such a grand scale? What did his celebrity status say about what society wants from its judges?

There was another paradox too, which other law reformers could see once they got close – the extent to which he danced on the edge of his own image as a legal and social progressive. Despite earning a public reputation as something of a radical, Kirby’s more routine, underlying message was one of faith in existing institutions. I saw it most clearly as a sometimes radical law student visiting his chambers in the 1980s. I commented that it was unfortunate he had to keep a very tired picture of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II hanging prominently on his wall. After all, something far more vibrant, interesting and socially relevant could be hanging there.

I assumed the washed-out royal photo was just an ageing part of the court decor. But the middle-aged Kirby fixed me with a chilling stare. I later learned this came from a stern, royalist Ulster-Scots grandfather. His tone left absolutely no room for doubt or challenge. ‘The Queen,’ he said slowly and pointedly, ‘is a wonderful woman.’

It was not just his faith in what I considered to be conservative institutions that struck me as strange. Nor my surprise that he thought Australia’s political challenges would somehow be improved ‘by encouraging adherence to a foreign cult’, as the Queensland judge Bill Pincus later described it privately to Kirby. It was the emotional, cultural nostalgia that underpinned this transfixing stare. Gareth Evans would later tell me how he explained it to the republican Paul Keating, as simply ‘tribal’: ‘You’re a tribal character, he’s a tribal character, it’s a tribal issue, it’s got nothing to do with rationality.’

But to a student, Michael Kirby seemed like a man from another planet. Only later did I realise it was this planet, but another epoch. He embodied a nest of paradoxes I then found perplexing and fairly uninspiring – but a quarter-century later considered fascinating.

By early this century, Kirby had gone from strength to strength as a visionary, a symbol of tolerance, diversity and reform, helping navigate a path into an uncertain future. Yet he did so with values and skills typical of someone who was also a conservative throwback. In one conversation, he could readily paint a perfect picture of why things were not right and should not be allowed to stay the same, but repel suggestions that the political institutions that had produced them might benefit from any substantial, systemic change. Someone had to try to make sense of this, or at least properly describe it. Better it be someone who saw the paradoxes, and was interested in what they meant for the development of our institutions, than one of the many who apparently did not.
Kirby’s reply that any biography should be ‘warts and all’ was the clincher. His greatest impact came from being a voice for transparency in the byzantine legal profession. His greatest opponents were those who did not think the general public could ever properly understand judicial decision-making, and therefore should not be educated in it. But whether hopelessly conservative or dangerously progressive (or, in reality, both), Kirby had a public resonance built on identifying the social and political principles at the heart of important legal questions. His career was built on his talent for laying bare the inner worlds of lawyers, judges and legislators. I smiled when the Weekend Australian’s review of Michael Kirby: Paradoxes & Principles was titled ‘A life laid bare’. It was the only way a biography of Kirby could be sensibly approached.

By the time I began work on the book Michael Kirby was a celebrity of thirty years’ standing. As a judge he had the luxury, even more than most politicians, of being able to insulate himself from those whose advice he might find too personal or critical. He engaged with public audiences and interest groups and academic scholars and students like no other judge, but fewer and fewer people were in a position, or had any motivation, to be brutally honest with him. Apart from select judicial colleagues, with whom he increasingly begged to differ, these were essentially only family members, some of whom had also given up. The enduring exception was his partner of many years, Johan van Vloten.

On the other hand, no one had made so many public commitments to the importance of humanity and transparency as elements of judicial life. From his roots in mid-western Sydney and Fort Street High School, intricately interwoven with his own brand of elitism, came a liberal egalitarianism that said every citizen, the lowlier the better, had the right to question absolutely anything. Few public figures had such commitment to open and frank debate. True to his rationalist view of the law, he believed instinctively in Cartesian and Marxian dialectics as paths to truth – also central to the legal system. Let the best opposing ideas be thrown at each other with full force, persuasion and logic, and by definition the winner is right. The only good biography of Michael Kirby would be one that challenged, with evidence, whichever presumptions its author thought should be assaulted.

NO BIOGRAPHER OF a living subject should hope to produce a book about which the subject does not complain – possibly bitterly. That is a recipe for an entirely ‘authorised’ biography: censored, or at least self-censored, and therefore moving closer to simply being ghostwritten on behalf of the subject. There may be value in such work, when a subject’s memoirs are important and would not otherwise be produced in a readable form. But it’s not biography.

Even when not bound by express or implied conditions for co-operation, judicial biographers face a special problem. As Edward White of the Virginia Law School wrote in 2003, there is always the fear that the biographer may ‘if not sanitise the
subject, at least not linger over personal issues that might be thought to be inconsistent with the image of...judges as figures of integrity, probity, and a certain heroic austerity’. Discussing challenges posed by a never-completed biography of the famous American judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr, White wrote: ‘But who is to say that the assessment of Holmes’s life and career would be adversely affected by knowing that he was, for a time, in love with a woman other than his wife? And who is to say that a judge and his close followers should seek to control the portrait of the judge offered to posterity?’

In Michael Kirby’s case, the blessing was that even a critical biographer was not going to open up too many fresh cans of worms – almost every can had already been opened, if not by Kirby, thanks to his own penchant for publicity, then by those who reacted against him. The task was to craft a story shaped by proportion and context, which was well researched and factually accurate, insightful and rational, which challenged assumptions but was fair and persuasive. The project was a biographer’s dream – to explain the personal journey of such a unique character, to dispel myths and expose little-known realities, and, by explaining him in true historical detail, to use his fame, controversy and drama to point the reader at some of the large political questions posed by his roles as law reformer, judge and social icon.

Part of the story’s power would be in telling it as soon as possible after he retired from the High Court, when no actual litigation could be affected but people still had a live memory of the events and interest in these questions. After all, what does a modern society want and expect from its senior judges? How well is it dealing with conceptions of its own identity and challenges of change?

But this meant the clock was ticking. There was an absurd amount of material in Kirby’s archives. And an impossible range of topics and number of people who traversed his multiple professional lives. How to write in six or seven years the type of book that traditionally took biographers three decades to complete, long after the subject died? And do so with the story still unfolding every day?

Apart from time and resources, the answer lay in making the most of Kirby’s co-operation, while retaining enough detachment to do a proper job. A challenge. But co-operation is vital. Without it, you can produce a serious life review or critique – such as Chris Masters’ Jonestown (Allen & Unwin, 2007), about Alan Jones – but to call it a biography is a stretch. Co-operation garners access to personal papers, or most of them, as well as the right to burrow for any information you think you aren’t getting. It gets you more useful, contemporaneous documentary evidence with provenance than can be obtained any other way. Biographical research is, above all, historical research. Accuracy is paramount. Stories and legends passed down ex post facto based on what a person became, not who he was at the time, are rarely as useful: they are distracting and downright annoying. As in legal evidence, contemporaneity trumps legend every time.
But even more importantly, the subject’s co-operation is the key that permits others to open up. Those who only want to say bad things about a public figure will do so whether or not the project has any blessing. The same is true of those who only want to say nice things. But those closest to a subject – the family, friends and colleagues who really know him, who admire him but have been frustrated by him, whose advice has been given but ignored, who tried to warn him of the dangers into which he fell – these are the people whose evidence is gold. I learned early that the privilege of being a university-based researcher is that people respect your independence enough to tell the naked truth, when they otherwise might not. But for a biography of a living subject, a little more is needed – permission to speak freely. And in this case, many of those key witnesses knew Kirby’s values well enough to take his permission at its word.

Sure enough, it turned out that Michael Kirby, as human as anyone else, had airbrushed his own past. Usually in innocent ways. A recollection of a key moment of reflection under a crystal starry sky, while camping beside the Black Sea in 1970, as told in one later speech, could not have happened that way – in fact, it had been stormy and raining. Sometimes in less innocent ways, which pricked my own experience. Believe some speeches, word for word, and you might think that Kirby had ‘participated’ directly in the liberation of, or even personally ‘liberated’, the Walgett cinema from apartheid-style discrimination, during the New South Wales Freedom Rides of 1964–65. But unlike Charles Perkins or Jim Spigelman, the young Michael Kirby, in his double-breasted suits, did not actually undertake ‘direct action’, attend political protests, flout too many laws or get himself arrested. He provided legal representation for those who did – after the event. It was an important role, not to be belittled, but not the role some later speeches implied.

Here was a sliver of the Kirby paradox – happy to present himself, in hindsight, as a little bit more daring and radical than he actually was. This is splitting hairs, Kirby defenders might say. Let them say it. Kirby is a living subject, so he can also defend himself, even though the book is for posterity, and must be balanced and scholarly.

In any event, it is on both small issues of accuracy, as well as bigger ones, that the biographer of the living subject has to decide where his primary allegiances lie. I always had a clear answer, thanks largely to having had a journalist father, to whom I dedicated the book. Perhaps some biographers fret, but I had two basic principles inculcated from birth: what does the reader need to know from this story in order to have a real picture, and how is their interest going to be held? Splitting the right hairs, provoking the right question, using the incongruities to get the reader inside the real story of a life worth telling. This is the biographer’s first loyalty. Not to preserve or endorse the subject’s reputation, nor the praises of admirers.
WHEN THE PROJECT started I did not contemplate showing Kirby the text before the book was published. Nor did he ever suggest it. But then came a piece of advice from a great scholar and colleague, Patrick Weller: ‘Show him drafts...don’t promise anything, but it’s the fastest way to check facts, get a reaction and cut to the chase.’ A proper journalist’s instinct, married to the Marxian dialectic: don’t beat around the bush. If you are confident and want to be critical, how better to test and shore up your position than by exposing it to the person most likely to react against it?

But if he didn’t like it, would he keep co-operating? This was Michael Kirby, a man rightly renowned for his generosity, so the answer was probably yes. But even Kirby is human. At the very least, there were elements of family history whose accuracy only he and other family members could properly check. So I decided to start with those sections, a few months after he retired from the High Court in February 2009.

He promised only factual corrections; but I never deluded myself that this was all I would get. As the book developed, accompanied by corrections and queries, the writing took on elements of a dialogue. I revealed the first, too-long drafts chapter by chapter. Practicalities dictated this was the way to do it, but in other projects it would probably also be wise. After all, a subject’s too-negative reaction is not likely to make the author more generous in subsequent chapters. Michael became keen to receive each next instalment, ‘so I can see what became of me’.

Thus came 592 suggestions for corrections or changes. Most were minor and factual. For many, rewriting and editing made the suggestions irrelevant anyway. Others were beside the point, or helped a final point be made equally well or more clearly in a different way. And in key respects, some reactions enriched the book. Twenty-four of my subject’s suggestions ended up supplying new evidence of his perspective, using words or ideas that came not from earlier papers, speeches or interviews but directly from his response to my drafts. They let me crystallise and faithfully reflect his position, often in his own words, even when based on assumptions I still intended to lay bare for critical readers. An ideal outcome, made possible by the co-operation of a subject, who was not only alive, but very much kicking.

But thirteen of the 592 suggestions required definite rejection. Michael Kirby was indeed only human. They were understandable edits or reinterpretations but still, in my view, thirteen that would have compromised the real story. The decision to reject was just as valuable – it meant I knew exactly where I stood, and I was forced to check. As on many other touchy issues, if in doubt I had access to the counsel of Australia’s best law and politics publisher, Christopher Holt. But on these thirteen suggestions, I was in no real doubt.
My subject generously offered to read the proofs for any last factual or spelling errors, but ultimately agreed this would cross a line. There were still things that, while he might accept what I had written, he did not agree with, and were certainly not presented as he suggested. If he tried to correct some things but not these, in the final stages, a reasonable reader could assume he was ‘authorising’ the result. That would not be fair on him, nor an accurate reflection of the book. A biography is not the subject’s story. It is my story of him. The mere fact of co-operation gives cause for wonder, as well it should. But he was clear on the reality, and so was I.

WHAT WOULD OTHERS decide? As the book made its way into the world, in early 2011, erroneous assumptions that this was Michael Kirby’s story, a memoir and not a biography at all, became my greatest fear. Some bookshops presented it this way, grasping the living subject’s fame as most important to selling books. ‘Oh, it’s the co-author,’ one admirer greeted me innocently. I swallowed fury and pride before explaining the truth – which persuaded her to buy the book.

I could live with this, provided the book still had its intended effect. Richard Posner, the prolific American judge and biographer, suggested that judicial biography was not ‘cost-effective’ because the amount of time and effort could be better employed writing on matters more directly relevant to judges, legal academics, practitioners and the world. Possibly said in jest, it was nevertheless true. Michael Kirby knew this, too. In the same reply in 2002, he had asked: ‘But surely you have better things to do with your time?’ And the answer was yes, I probably did.

The advantage of this living subject – almost larger than life – was to produce a biography that was not simply historical, to give meaning to days gone by, but to demonstrate that history is alive now, that we are all making it now, and to use the currency of its themes to help others reflect and find their own longer-term view of what is happening now, as we struggle to achieve our oft-stated aim of becoming a more democratic and more accountable, open and tolerant, fairer society.

John Ritchie, a former general editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, once described the biographer as ‘like an archaeologist, inferring from fragments... That should not deter us. Don’t search for Grand Theories of Human Behaviour. Get on with telling the story. Practise biography rather than preaching or philosophising about it. By resolute and dogged steps awareness can be won.’

But the biographer of the living subject also has special advantages: he is not just an archaeologist, but an anthropologist, a sociologist, a political scientist and, just like some judges themselves, an activist. While deploying all the best scholarly methods, he can work with more than fragments, and present a life story that is both
past and present, to collide with the society around it. A servant of history and the reader, but also an architect. If he chooses to see it, he is his own warrior of ideas, devising which pieces of shrapnel might bounce off the story into current and future debates, the point sometimes made obvious through the eyes of the characters, sometimes in almost undetectable slivers.

Fortunately, the result worked, or at least so it appears. Even as Kirby helped launch the book, in two different cities, both official launchers – Malcolm Turnbull and Michael Lavarch – seemed genuinely intrigued about how I got away with it. In the Canberra Times a long-term watcher of politics and the law, Jack Waterford, commented on the unusual sight of a living subject indulging deeply in the promotion of a biography over which he had no control: ‘Kirby joined the publicity roadshow…mostly seeming so flattered to be the subject of such an exhaustive portrait that his protestations that the book was very tough on him seemed only to be ritual. In fact the book is tough indeed, and some of its judgments, or discussions about the mystery and mystique of the judge, must have been difficult for Kirby to swallow. The more so, perhaps, because they reflect some of the persistent criticisms of people who have been friends and colleagues, but not unsparing ones, over the years.’

But for the story to achieve any of its aims, it above all had to reveal a real life. I waited for the magic words, and then they came: Richard Ackland, in the Sydney Morning Herald, described the biography generously, and finally, and more importantly, as ‘warts and all’.

---

AJ Brown is John F Kearney Professor of Public Law at Griffith University. His most recent book is Michael Kirby: Paradoxes & Principles (Federation Press, 2011), but he also works on other more cost-effective projects. His previous Griffith REVIEW articles are ‘When the whistle is blown’ and ‘The states we’re in’.
Heart’s dream
Sandra Goldbloom Zurbo

Only recently did it occur to me
that she might have dreamt a different life,
a creativity not bound by all the matter of women’s domesticity.
So I asked her.
The afternoon was sunny – matching her disposition.
Over coffee in the chic café
I say
‘Mama, what was your heart’s dream?’
She blinks – once – perhaps to give herself time to think
then bunts the question back to me
the question mark
a grappling hook at the end of a sentence.

A pianist, is the reply I expect.
My mind’s ear tuned to childhood, I hear
Chopin Schubert Mozart Gershwin.
No mean talent, she.
‘Nothing,’ she replies, ‘not really.’
I slump in disappointment
until, having completed the task of
brushing imaginary crumbs from her ample bosom, she adds:
‘Except a singer. Not opera. You know, a singer.’

Careening jigsaw-puzzle pieces of memory
lock together, fragments are made whole.
‘Jazz’, I exclaim, and she smiles.
‘Yes. Ella Fitzgerald.’
‘Only that,’ she says. ‘Nothing really.’

Just a dream.
CIGAR boxes are elegant and prettily made small objects, more common once than they are now. They are made of thin slices of wood, and their labels may show a certain rose and gilt baroque splendour. They have a delicious scent that has nothing to do with cigarettes and the smoking thereof. When one day I found a cigar box tucked in the bookcase, I thought it was just the thing to keep small treasures in. When I looked in it, I discovered that someone else had had the same thought: it was already full of small treasures.

They are my mother’s, and together they are the bones, incomplete and disordered, of a narrative. As though a skeleton has been disturbed by small or large predators, and bits scattered or even stolen. They need to be recomposed. A lot of them are small clippings from newspapers, thin and frail now, but still clear. From the Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate, as it was then, a distinguished broadsheet that the locals read like a novel of their daily doings; or the evening tabloid Sun, which seemed to be mostly racing and sport, and was read by people on the bus after work.

Some of the clippings are death and funeral notices: my mother’s mother, Louisa Emily; her father, William; her brother Stanley Byron; her sister Muriel Louie, always called Lou; her aunt Minnie Caroline Ella. I always thought Louisa Emily fared better in the naming lottery than her sister Minnie, but I did not know about the Caroline Ella part. I thought it was perhaps the rhythm and the elegance of Louisa Emily that got her married and mothering six children, living into her nineties, a beloved and independent matriarch. Whereas Aunty Min, despite the euphony of Minnie Caroline Ella, never married, and spent her life as a companion in the houses of rich people, like the Gartrell Whites, who were cake makers of national significance, and another family called I think Armati.

I often wondered about Aunty Min’s job. She wasn’t a nanny, or a maidservant, and she was very sharp about the things she didn’t do; perhaps she poured the tea, changed the library books, possibly a little light dusting. I suppose she fetched
things. She was supposed to fetch me and take me to Sunday school, and when I was not quite five she failed to come – I have never found out why – so I went on my own with a note written by my father. It was the Anniversary, when everybody got a book prize; they found one for me: The Rocks of Han, by Pixie O’Harris, perhaps the most important book in my life. It was a magical story about a man who fishes a mermaid, a merrow, out of the sea and steals her little red cap so she can never go back; he goes through various vicissitudes, proving himself a good man, until finally all is well. The narrative is a powerful one, and the pictures, for a change, are just right. I spent my childhood worried by pictures that were so evidently wrong for the stories they were supposed to illustrate.

Aunty Min, as I remember her, was grim, and outspoken, and evangelical. After my mother died I found a letter Min wrote to her, a long complaint about the nursing home she was living in, especially about the woman who shared the room, who was always whingeing. She only had one leg; the other one had been cut off. Aunty Min said she thought she ought to have a more spiritual approach, considering that she already had one foot in the grave. This is the sort of blackly humorous moment that tidying up after a death reveals.

Aunty Lou never married either; I always supposed that it was because of the Great War – that her fiancé, whether or not she had yet met him, was killed by it. She was the right age. I have written stories about this, fictions, since I don’t know any facts. I can’t think now why I did not ask my mother these things, while I could.

The clippings mark daughters engaged and babies born. Some are fragments from the social pages. My wedding in Canberra is written up in some detail, and finishes with the news that the couple left by air for a honeymoon in Sydney. I don’t know why we didn’t drive, since buying the rings and those airfares left us penniless. Later we – Mr and Mrs Graham Halligan – are sailing for Europe with our baby daughter, Lucy, to ‘be farewelled in Sydney by several friends from Merewether’. Several friends! The whole family came down.

This social pages stuff is a sort of news. You don’t pay for it, whereas the death notices you do. Engagements may be gossip and so free, or you might pay.

My father’s death gets eleven notices: the family announcement of his death, and of the funeral; all the rest are requests from his lodges for their brethren to attend. They are held together with a pin, worn but not rusty.

There’s the birth of a daughter to the cousin who married and went to live on a sheep station in New Zealand. There’s a school award for citizenship and patriotism, notice of a scholarship, Leaving Certificate results. My sister Rosanne is one of three children selected from her primary school to write messages of loyalty to the Queen, via the Royal Empire Society – how I will tease her about that when she gets back from zipping round Languedoc! But not everybody is there. The births of my children, for instance: those cuttings must be somewhere else, or lost.
Underneath the clippings are old pages, rather thick and blunt, but flimsy and faded, though still legible, written in a most beautifully curling handwriting. You can imagine a nib dipped in ink. One is Praise Letter, from a teacher called Miss Cameron at Newcastle South Public Infants’ School, addressed to my grandparents, to say that their daughter, and my mother, Milly, has acquitted herself remarkably well in the four quarterly examinations of the year. She only hopes that Milly will be able to overcome her shyness and so do herself credit. It has been a great pleasure to teach her and Miss Cameron trusts that she will do better and better. This is in December 1913. Milly would have been eight.

Another, of the year before, is addressed:

My dear Little Milly,
So you did not forget me while I was away.
You are a very kind little girl to send me that pretty post card.
I wonder if you will think this letter better than a post card.

That seems quite a hint to me. Miss Cameron goes on a bit and ends up sending her a kiss (X) and saying goodbye.

The third letter is from August 1913. Miss Cameron is sorry that Milly has been sick, and hopes she will like to read the copy of Sleeping Beauty she is sending, especially the pictures. Nearly all the sick children are back again.

Will you give my love to your mother and tell her I’ll be glad when she makes you better.
We all send you a kiss.
Your loving teacher
M. Cameron.

I think little Milly would have been thrilled with this letter. With both her letters. I wonder when she would have seen the praise letter. They are a bit from on high but very sweet. Formal, and yet loving. I can’t imagine a teacher these days writing like this. And here they are, foxed and faded, nearly a hundred years on, kept safely in the cigar box. While the people who wrote them and read them are long ago ashes, or dust.

I wonder if this is the teacher who once called her Millicent. My mother told me about this. She said: I expect she felt sorry for me, having such a silly name as Milly. I said I thought it was lovely, nicer than Mildred, her name and my middle name. But I could see she felt there was something frivolous, something not serious, about the name Milly. I imagine she was a serious little girl; shy children often are. And now she has a great granddaughter of that name, though differently spelt, which
we, first Milly’s daughters, think is wonderful. Especially as new Millie’s mother in Dublin chose the name without realising its provenance. She said to her husband: What do you think of Millie? And he said: Great; that’s my granny’s name. There are twenty years between the child’s birth and the granny’s death, but we don’t forget her. Sometimes my sisters and I talk about Milly, which is what we called our mother in later years, not realising it might not be clear which one we mean.

THERE ARE NO photographs in this cigar box, but I have some. Once I found that my mother had cut off a whole collection of pictures at bosom level. Why did you do that? I shrieked. I looked like the side of a house, she said. This is not true. I know because she missed some. She is wearing a filmy dress, with lace ruffles, straight 1920s-style, the kind that needed you to bind your breasts in a bandage to keep the line. She does not look so thin and shapely as in photos from the 1930s, taken in colder weather, in fitting, beautifully cut clothes, but she looks lovely. She has silky stockings, strapped shoes, a deep hat framing her face, with slightly more brim than a cloche, perhaps. Her cheeks and chin are finely moulded and very smooth – she was famous for her complexion, so her brother’s wife told me. She is standing beside my father, who is in his homburg hat, holding her flowered parasol, looking cheerful and pleased with himself. His trousers are strangely short, but that must have been the fashion – he was quite a dandy in those days.

In some photos there is a man we called Uncle Vic, who was courting my father’s sister Violet; she didn’t marry him, but instead a smooth-tongued Irishman, Tom, who spent his life shut up in a room writing bad poetry, long yawping verse forms like Walt Whitman gone wrong. He was a keen communist. He worked as a shunter in the railways. My father thought marrying this man was a terribly bad idea, and possibly it was. I don’t know that Violet, who was called Queenie, thought so, but then it wouldn’t have been in her interests. My father had to give one of Tom’s daughters away at her wedding; her father wouldn’t go. He had a habit of lying about in his back garden in baggy shorts, tanning his lean and muscular body. When I put him in a novel once I made him very sexy. The real one, he was charming, and handsome, with a wicked Irish sneering smile and sly eyes. He played a killer game of Scrabble full of mad erudite words, and had a habit of turning trays of food upside down. The women of the family brought him meals to the room where he shut himself to write his bad poetry, and when he didn’t like the look of them he tipped the trays over.

Vic was romantic, he used to give Violet books of other people’s poems, real ones. He married a pleasantly plain woman called Molly Frogley, no beauty like Violet in old photographs. There is one of grandma, my father and his three sisters sitting in a scruffy garden with a little foxy dog. One sister is very plain; one is handsome; the third, Violet, the youngest, is beautiful. Grandma looks the way I fear I look now. They are all very alike.
Once when I was walking home from school my hat blew off and into a drain running along behind the drycleaners. I was secretly pleased because I hated that hat. Uncle Vic was visiting. Come on, he said, and got me to sit on the back of his motorbike, we roared off, he climbed over the bridge into the drain, a kind of creek, and retrieved the hat. I was not happy, I was terrified of the bike, and I had to go on wearing the hat. I was about five, and it was a big noisy bike, even for the time.

My hat was floppy lemon-coloured linen, with embroidery on the front. That becoming hat in my mother’s photo would have been made by Lou, who was a milliner and worked in Winn’s Department Store. My mother was trained as a dressmaker, like her mother, who was apprenticed for three years without pay to learn the trade. My mother went to Tech, where she learned to draft, to cut, to shape; she was already a fine embroiderer. But she never went out to work, she was too timid. She stayed at home and kept house while Louisa Emily did elegant needlework.

I’m fascinated to look at the photographs of the two girls, Lou and Milly. They are slender, with long necks and sharply curved hair, in the bobbed style of the 1920s. Their clothes hang beautifully on them. I am imagining them at home in the old family house, looking at magazines, poring over patterns, sewing ambitious clothes, shaping them to one another’s bodies. By the time of the ’30s the clothes fit, not tightly but elegantly, like gloves, they are superbly sculptured with a band or a stripe emphasising the line, their hats complement them and so do their shoes, their legs are clad in silky stockings. In the ’20s they have necklaces, and tiny handbags, and gloves. I have only just begun to think what fun they would have had, working out and clothing themselves in the latest fashions, and all on shoestrings, whatever they are.

When I was a small child the odd luxurious things in my mother’s life came from Lou. Fine stockings. Scented soaps. And Milly made all our clothes. My sisters, in their teens (they were among the first teens ever), had big fights over the tightness of things. My mother liked them to fit easily, they wanted skin-tight, especially round the waist.

There had been various pretty necklaces, I remember from my childhood: carved coral beads like roses, ivory-coloured ones, some painted with flowers, one mint green and white, and I recall that a lot of these got broken. I was going to a birthday party and I begged to be allowed to wear one. My mother said no, necklaces in my hands always ended up broken. I carried on about this, and my father said: Why not let her, it can’t do any harm. I knew my mother didn’t want me to, but I played on my father’s persuasion. I set off for the party, just up the road, with my present, and the necklace, one of the ones painted with flowers, hanging low round my neck. I was five, on my own. I’d hardly got round the corner when I felt a horrible slow cool trickling against my skin. The necklace had broken! I hadn’t touched it. I grabbed at the string and caught a few of the beads before they slid off. I scrabbled round on
the ground and found some more, but not all; I knew enough about numbers to see that I did not have nearly enough to make up the length of the necklace. I got hot and bothered and worried. I didn’t have anything to put them in. I clutched them in my hand and when I got to the party handed them to my hostess with some incoherent story. I didn’t enjoy myself at all.

I took them home to my mother, babbling about how I had done nothing, they had just broken, I was just walking along, being good, not even touching them, and suddenly – broken. She didn’t say anything, just looked sad. That made me feel even more miserable. I knew if I hadn’t fusses about wearing the necklace it would still have existed, whole and beautiful. I still feel bad about it: my mother’s pretty thing, lost; she didn’t ever wear it, but that wasn’t the point. It does occur to me that she might have guessed how fragile it was, the string old and worn. Just the same, I look back upon myself as a monster child.

THE PHOTOS OF my mother with my father and Vic were taken on a wreck. It was a boat called the Adolphe, one of the many ships to founder on their way in to Newcastle’s dangerous harbour, and it was stuck on Stockton Breakwater. There is a long rusty hole on the deck in front of their feet, and you can see bits of riveted wall behind them and above are beams that look as though they would have supported the planking of a deck. It was a favourite outing, to take the ferry to Stockton, walk out along the breakwater, and explore the wreck. One false step of my mother’s pretty shoes and she would have fallen through the rusty hole into the oily water beneath. You can’t do this anymore: the wreck has broken up, and even if it hadn’t, imagine anyone in this litigious age letting you do such a risky thing. It is charming to see how beautifully they are dressed for this rough expedition.

My father is courting my mother in this picture. That sweet, rather conscious smile she has; his cheerful happiness – things seem to be going well. In fact, they weren’t. He asked her to marry him; she refused. She told me she thought he was too high-toned and arrogant, and that his family had ideas above their station. They’d met because his sister Ivy and her sister Lou were friends, Lou the milliner and Ivy the nurse, the handsome sister, who later changed to her middle name, Mary. Milly must have been firm about it because Jamie went away and eventually married someone else.

This story none of us children knew until the night before father’s funeral. I find this amazing, because the family was full of people who were there at the time, but never a word was let slip. We knew about Thelma, that she was a young woman in his life, that she’d knitted him a cream silk dress scarf and she certainly didn’t do as good a job as our mother would have done; there were flaws in its pattern, one called I believe blackberry stitch. We gathered that she disappeared from the scene and Milly took her place. But that funeral eve we found out he had married her, and
she had died of tuberculosis. Milly produced Thelma’s diary and said: Tell me, should I burn this? Of course we all shrieked no, having a great respect for words on paper, even before we knew what they were.

It is the saddest little story. Thelma so loves her Jimmy, her Brown-Eyes, she calls him; she is sure she will be well, she is trying so hard. Milly said: Jamie really believed he could save her; he’d read a whole lot of books and thought that they could beat the disease.

Thelma wrote in her diary that the doctor says she can get married provided they practise ‘BC’. And marry they do. She tells her diary how she loves the smell of him. How happy she is. So much better. Six months later she is dead. Our father was devastated, ran away up north, had a miserable time. It was 1930 that she died and the Depression didn’t help. I think he started writing again to Milly after a while, and eventually he came home and asked her to marry him and this time she said yes. I expect he wasn’t so high-toned and arrogant after all that had happened, and also I think that my mother might well have thought that since she was keeping house for her own parents, her mother spending her time as a lady doing needlework, maybe it would be pleasanter to keep her own house instead.

In 1937 they were married; she was thirty-two. She was very old not to be married; I think young people these days possibly don’t know how invidious was the situation of single women; it was never considered a choice anyone might have wanted to make. My parents had a little general store at Adamstown that struggled along, but when I was two they gave that up and father went to the state dockyard as an accounts clerk. He used to say that if they had stayed through the 1940s in the shop they’d have made a fortune, but it was no life for a family.

Tucked in Thelma’s diary there is a photograph, sepia, or possibly just yellowing with time. It shows a grave in Sandgate Cemetery, a wide grave, with a marble book for a headstone. On the left-hand page is written Thelma May, beloved wife of Arthur James. The right side is blank. Waiting for her Jimmy to be buried there. But by this time he is our Jamie. The next day we cremate him; his ashes are buried beneath a yellow rose bush, and a decade or so later our mother’s join him.

We are not filial, have not been to see them, as good daughters should, do not make pilgrimages when the roses are blooming, do not take our children to see where their grandparents lie. I think of them sometimes, when I think of the ashes of my husband and my daughter, still in my house with me; my son James says we should scatter them, and I suppose we will, one day. I would like to go and see if we could find Thelma’s grave. This unlucky young woman who lost the life she so passionately wanted.

VIOLET’S FIRST DAUGHTER got married shortly after I did. She was considerably older than me, so it was a late marriage. One of the clippings in the cigar box is the announcement of her engagement, very pleasing for her because
everybody thought it would never happen. We slowly lost track of her after that. I think she deliberately drew herself away, although she had been in the habit of coming to our place just about every Saturday or Sunday; she’d stay for tea and go home on the bus. She carried a pale Orlon cardigan in a plastic bag, both of these things being new and exciting at the time. She was a tall and statuesque woman, usually stout; her father and her brothers were big-boned, tall people. We children rather liked this visiting, though my mother was sometimes irritated by the casualness of it: she never knew if Judith was coming or not. She taught me to sew on the Singer treadle machine; she observed that what was going wrong was my failure to co-ordinate the spinning of the wheel by hand with the peddling of the footplate. My mother had despaired of my ever getting the knack.

One day Judith and I were fiddling about in the laundry, and for some reason were talking about men carrying women over puddles. Well, Marion, she said, you and I will just have to get used to the idea that it won’t happen to us.

I knew she wasn’t just meaning being carried over puddles, she meant all the things men do with women, and I was irritated by this. I was twenty-two and was by no means supposing that such things were passing me by. I knew she thought this for herself, and wanted my company in this bleak place she had in mind. So I didn’t say anything. And in fact quite soon after a man did carry me over a puddle, a man I had only just met, and in six months more I was married to Graham – not the man of the puddle, I didn’t see him again for another forty years.

We three sisters got in touch with Judith a quarter of a century after her marriage, when our mother died. She invited us for lunch and made bacon sandwiches. She didn’t eat them, as she was dieting so she could have a hip operation. Both husband and wife had got very large. The husband’s favourite dish, which he liked to cook, was chips and battered fish, deep-fried. They were very good. When we visited they had just had the door of the lavatory re-hung so it opened outwards, in case one of them collapsed while they were in there.

THE BIGGEST TREASURE in the cigar box is three letters. They were written by my father to my mother, just after my daughter Lucy was born, when he would have been sixty-two and she sixty-one. I had rung him up and told him that my mother had to come down to Canberra and stay with me, that I couldn’t cope on my own.

Notice, rung him. There wasn’t a telephone in my family house until father retired. No matter how often we girls complained that he was ruining our social lives, that we would never have love lives, because people couldn’t ring us up, no matter how often we pointed out that he would never get rid of us, we would be on his hands for ever, because nobody would ever get to know us well enough to want to marry us, he refused to have a telephone put in. There was still that idea around,
that a woman was on her father’s hands until he gave her away to her husband. In
fact, we all did get married without the benefit of his telephone, but we had to leave
home first. So I had to ring him at work. I must have done a good job, though,
because he let Milly come. That’s how I always saw it, though when I said this to
Rosie the other day she said: He couldn’t have stopped her. She was coming.

Not often did my mother put her foot down, but she did then, clearly.

I had forgotten the details of that coming, but the letters recall the huge
organisation required, so my father would not feel too keenly the loss of his
helpmeet. Rosie was living at home, going to university; Brenda was married and
living in a flat not far away. Would Rosie give up getting up at midday and staying
out till all hours, in order to get father off to work and have his dinner ready? He
was famous for saying he liked it waiting on the table when he walked in the door.

The first letter begins ‘Dear Beautiful’. Just a note, he says: it runs to one and a
half typed pages. Rosie got him to work all right that morning and when he got
home she had the house quite tidy ‘and had done things’. After all sorts of news and
remarks like ‘we are bearing up bravely under the strain and our survival is
expected,’ he ends: ‘This is all for now, lovey-dovey.’ His new Bruckner record had
arrived that day and he is going to relax and play it.

The second letter begins ‘Dear Precious,’ and expects to be short too, since he is
writing it at work, with his fountain pen, in order to catch the post that day, but he
manages more than two pages. She’s already written back to him. Lots more daily
news. Brenda dropped in to see him, and found him sitting on his ‘lonely own’ since
Rosie had gone to uni. She’s doing pretty well. ‘Made some meat concoction the
night before last and put in garlic, lemon juice and sherry – it tasted quite good, but
you know my reaction to high flavours.’ She’s cooked a decent steak and the apple
pie is highly praised.

He’s solved the problem of getting her up in the morning – he takes her a cup of
tea and the paper.

This letter finishes with love to his sweetheart.

The third letter begins ‘Dear Gorgeous’. Rosie is a great success. On Friday night
they go to the pictures with Brenda and Fred, and she does dinner first. Oysters
(smoked, I suppose), an excellent casserole with stuffed tomatoes, pears with jelly
and ice cream, biscuits and cheese. All before an 8 pm movie. He tells her she should
take over on occasion and give her mother a spell, ‘but I think that is a horse of
another colour.’

He tells Milly how he does his washing, and who has died, who had a baby, who
an operation. There have been great storms, and the street at right angles to theirs,
along the beach, has been under nearly two feet of sand again, but theirs has just a
smear. Brenda got a pay rise. He’s in the middle of his secretarial work for his
lodges, so will wind up now, lovey. He ends with his love. And there is a PS: ‘Your rose petals still had quite a perfume.’ I wonder what this means, this small, almost poetic sentence.

I was full of tears when I read these letters. They are so loving, so daily, they pay so much attention to the threads that weave the fabric of their life together. And they recall to me his humour, his heavy-handed irony, his rather ponderous jokes. He remarks that Brenda dropped in again – she was having fun running round in their car, which was an Austin Healey at that time, I think, a wonderful object, and Brenda, tall and slender and twenty-three, with her straight shining brown hair halfway down her back, was the right glamorous driver of it – to borrow some knitting needles; apparently, he says, the craze is on again. She didn’t stay, just glanced over his shoulder to see who he was writing to. ‘Wanted to know who Beautiful was. Do you know?’

Beautiful. Precious. Gorgeous. He is having fun. But he means it. He wants her to know he loves her, he misses her, even though he is being looked after by his daughters. He knows that I need her at this time, and that is right, but he is holding her close.

There aren’t many letters because they were never apart. They went away together and stayed home together. Every morning and every evening, before and after work, he kissed her. Every night we heard the bed springs rattle as he rolled over to give her a cuddle. They liked one another, liked to touch, to be near. There were other letters, I realised; when I was a child collecting stamps my mother took some envelopes out of the back of her wardrobe and cut beautiful 1930s stamps off them. She had them safe and whole there, and much later I worked out that they were the letters Jamie had written before they were married, after Thelma’s death, when he wanted to renew his connection with her. She wouldn’t show me the letters, and I didn’t go and look when she wasn’t there. She trusted me not to do that and I couldn’t have betrayed her. I don’t know what happened to them. Perhaps she destroyed them, as she had thought of doing with Thelma’s diary, this time not asking us our opinion.

She was shy, and private. She wouldn’t like her daughter writing about her like this. But this is what I do, with stories that I find, or invent; I write them down for others to read. That cigar box, with its narratives, she left it for me to find.

---

Marion Halligan AM is an award-winning novelist, essayist and short-story writer. She has been shortlisted for the Dublin IMPAC Prize, the Miles Franklin Award and the Nita B Kibble Award. Her books, published by Allen & Unwin, include Taste of Memory (2004) and Valley of Grace (2009), and her new novel is Shooting the Fox.
FOR a long time I could not make up my mind where and when to start my story, but eventually I decided to begin in the middle.

About ten years ago my sister told me that my mother had had another child, one we knew nothing about. We were standing in my kitchen, the day before she was due to go home to Germany.

‘Mum was raped by three American soldiers shortly before the end of the war. One of them was black and he was the one that made her pregnant.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked, in shock.

‘She told our brother a few months before she died.’

The conversation went on for a while; my face, ghost-white, slowly regained its normal hue. For the rest of the evening my moods and thoughts swung from incredulity to curiosity, from sadness to hatred.

My sister left the next day. My husband tried to gently coax me back to normality, but saying ‘It was all a long time ago’ did not really help my confusion.

I GREW UP in Germany, learning about World War II in school. As young teenagers my classmates and I were taken to the nearest concentration camp and told to stand in the fake showers, a few at a time. Each year we collected money for the upkeep of the war graves. At the beginning of winter we had to buy little candles to take home and put on the windowsill, to shine towards East Germany, to let the people know we had not forgotten them. Once a year each class packed up goodies to send to an address in the East. I am not sure whether my annual contribution, a packet of rolled oats, briefly improved their diet, but it was all my mother could afford.

My sister’s news brought the war closer again. One uncle died in the war, ‘lost in Russia’; other uncles were imprisoned by the various victors. Some came home
quickly; others took years. We grew up with this knowledge, but thought that our mother and her first two children, who had been ‘bombed out’ of their flat in Munich, weathered the rest of the war all right, tucked away on her in-laws’ farm.

In the time that followed my sister’s revelation, my siblings reminisced. Some of our mother’s strange behaviours began to make sense.

We had no way of tracing this new brother. Where was he? Should we even look? Worst of all: did he know that his father raped his mother? Best leave it alone, we thought.

But the seed was sown. My sister looked on the internet. We talked to our aunt who had been there when the rape happened. She had run away. It was hard to talk to her: it all happened a long time ago. She thought the church had dealt with it.

TWO YEARS AGO my sister phoned: ‘Guess what happened? Our American brother’s son turned up at Mum’s house!’

He had been seeking a German passport, and after visiting the council building for records of his grandmother’s address he walked to my mother’s house. He rang the bell and my niece, who now lives there, answered the door.

‘I’m looking for my grandmother – does she live here?’ he asked.

My niece told him that my mother had died nine years ago.

He had known where to look, he explained, because his father stashed the relevant paperwork in his attic.

The holes in the story could now be filled in. Mum had given her black baby up for adoption in Germany. He lived in an orphanage until he was five, when he was adopted by an elderly African-American couple and moved with them to America. My brother later married and had three sons.

My parents went on with their lives. When my father came home from English imprisonment, six months after the war, mum was eight months pregnant. In the following years, my oldest brother recalls, she would periodically take the train to Munich. When asked what she did there, she would say: ’Mind your own business – you don’t need to know!’ My brother says now he realises that she was visiting her baby. We discovered she had met his adoptive parents several times and had stipulated that they be Catholic.

SHE’D HAD ANOTHER five children after my half-brother was born. There were too many, even with a nanny to help. My father died when I was four, and we moved to a bigger town. For my mother, in her early forties, the shock of losing her husband in an accident was profound. She never really wanted to talk about it, but every year on the anniversary she would say: ‘It’s your father’s death day today.’ This was so ingrained that I still don’t recall his birthday, only the day he died.
She coped while my father was alive but less well after he died. In our early childhood half of us were sent to an affordable boarding school; my sister and I used to comfort each other when, during the autumn holidays, we were not allowed to go home because she could not cope. Eventually I became chronically sick and was allowed to leave the boarding school for good.

I only realised how extraordinary this family situation was when I became a mother myself. My mother was a highly educated young widow – she had completed a doctorate in economics before the war – with eight children and no husband she was out of her depth. It was a hard job, one for which she was mentally ill-equipped. When, like all kids, we would fight, she would retreat to the kitchen and sit at the table, her head bent down with both hands over it. She would sit there, sometimes quietly sobbing, waiting till it was all over. She used to go to church a lot – every day in later life. She said it gave her day a beginning, but now I think there was more to it. She lit many candles for my father and other remembered people. I imagine now that the occasional little red votive candle was for the little baby she gave away.

Another moment comes to mind. In my early teens I was sitting at the table totally absorbed in the local paper when suddenly my mother’s hand, index finger outstretched, shot past my head and landed on an article. ‘This is what happens to you if you’re not careful,’ she said sharply and walked off. It was an article about a rape in our town. I did not think about it any more until years later, when I told my girlfriends this little story, and they were all shocked and worried about the psychological impact that it might have had on me.

MY SECOND BROTHER was the ‘golden boy’. Without my father he was the one who helped mother cope by reigning over us. He made us suffer. He decided how much weekly pocket money his little sisters got, depending on how well we had done our household chores. ‘How much do I get this week? I think I did my job really well,’ I would say. He would think a little while and decide how much the work was worth. It took me years to overcome my deference to men.

The loss of self-esteem experienced by women who have been raped is a well-known phenomenon, and in my mother’s case it is obvious to me now, especially when I recall the sleeping arrangements in our second home. The house was the middle one of three terraces; it had four levels. The older children, all boys, had sunny bedrooms upstairs, with at most two to a room. My mother, my little sister and I shared the cellar, where the three of us slept in a double bed. I have begun to understand the loss of self-worth my mother must have endured to allow this situation. I try to slip into her mood of despair but tears stop me. How could she have been so subservient to my brothers? Why did she not put more importance on having her own space? I cannot resist the imagery of a life that started high, with academic success, but descended to a dark basement.
Anna Dorrington lives in northern New South Wales, and last year completed an honours degree in visual arts at Southern Cross University. For it she created an installation using the tools of print, 3D, assemblage and video to address the emotional highs and lows of getting to know her mother again.

My second brother persuaded my mother to buy a family car. The expense, combined with the large mortgage, meant she had to rent out three rooms to students. Outside it made the family look fine, but inside the cost was high. To this day, for me BMW conjures poverty more than speed and German engineering. As children we were not aware of this deal my mother had made, subconsciously, with my brother. She needed his support and he was a handsome young man with credibility in the outside world.

With my mother’s rape as a background, I have started to watch older people, the way they sit, the way they walk and dress. It is striking how much my mother seemed to want to blend into the background. Granted, her body was worn out by babies, but there was more to it. Her boring colour scheme, her overly sensible clothing, made her disappear and did not befit the way she started life. Her posture was so stooped she almost resembled an upright egg, another way not to stick out in the crowd.

As a child I was not really aware that we hardly ever had visitors. Sometimes relatives would come, but never outsiders or friends. The house was full anyway. She never made a cake, cooking was a chore; she disliked being a housewife, full stop. I ask her once whether she would marry again. A short sharp no was the answer. I was so taken aback that I did not enquire further.

It is this mental mess that I find hard to deal with. I wish I had been able to talk to her about it to find out about her sorrows; I wish she felt she could have told us about the rape and her baby when we were older and more worldly. Knowing her pain, I would have liked to be able to tell her that I loved her even more.

After the initial grand feelings at meeting the new part of the family, I find it a bit hard going getting to know each other more. I hear the right words but the feelings and emotions seem to lag – hopefully they will grow over time. I realise how comfortable I am with my old rabble of a family, most of them anyway. But I persist and send the odd email, ask for photos and so on. I will see my new brother again this year; we will meet in Germany; it will be nice to talk some more.

My mother tells me that she wants me to.
Beyond truth and justice
The path to healing
Maria Tumarkin

At the funeral of Chile’s General Pinochet, in December 2006, Francisco Cuadrado Prats stood for hours in a queue of grieving mourners. When it was his time to say goodbye, he walked up to the coffin and spat on the general’s slowly decomposing face. In what seemed an instant, the crowd set upon him. Who knows what would have happened if the military police had not intervened, and swiftly?

Francisco Cuadrado Prats, it turned out, was the grandson of General Carlos Prats, commander-in-chief of the Chilean army, who resigned from his post in 1973 but not before heartily recommending his friend, Augusto Pinochet, as a replacement. After the military coup of 11 September 1973, Carlos Prats was forced into exile in Argentina and then blown up on a Buenos Aires street – together with his wife, as was the custom then – on the direct orders of his successor and good friend. When it happened, little Francisco was about to start school: a formative age, you may say.

In the coffin, Augusto Pinochet wore a blue Chilean army uniform, his allegiance to the military as the foremost institution of the state unambiguous even in his afterlife. The military, after all, brought him to power in 1973. The military ensured his amnesty. And now the military was burying him with enough pomp and ceremony to make everyone forget that the massive gathering was not – and, in 2006, could not be – a state funeral. Michelle Bachelet, the Chilean president at the time, was imprisoned under Pinochet, as were both her parents; her father, Air Force Brigadier General Alberto Bachelet, died in military custody from a heart attack brought on by torture.

Later in the funeral proceedings, in an unscheduled appearance defying military regulations (a captain in the Chilean army is forbidden from making political statements while in uniform), Captain Augusto Pinochet Molina burst into a speech defending his grandfather’s honour and legacy: ‘He was a man who at the height of the Cold War defeated the Marxist model, which tried to impose its totalitarian model not by vote, but more directly by force of arms.’
At the funeral the crowd parted for Pinochet’s grandson, but later that week he was expelled from the army. Shortly after, thousands of scam emails claiming to be written by Pinochet’s grandson were sent around the world: ‘I am now being dismissed from the Chilean army…and they want to collect our family fortune from me. I need your help to take care of this money.’ Whatever you say, these guys are on the ball.

Reflecting on the events of the funeral day, the Chilean-American writer and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman noted the extent to which the story of today’s Chile was ‘told by two grandsons of generals’. ‘For reconciliation to occur in Chile,’ Dorfman wrote, ‘the grandson of Carlos Prats would have to forget the death of his grandfather, renounce all desire for justice, betray the deepest sources of his wounded identity. Or the grandson of Augusto Pinochet would have to accept that his grandfather was a murderer and ask for forgiveness for the dead man’s actions.’ Neither of these grandsons will ever able to do this. This, Dorfman says, is where Chile is at.

Dorfman, who survived the coup (miraculously, he believes) and fled to the US, waited a long time for Pinochet to be brought to justice. To him, and to countless others in Chile and across the world, Pinochet’s death brought no relief. Coming before Pinochet was convicted for human rights abuses, it felt acutely like a defeat, a painful miscarriage of justice. ‘Both supporters and opponents of Pinochet had reasons to wish he was still alive,’ noted Jonathan Franklin in The Guardian. Supporters wanted Pinochet to be immortal. Opponents wanted him to be held accountable for his crimes, for justice to beat mortality to the punch.

A FEW YEARS after Augusto Pinochet Molina rose to his feet at his grandfather’s funeral, the grandson of another dead general – of a dead Generalissimus, in fact – was suing for defamation. Yevgeny Dzhugashvili, Stalin’s grandson, was claiming that the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta (for which the murdered journalist Anna Politkovskya had worked) should be held accountable for its claims that his grandfather was a mass murderer. Yevgeny Dzhugashvili told journalists he felt compelled to intervene because his grandfather (not unlike the grandfather of Augusto Pinochet Molina) could not ‘defend himself from his grave’. In Captain Molina’s speech at his grandfather’s funeral, he lauded his grandfather’s victory over the Marxist totalitarianism of the kind Yevgeny Dzhugashvili’s grandfather had taken to its apotheosis, yet somehow, two generations down, Augusto and Yevgeny found themselves on the same side of the barricades.

Today there exists a curious preponderance of renegade grandsons of the dead dictators (granddaughters are also there but not quite in force, it seems). The grandson of the Spanish dictator General Franco was recently in the news, accused of pulling out a revolver and firing four shots at another driver at a roundabout near Madrid. Mussolini’s grandson is also out there, still looking for the elusive truth about the circumstances of his grandfather’s death, in 1945.
Even though the twentieth-century dictators may seem like ghosts to us now, farcical more than dangerous, shadowy more than real, their grandsons point to a peculiar historical condition of our time. Ours is a world where the unravelling of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes in Europe and Latin America has produced a host of societies in which the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of ‘victims and tormentors live side by side, drink at the same bars, eat at the same restaurants, jostle each other on buses and streets’, as Ariel Dorfman puts it. Perhaps this condition won’t seem so peculiar when we begin to confront the intergenerational legacy of more recent outbreaks of large-scale violence – in post-apartheid South Africa, in post-genocidal Rwanda and Bosnia – where at least some of the victims and perpetrators, as well as their children and grandchildren, are condemned, for what may seem like an eternity, to walk the same streets.

DECEMBER 2010 MARKED the end of my three-year research fellowship with the Social Memory and Historical Justice project at Swinburne University (the italics are mine). When I first joined the project, at the end of 2007, that co-ordinating conjunction in the project’s title felt comfortably self-evident to me. Of course the two – Memory and Justice – were connected, urgently and meaningfully, in confronting the legacies of violent and painful pasts. Because we doggedly and single-mindedly keep the memory of the great moral catastrophes of the past alive, we will not let them happen in the future. Memory of the past, vigorously maintained and transmitted, deepens and intensifies our commitment to justice in the present. It locks us in to the pursuit of a just world, however we may imagine it. Spurred by this memory, we create and maintain national and transnational institutions concerned with the vigilant protection of human rights. We fight against the impunity granted to mass murderers. We don’t stand in silence when people’s rights, lives and dignity are systematically violated.

It all seemed pretty obvious to me.

And if, at the start of this project, I was looking for tensions and complications in that symbiotic relationship between Memory and Justice, then Memory, the socially shared and publicly manifest kind, struck me – again, quite self-evidently, I thought – as being the wildcard. Memory was the volatile and unpredictable partner, the one that, if not kept in check, could be difficult and divisive. Justice – both restorative, focused on the needs of victims, and retributive, focused on the punishment of perpetrators – was the mature one, holding the relationship together, steering it through the rough waters. However difficult it might be to define and enforce, especially when dealing with historical injustices and wrongs, Justice looked like an unambiguous, theorisable good. It was to be administered sternly, like medicine. The patient may gag at the start, but sooner or later she was bound to get better.
I had not yet come across Dorfman’s reflections on Pinochet’s funeral, and so did not have in my mind the image of two grandsons at a funeral (spectacular, but by no means unique to Chile); nor did I have an inkling that three years later I would come to see Justice too as a wildcard. For all the official state apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions, the trials and tribunals, the independent reports; for all the vast archives of testimonial material and cultural responses, all the charged conversations about healing and forgiveness – the pursuit of intergenerationally meaningful and enduring justice and reconciliation in post-totalitarian and postcolonial nations remains one of our age’s most intractable problems.

And so, three years later, I came to see the disjunction ‘or’ as a more accurate and honest descriptor of the relationship between Memory and Justice (and, in fact, between Memory, Justice, Truth and Reconciliation). In truth commissions in South Africa, Chile, El Salvador, Argentina and Uganda, amnesty – sometimes limited, sometimes unlimited – was offered to perpetrators in exchange for their testimonies. Truth was traded for Justice. The most famous of these commissions, in South Africa, promised amnesty to individuals guilty of ‘gross violations of human rights’, who offered full disclosure of their acts and whose offences were deemed politically motivated.

Just as frequent, if less explicit, are the trade-offs between Truth and Reconciliation. Christine Bell, a professor of public international law at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, says that in post-autocratic societies seeking to establish a democratic rule this so-called transitional justice often becomes a ‘cloak’ concealing all kinds of bargains made with the past. Bell believes that the primary motivation behind the pursuit of justice in such societies is a quest not for accountability, but for ‘a mechanism for “dealing with the past” that will sustain political settlement’. The past – the truths it may yield, the forms of acknowledgment and redress it may demand, the memories it could mobilise – is managed, kept in check, in the name of a politically sustainable future.

Still, the disjunction ‘or’ straddling the space between Justice, Truth, Memory, Reconciliation does not always stand for an elaborate political compromise; just as often, it speaks of the complexity of our individual and our society’s needs in the aftermath of violence. Sometimes, for instance, the acknowledgment of truth may be worth more to those who suffered than the enforcement of retributive justice. Lawrence Weschler’s A Miracle, a Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers (1990) examines the aftermath of large-scale violence in Brazil and Uruguay. He found that if anything the desire for truth is often more urgently felt by the victims of torture than the desire for justice. People don’t necessarily insist that former torturers go to jail – there’s been enough jail – but they do want to see the truth established and exposed.

At the same time, public acknowledgment of dirty truths that up to that point
were an ‘open secret’ – known to everyone, but publicly unsayable – and the
cascading effects of this acknowledgment may function as a form of restorative
justice. While the search for forms of justice that could prove enduring and
meaningful across generations will continue, as it must (and so will those life-and-
death debates about the politics of regret and redress), there are things that we know
already. We know that Memory, Justice, Truth, Reconciliation do not all co-exist
blissfully in one shared meta-field, part and parcel of the same noble projects and
endeavours. Perhaps it is time we paused, and stopped waving them around like
Olympic flags.

WHERE TO NOW? I suggest we follow Ariel Dorfman, with his image of two
grandsons and one funeral, of grief and anger bumping against each other like
dodgem cars for generations. The place Dorfman can take us to may prove no less
revelatory for settler nations like Australia, postcolonial rather than post-totalitarian.
As we attempt to get a measure of colonialism’s all-pervasive yet dangerously
evasive trans-generational legacy, Dorfman’s foregrounding of Time, as a crucial
and independent dimension in our pursuit of justice, and of Family, as the foremost
site we need to focus on, is likely to be singularly instructive.

If we follow Dorfman, sooner or later we will have to give up our comforting
vision of the third generation acting as a watershed – a vision that promises us that
once we get to the grandchildren of those who brutalised, and those who were
brutalised, all kinds of things may become possible: Reconciliation (even if it is, of
necessity, Reconciliation-lite), forgiveness, healing, the beginnings of a properly
shared country. Dorfman insists that living memory – the kind that burns within
survivors, perpetrators and witnesses, within their children and grandchildren; the
kind that carries within it a unique charge – cannot be fully reconciled. Not in Chile;
not in other post-dictatorial countries of Latin America; not in Rwanda or Bosnia;
not in the former Soviet nations; not in South Africa.

In Country of My Skull (Random House, 1998), which chronicled South Africa’s
Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog famously wrote, ‘It doesn’t
matter what we do. What De Klerk does. Until the third and the fourth generation’ –
in other words, until the living memory is no more. We may agree or disagree with
Dorfman and Krog, but there is a profound point in what they are saying that
should not be missed. The irreconcilability of memories and experiences in post-
genocidal and post-totalitarian societies can, they tell us, only be waited out. If we
are honest with ourselves, we can only count on time.

A Time for Justice. A Time for Reconciliation. We are, understandably, in a
hurry. We want justice to be done as quickly as humanly possible. We want to
strive for reconciliation feverishly, tirelessly, single-mindedly. But are we
rushing too much? Are we forcing the issue in ways that inflict new injuries on
those already in pain; that create new, invisible forms of injustice which displace the burden of reconciliation on the shoulders of the descendants of survivors, from whom we implicitly but persistently demand forgiveness? Are we trying to push people to traverse as quickly as possible the vastness of their grief? Are we trying to fast-forward all those processes – resentment, resistance, recognition – that must be fully and painfully lived through before reconciliation can stop being a joke or an insult? ‘Before forgiveness, before reconciliation’, writes the South African academic and activist Heidi Grunebaum, ‘there is an obligation of recognition: recognition as the suspension of expectation, as the move toward a reciprocity that may be endlessly deferred.’

Deferred, that is, by the descendants of those victimised. How long will it take for experiences of violence and injustice to be lived through and absorbed, for the forgiveness to emerge, not to be forced out? We don’t know. It will take as long as it takes. And we must not forget fear. How many decades need to pass before people in post-totalitarian countries can stop fearing the return of the dictatorship, before they can view the end of tyranny not merely as a temporary, unsettling respite? How many decades need to pass before genocide survivors and their descendants come to believe that the world has changed so much that, what happened to them, or their parents, or their grandparents, can never happen again?

In a postcolonial nation such as Australia, where the intergenerational structures of violence and injustice are particularly pronounced and where there is no clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ of colonisation, the question of time is particularly relevant (the second- or third-generation descendants of the Stolen Generation, for instance, can claim to be survivors in their own right). The philosopher Janna Thompson tells us that Indigenous Australians cannot simply be regarded as another category of disadvantaged and marginalised citizens. The historic, intergenerational nature of the injustices committed against them is central to imagining and putting into practise meaningful forms of redress.

For Thompson, our responsibility to future generations – which we express so uncontrovertially in our concerns about, say, the national debt or looming environmental disasters – must run parallel with our responsibilities to those who came before us. We must think of the time of justice as flowing in both directions at once. And if we let ourselves think like this, then all kinds of questions emerge. Could shared pain – not shared memory, distilled into a public consensus – be the backbone of a reconciled country? Could grief – not justice – be the foundation on which something real can be built?

A great deal of contemporary thinking about justice has focused either on the institutions of the state (truth and reconciliation commissions, reparations, courts, monuments and anniversaries, apologies, school textbooks) or on various groups
(victims, perpetrators, witnesses). Yet, if we follow Ariel Dorfman, we will stumble on a simple truth: family is where we need to look if we are to understand the long-term legacy of totalitarianism and colonialism, if we are to theorise possibilities of justice, memory and reconciliation in post-totalitarian and postcolonial societies.

This is what happened in Germany after World War II. There, over time, the intense debates about intergenerational complicity and guilt resulted in what Elizabeth Hook calls the ‘relocation’ of questions of responsibility from ‘the larger national and political arena to the intimate relationships between parents and their children’. Thinking of a family as a basic intergenerational unit of social, communicable memory can also remind us that social memory is not some bloodless, abstract category. It is not a set of competing and ideologically inflected narratives about our nation’s past. Memory like this comes to us charged with anger and guilt, stung with shame, shadowed by grief, shaped by loyalty and love. We must make room in our public sphere, and in our debates about justice, for everything this memory brings with it.

Maria Tumarkin was born in the former Soviet Union and migrated with her Russian-Jewish family to Australia in 1989. She lives in Melbourne with her two children, and is the author of Traumascapes (2005), Courage (2007) and Otherland (2010), all published by MUP. Her previous Griffith REVIEW pieces are ‘Life in translation’ and ‘From an unconscious state’.
I TRIED not to jump to conclusions. I remembered Oklahoma – those few hours (or was it days?) during which people thought that the blasted government building, its child-care centre littered with tiny corpses, was a Muslim crime scene. So I said, ‘Bin Laden couldn’t do it.’ Afterwards, I wondered whether my reaction, hearing about the planes crashing into the World Trade Center, was ‘denialism’. I had not meant that bin Laden wouldn’t do it, but that he had targeted the complex once before, and failed. He would have done it, but he couldn’t. Maybe the hijackers crashing planes into New York and Washington were well-organised white supremacists.

Somehow, I didn’t think so.

I phoned friends and colleagues, woke them up and said, ‘Turn on the television.’ (‘Which channel?’ ‘All of them!’) We calculated the date in America, wondering whether it was significant. September 11, 11/9. My colleague translated it into American – 9/11, the emergency number.

And so we crossed the border into the post-9/11 era, although it took a while for the phrase to come into circulation, and longer still to name the apprehensive, hyper-vigilant state of mind that has characterised the past decade: nine-eleven-itis.

SOMETIMES DURING A flight to Lahore at the end of September 2001, I went from being half-Pakistani to being half-white. I felt the transition as I slid between selves, a shift in gear marked by the change in the pronunciation of my name. English-speakers tend to place the emphasis on the second syllable; Pakistanis stress the first, just slightly. Sha-kee-ra; Shah-kira. With a half-caste’s flexibility, I use both versions myself.

We are not supposed to feel comfortable with such slippery identities, but I have never minded. I like the duality, the not-quite-fitting-in, no matter where I am. It helps me to see things from a different perspective, and makes me careful. It
excludes me from collective plurals, and from certainty. My skin changes shade 
according to the onlooker. Anglo-Australian friends and family give me T-shirts and 
dresses in pastel shades of pale pink or apricot to suit my dark complexion; 
Pakistanis give me *shalwar kameez* in a burnt orange that looks good with fair skin. I 
like the range of my wardrobe and I like my skin, with its mongrel capacity to 
lighten or darken according to the company I keep.

But September 2001 was a bad time to be a hybrid. Bodies were still being dug 
from the ruins of the World Trade Center and Pakistan was bracing itself for what 
George W Bush called a ‘crusade’. People yearned for absolutes. They were 
suspicious of complexity and shape-shifting crossbreeds. It seemed as though 
everyone was quoting Samuel Huntington and his *Clash of Civilizations* (Simon & 
Schuster, 1996), a work that angered and frightened me. I knew that I did not want 
to live in a Huntingtonesque dystopia, forced to choose between my twinned selves. 
I like to live on the rich grounds of overlap and cross-fertilisation – the mongrel’s 
true homeland. But I was afraid that this would soon become no one’s land.

There were more concrete fears, too: destruction from the coming war, 
authoritarian politics that find justification amid the ruins and the grief. In the 
days before I left Australia for Pakistan, my mind was a jumble of images. The 
gleaming buildings pierced by the aircraft, an image on permanent loop in the 
collective consciousness, but also a delicate-boned Afghan girl crying for her 
mother still trapped in Afghanistan, waiting for another round of bombing.

So much already lost, so much more still to lose.

**JAVED PICKED ME** up from the airport in Lahore. It was an awkward situation. 
During my previous visit, a year earlier, he had told his mother that he intended to 
marry a half-white single mother from Australia, leaving out the bit where I’d said no. 
His mother was even less enthused by the idea than I was. She told him that such a 
match would disgrace his family for generations. I told him that I would never marry 
a man who couldn’t make a cup of tea for himself. Javed didn’t give up immediately. 
He told his mother that while I was a half-white non-virgin, I was nonetheless a 
descendant of the Prophet. And when I got back to Australia, there was an email 
waiting on my computer, announcing that he had learned how to make a cup of tea.

But his mother won that battle for both of us. While Javed was practising his tea-
making skills, she was out looking for suitable brides. A few months after my visit, 
he was abruptly informed that he was to be married in three days’ time – and not to 
me. He begged to be released from the match, or at least to be able to meet the girl in 
advance, just to glimpse her face. His mother was unyielding. To cancel the 
wedding at such short notice would shame both the families, and especially the 
bride. And you couldn’t go around asking respectable people to show you their 
daughters’ faces.
Javed was a journalist on one of Pakistan’s major English-language dailies, but his salary couldn’t provide him with the lifestyle he felt was appropriate to his social position. So, grizzling like a spoiled toddler, he allowed himself to be scolded into matrimony.

Since then, Javed and I had agreed to keep our relationship friendly but professional. This agreement was not rock-solid – my email announcing my next visit had been headed ‘writing as a colleague only’, while his reply was titled ‘U R still my little princess’. I’d bought him a wedding present at Sydney Airport, an alarm clock clutched in the arms of an angry plastic koala. I didn’t think it was open to sentimental interpretation, and anyway, it was on sale.

It might have been more prudent not to contact Javed, but I’d been told that incoming passengers were having a difficult time with immigration, and like most middle-class Pakistanis Javed was adept at the threats, bribes and rank-pulling required when dealing with officials. With him to smooth the way, I was whisked straight through, a porter at my side to cart my luggage to Javed’s battered little car.

I handed Javed the gift-wrapped koala clock.

‘Why have you bought me a present?’ he demanded, half-angrily, and tossed it into the back seat.

‘It’s a wedding present.’

‘You give me a present, but nothing more. To tell you the truth, madam, I had a very torrid time after you left last year. Ten whole days I was in agony.’

‘Ten days? You must really have cared about me.’

‘Two weeks, even.’

‘I’m sure Samina will make you a much better wife than I ever could. How is she?’

‘Samina is well, I suppose. I have not seen her for a long time. She is still living with her family. We will not be living together until next year. I am not looking forward to it. She is a good girl, but to tell you the truth I have no feeling for her.’

‘That’s not her fault. You shouldn’t have married her if you weren’t going to care about her.’

‘I told you, madam. I was in shock, absolutely. What choice did I have?’

‘You could have left home. You have a job, after all.’

‘I can’t live on that money. I tell you, my wage pays only for my cigarettes.’

Already our relationship had fallen into its usual pattern – Javed complaining, me scolding. We might as well have been married.

‘I have booked you into a very good hotel. The Amir. They have agreed to an excellent rate, half their usual price. It is in a good area, not like that stupid place you stayed in last year.’
This, too, was an old quarrel. I liked one of the cheap hotels along the cinema strip on Abbott Road. I liked the strings of coloured lights above the cinemas, the gigantic lurid film hoardings showing gore-splattered men silhouetted against the lavish bosoms of maidens in distress. I liked the stalls where street food and banter were available at all hours. I had never been game to taste the goats testicles, which were set out in neat rows, pale and plump and glistening, waiting to be fried. But I did buy samosas, freshly baked naan and slices of crisp sweet watermelon sprinkled with chilli. And a shop around the corner sold my favourite pistachio milk drink, a treat worth the airfare from Australia.

But decent girls weren’t supposed to stay in hotels alone. Javed had worn out that argument last year; this year he had a new line.

‘You can’t stay there. The police are checking all those cheap hotels for foreigners.’

‘I can’t imagine why. If it’s journalists they’re looking for, they’ll be staying in expensive hotels.’

‘I am telling you, madam. Things are different here now. You must be more careful.’

I gave in. The Amir had a fancy lobby and lots of uniformed bellboys, but the room was no different to those in the cheap joint, and it smelled of insecticide. I dumped my suitcase and changed, then went with Javed to his newspaper office. It was after midnight, but Lahore is a nocturnal city. I was tired, yet I was also keen to talk to people, to hear what they were thinking.

We had all stepped through the looking glass on September 11. In Pakistan, just as in Australia, people kept saying things that sounded bizarre, out of synch. Back in the car, Javed told me, ‘Of course I support Osama bin Laden. Everyone here does.’

I mistook the lurch of surrealism for jetlag. ‘Scuse me?’

‘Yes, why not? A strong leader, standing up to America and all.’

It wasn’t what I expected from Javed, the lazy, dandified princeling who had danced the night away at the Pearl Continental’s ABBA tribute a year before. ‘I thought you hated the Taliban.’

‘I do hate the Taliban.’

‘So how does that work? Supporting bin Laden, but not the Taliban?’

‘The Taliban are Afghan.’

Most of Javed’s colleagues were still in the office, but few of them were actually working. I had talked to Australian journalists since September 11 who were powered by sheer adrenaline. War fever had migrated from the ruined towers in New York, through the internet and over satellites, to grip editors in Sydney and Melbourne. It acted like speed, giving their eyes a manic gleam and sharpening the air around them.
If the Australian journos were speed freaks, their Pakistani colleagues were morbid drunks, nursing their gloom like flat beer and swapping dark predictions. Their mood matched the office, dingy with stale cigarette and food odours, moth-eaten furniture and ancient computers without internet connections. The journalists – all male – sat drinking tea, gossiping and listening to the cricket. I was updated on the office politics: a new editor, the odd promotion or transfer. Someone asked how I had managed living in the West since September 11. They were all familiar with the stories of Muslims (and those unfortunate enough to be mistaken for Muslims) who had been beaten and abused for having the same religion as Osama bin Laden.

‘We hear about these things here, you know. There is a lot of strong feeling about it. There was a mosque burned down in Australia.’

‘Yes, that was in Brisbane, where my grandmother lives. Some Muslim schoolchildren had rubbish thrown at them, too. And women in hijab have been abused by people on the street, but I haven’t had any problems, personally.’

‘Well, I suppose you just wear your jeans and all, and nobody can tell what you are.’

‘I haven’t been wearing jeans. I’ve been making a point of wearing shalwar kameez. I don’t want people to think I’m ashamed of my background.’

‘Shalwar kameez? In these times? Are you crazy?’

The others agreed. ‘My brother is studying in London. He told us he doesn’t travel on the Underground anymore. He doesn’t feel safe there. People said racist things to him.’

‘And in America, there have been so many Pakistanis arrested since September 11, just students and visitors, not terrorists.’

‘It’s getting too dangerous for Muslims to live in the West. I think you should come and live here. You could find a job teaching in a girl’s school. Not some rubbish government place. A posh school. You would be safe, living here.’

Safety now lay in the familiar, in the homeland. My friends in Australia had not wanted me to go to Pakistan, either. Terror: it ran through the fissures and ravines of identity, leaving people clinging to their own familiar rocks.

And I was a half-and-half in Pakistan, just as I had been in Australia. I was also an unaccompanied woman who wanted to not only revisit the familiar landscape of women’s space (‘aunties and activism’, I privately called it) but also come to grips with the hyper-masculine mood of the new political era. The journalists considered my safety.

‘She doesn’t really look foreign.’

‘Those faces she pulls are very Panjabi.’
‘And always with the dupatta. No one wears a better dupatta than Shakira.’

I asked whether the Pakistani press had come under increased government pressure since September 11. Although a military government, the Musharraf regime had allowed considerably more press freedom than had its civilian predecessor.

‘When this government came to power, it made the boundaries clear to us – what we could and couldn’t say. We keep to those boundaries, and we have no problem with them.’

‘So what are the boundaries?’

One of the younger staff laughed. ‘You don’t criticise the ISI!’ Inter-Services Intelligence: ISI. The initials conjure a blend of mystique and menace.

‘There are times when you don’t even mention ISI!’

‘ISI knows everything. Everything. They make the CIA, M15 and all look like babies. If – if – bin Laden planned this, ISI knows. But I would never say that to just anyone. I would never write it.’

Javed took me through to meet the new editor. It was an encounter requiring his most deferential manner. ‘Sir,’ he purred, ‘an Australian journalist who wishes to talk with you.’

Following his lead, I twitched my dupatta into place, lowered my eyes and murmured a demure ‘Assalamu alaikum.’

The editor gave a bewildered blink. ‘This is an Australian journalist? She’s more Pakistani than a Pakistani! Sit down, sit down. Javed, get the boy to bring more tea.’

He was an amiable man, his English smooth with the ‘excellent accent’ so prized in the subcontinent, his belly nestled on his lap like a pet. The television in the corner was tuned not to the constant CNN updates on ‘the crisis’, but to the cricket being played overseas. Between overs, he gave his reading of the political climate.

‘It is impossible, really, to say what will happen. The situation changes so fast and there are so many rumours. But I do think that the foreign press is underestimating the anti-American feeling here. Musharraf can say all he likes that the people are behind him. But you know what we Pakistanis can be like. If the Islamists can convince us that Islam is in danger, the nation is in danger – oh my God. We go blind. We go mad. We won’t listen to anyone. Ah, look at that. The South African side is in excellent form.’

It was like finding the eye of the storm. I let myself be soothed by the scalding sweet tea, by the mellow ripple of the cricket commentary and the editor’s easy, sonorous conversation. Exhaustion began to flood through me. I returned to the hotel, and sank into bed and sleep. The flit of insect legs across my face lit one last spark of irritation at Javed. The other hotel had been bug-free.
I HAD NOT anticipated finding pleasure on this journey. I had been too driven by the compulsion simply to be there, to observe and to write. I had forgotten how much I liked Lahore. Looking at the city from the back of a rickshaw the next morning, I remembered. It was a joy to see the Lahore streetscape, the relics of the British and Mughal empires. We passed the cannon that Kipling had made famous as ‘Kim’s gun’ (where he sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zain Zammah), and a little further down the Mall the museum where Kipling’s father had been curator (Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum). The lawnmower splutter of the rickshaw’s engine was like a symphony to my rising spirits. I had the driver stop in a side street lined with food stands so I could cram my body with flavour. Mince and roti, freshly fried gulab jamuns in rose syrup and the special Lahori fruit salad, heavy with pomegranate seeds and walnuts, glittering like treasure.

Pakistan was awash with testosterone and conspiracy theories. It was hard to find people who were prepared to believe that bin Laden or any other Muslims were responsible for the attacks on New York and Washington. It was the CIA. Colombian drug lords. Mossad – the story of the four thousand Jews who supposedly knew better than to turn up for work at the WTC buildings on the fateful day was widely repeated. Or – my personal favourite – it was George Bush. ‘The father. He wanted to test the mettle of his son.’

Many of those who were not thinking conspiracy were thinking blowback. ‘Of course, I don’t support terrorism. But really, the Americans were asking for it.’

I understood the seductive power of the conspiracy theories. I was prepared to believe that bin Laden was the prime suspect, but I had seized on the white-supremacist hypothesis as a more palatable explanation. And while I did not think that the Americans – and Australians, and Britons, and Arabs, and Israelis, and Pakistanis – who had died were ‘asking for it’, I had begun to grow angry at the way the carnage in America overshadowed routine, never-ending violence elsewhere.

Entering into a strategic pact with the Americans was always going to be a hard sell. The alliance came with financial sweeteners, as General Musharraf reiterated at his press conferences – billions of dollars worth of development packages. ‘Will all the money go to a few generals, like the last time?’ one of the journalists asked.

Like the last time. The last time, when the Soviet Union had occupied Afghanistan, when the United States had propped up a previous Pakistani dictator as part of an Afghan strategy, when the Pakistani military and Islamist parties were used to channel aid to the mujahedeen across the border. The last time, when the Americans had left the battlefield after the Soviet withdrawal, allowing Afghanistan to sink into an abyss of civil war while Pakistan was encumbered with the infrastructure of ‘Islamisation’ that successive civilian and military governments failed to dismantle. As the editor
had said the night before, ‘People are worried that the Americans will just use Pakistan and discard us, as they did after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.’ He had refrained from using the simile commonly used to describe Pakistan’s fate – ‘discarded like a used condom’ – but the sense of having been defiled remained.

Now the feckless seducer had returned for another cycle of intimacy and exploitation, bearing aid packages rather than flowers and chocolates. Pakistanis were understandably cynical.

OVER IN PESHAWAR, Osama bin Laden’s image was everywhere – painted on the backs of rickshaws, photoshopped against suitable landscapes and props in the posters that were spread out along the pavements of the bazaar, and used as banners in demonstrations. Osama as a desert warrior galloping across the desert, submachine gun over his shoulder. Osama as a kind grandfatherly figure overseeing a young boy as he read the Qur’an. Osama wearing a white robe and a beatific expression as a plane slammed into the side of a gleaming silver building in the background.

The youths at the recruiting booth proudly displayed a book filled with the names of those who had signed up to join the battle. They looked so young – children. I asked whether there were any age restrictions on recruits. They said that they didn’t take anyone over the age of fifty. They dismissed my suggestion that some might be too young. ‘If they want to go, why not? It’s a chance for them to fight for Islam.’

At seventeen, Anwar was already a seasoned fighter. His brother had already become a shaheed – a martyr – fighting Indian troops in Kashmir. At fifteen, Anwar too had joined the battle and crossed the border into Kashmir to fight with the Hizb- ul-Mujahadeen. When I met him at an Islamist demonstration, he was preparing to leave for Afghanistan. He was a good-looking boy, with gold-rimmed glasses below his Arabic-sloganed headband and strong muscles apparent beneath his appropriately modest combat fatigues. Despite the muscles and clothes, he seemed more like a student. He showed no discomfort talking with a woman and shooped away a group of youths who’d been harassing me.

It was Friday and the crowd swelled as the worshippers emerged from the mosques after midday prayers, bearing Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) flags, bin Laden posters, and banners in Urdu and English. BASTARD. UNGODLY. SATAN. HUMBUG. AMERICA IS TRYING TO ERASE PUSHTUN PIPPLES. (I do feel like helping them out with their spelling,’ a British journo commented later.) OSAMA IS THE HERO OF THE MUSLIMS; TONY BUSH WANTED ALIVE OR DEAD.

The crowd was warming up with chants of Allahu Akbar, Osama bin Laden zindabad! (Long live Osama bin Laden) and Amrika murdabad! (Death to America).
Anwar started a new chant in my honour – *Australia murdabad!* – and smiled at me. ‘Only joking,’ he directed me up onto the stage, out of the crowd, where I would be safe. The bearded mullah alongside me did not look impressed. I was not happy either. Appearing on a public platform alongside leading Islamists as the crowd bellowed for jihad was a scenario that could easily be misunderstood. Misunderstood by ASIO, for example.

The boys in combat gear went into a frenzy when Qazi Hussein arrived, surrounding him protectively and clearing his path to the platform. He spoke in fiery language and at Castroesque length about God and His enemies and how the Afghan people would defeat the Americans just as they had defeated the Soviet Union, amen. JI never polled more a tenth of the national vote, but watching the party’s leader address the packed crowd, the sense of intoxication, the certainty that this was the future, was palpable. It felt like a scene from Samuel Huntington’s worst nightmare.

**PESHAWAR’S GOOD HOTELS** were booked solid by international journalists, but the Rose Hotel was not a good hotel, and a bewildered-looking American was an attention-grabbing sight there. Kevin looked out of place at the check-in desk – he clearly wasn’t a journalist, aid worker or thrill-seeker. He was a yoga teacher from New York who had been hired by Wall Street companies for their executives, including those based in the World Trade Center. Kevin had watched the towers crumble through the window of his apartment. ‘I didn’t want to see, but I couldn’t look away.’

‘Did you lose someone?’ My question felt tactless as it came out of my mouth, and Kevin’s silence and welling tears were answer enough.

He couldn’t bring himself to stay in New York after the attacks, and his apartment had been deemed unliveable during the initial clean-up. So he had come to Peshawar, as near as possible to Afghanistan. George W Bush had answered the question ‘Why do they hate us?’ but Kevin found that answer – they hate our freedoms – unsatisfactory. He had come in search of his own explanation, without telling anyone where he was going.

Peshawar was packed with traumatised refugees who lacked basic essentials. Kevin had a hotel room, an American passport, a ticket out. In Peshawar, these were privileges. And yet I couldn’t dismiss Kevin’s need as irrelevant simply because it was less acute. His desire to understand and be understood was honourable, but he was too fragile to be turned loose in the wilds of Peshawar. The sight of a Pakistani-looking woman in the company of a western male tends to attract hostile scrutiny at the best of times, and these were not the best of times. So I told Kevin to keep me in view, but at a distance, as we made our way through the streets to meet people who I hoped would give a sympathetic reception to an emissary from New York.
After years of treating Afghan refugees, Dr Rahim was used to talking with traumatised patients. ‘They fall into two categories. The middle-class patients suffer from psychiatric illnesses – depression, suicidal tendencies. Then there are the poor people, the majority. People whose level of existence is hardly human. They are so occupied with sheer survival that they don’t suffer from mental illness.’

Dr Rahim accepted our invitation to dinner, listened to Kevin’s account of his journey and talked about his most recent patients – the casualties of Operation Enduring Freedom. He did not see the latest conflict as different to that which had preceded it. ‘The refugees are still coming, aren’t they? We are on the main road to Jalalabad here – it is only two and half hours away. So long as there is war, they will come here. We are prepared for them.’

Kevin’s bridge-building efforts were mostly sympathetically received. He told a fire crew he saw on the street about the heroism of their New York colleagues; he listened as refugees told him of lost families and homes. Occasionally his attempts to draw parallels between his own life and theirs were politely corrected.

‘My neighbourhood looks like Kabul now.’

‘No – no. New York is not like Kabul. What happened was terrible, but it was only one day. In Kabul this has happened over and over again. For years.’

IT WAS TIME to return to Australia, to be reunited with my daughter, to work out how to live a hybrid life across barricades that I believed to be imaginary, but that others maintained were absolute and immutable. I was still unsure whether we mongrels were about to be crushed between colliding civilisations, or ripped in two as they drifted further apart.

People continued to come up with suggestions about how I might be able to return to Pakistan with my daughter and establish a life there, despite the difficulties for unattached women. Move to Abbottabad, a Pashtun journalist in Peshawar suggested. It was his childhood home, a popular holiday destination, with excellent schools, a beautiful location, far easier to navigate than the major cities. And a military town, so very safe. In a world that was descending into chaos, Abbottabad would provide shelter from the storm. He hoped to bring his wife and daughter to visit us there one day.

My time in Pakistan was a way of grappling with nine-eleven-itis, but it was not a cure. The war in Afghanistan, then Iraq, the imprisonment of ‘mainly Muslim asylum seekers’ in detention centres, headlines about Muslim gang-rapists, the Cronulla riots: the weight sank deep into my body. I ran through a list of synonyms for ‘tired’, searching for the one that described how I felt. Exhausted. Weary. Drained. Tired to the bone. Crushed. All applied, yet none seemed adequate. ‘Not normal tiredness,’ I dubbed it; these were not normal times. This did not feel like tiredness – more like failure.
The sense of defeat pressed more and more heavily until the day when I reached for a pen to mark the attendance sheet for the class I was tutoring and could manage only a clumsy fumble. I did a quick audit. There was no pain or visible injury, and yet somehow the transmission signals between my brain and hand had broken down. My leg was not connecting properly either – but I could still speak and read. Nothing to prevent me from chairing a class on Confucius, so we talked about collectivist values for an hour before I was swept into the maelstrom of hospital waiting rooms, hammer-taps against kneecaps, blood tests, CAT scans, and then the appointment with the neurologist who told me that my problem was psychiatric.

‘A psychiatric condition that stops you from walking?’ my friends asked incredulously. But I remembered Dr Rahim’s words: ‘The middle-class patients suffer from psychiatric illnesses – depression, suicidal tendencies.’ I was safely in Canberra – if anyone could afford the luxury of a psychiatric illness, I could.

By the time another neurologist referred me for a MRI scan, I had long since self-diagnosed. I had allowed my post-9/11 anxiety to cross the barrier between mind and brain, to cripple me. What could be more attention-seeking, more pointless, more self-indulgent, than to appropriate the symptoms of other people’s trauma to manifest my own stress? And how humiliatingly visible – an unsteady gait for which the explanation was uttered only in the most secret corner of my heart: I think I’ve just been letting this whole 9/11 business get to me.

I struggled to express this to the neurologist when I returned for my MRI results, and concluded: ‘I’m working out some complicated issues.’

The neurologist paused before responding. ‘The scan was abnormal.’

Oh. Not nine-eleven-itis. Multiple sclerosis.

Although no medical doctor would tell me this, mine was a case of ‘comorbidity’, assailed by both nine-eleven-itis and multiple sclerosis. The multiple sclerosis is remitting-relapsing, flaring once a year or so to blur my vision, drive red-hot nails into my face or disconnect limbs from my central nervous system, before subsiding.

There has been no remission from nine-eleven-itis for any of us. I write this essay during a flare of both my diseases, and amid hopeful talk of treatment breakthroughs. In the days after bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad, the safe military town that I had considered as a bolthole, the numbness that had been creeping into my left side jammed my fingers as I frantically attempted to write, write, to hold back the clash of civilisations. My much-scanned brain went into overdrive as it tried to process the reports of the al-Qaeda leader’s final years, the allegations of ISI involvement (‘ISI knows everything’), the surreal ritual of his consignment to the ocean.
The consensus that seems to be emerging is that while it is too soon to declare victory, the post-9/11 era has drawn to a close, a decade after it began.

The neurologist is upbeat when I return for my review one month into the new treatment. The latest drugs are very effective. The long-term effect is not yet clear, and since the medication may suppress my immune system, I should have regular pap smears and breast checks. But if all goes well, I should have fewer flares, and I should be able to hold off the ‘serious disability’ she has warned me is otherwise likely. *Inshallah*, I add silently to myself.

As for nine-eleven-itis, I suspect that this improvement in symptoms may turn out to be a placebo effect.

---

Shakira Hussein is undertaking a postdoctoral fellowship on Muslim women, gendered violence and racialised political discourse at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne.
The blind side
Deciding what to tell
Matthew Ricketson

WHEN George W Bush began looking for a running mate for his Republican Party ticket before the 2000 election, he chose Dick Cheney to head the selection committee. Cheney, a former Secretary of Defense in George HW Bush’s administration, and at that stage chair and chief executive of the Halliburton oil services company, approached half a dozen senior Republicans in May 2000 and persuaded them to nominate.

He then subjected them to a questionnaire that even by the standards of post-Watergate, character-obsessed American politics was extraordinarily intrusive. For a Top Secret clearance in the United States government, applicants must answer thirty questions; the Cheney form had six times as many. Security-clearance questionnaires allow people to withhold information about marital or grief counselling, but Cheney’s form sought details of any visit, for any reason, to a psychiatrist, therapist or counsellor. It sought details of any event or habit that might leave the applicant ‘vulnerable to blackmail or coercion’.

More than that, the vetting forms required applicants to authorise Cheney ‘or any person designated by him’ to obtain their medical, legal, insurance, credit and taxation records, and, where it existed, FBI file. They were required to give Cheney and his three-person team, one of whom was his daughter Liz, a blanket waiver of ‘any liability with regard to seeking, furnishing or use of the confidential information – with no end date.

None was ever interviewed formally by Bush about the role of Vice President, which was taken by Cheney himself. Reading Barton Gellman’s investigative biography shows that in all likelihood Cheney imagined himself as Vice President even when he accepted Bush’s request to head the selection committee.

I say in all likelihood because Cheney declined to be interviewed by Gellman, a journalist with the Washington Post whose work Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency (Penguin, 2008) was published in the final months of the Bush administration. What
Cheney told his authorised biographer, Stephen Hayes, was that it was only on 3 July 2000 that he agreed to Bush’s request to be his running mate.

Even if we take Cheney at his word, what do we make of his refusal to subject himself to the same vetting process as the other applicants? The form may have been intrusive but a candidate’s general health is certainly relevant, as became clear even before Bush was inaugurated in early 2001, when Cheney suffered his fourth heart attack since the age of thirty-seven.

What do we make, also, of the leaking of damaging information from the file of one of the other prospective Vice Presidents, Frank Keating, who’d had the temerity to joke publicly about the chair of the selection committee getting the job? The file had been seen by a small number of people; if it was not Cheney who leaked the information, it was one of his team.

This had a doubly chilling effect. Not only did Cheney possess highly personal information about half a dozen people who would go on to hold senior posts in the Bush administration but, Gellman wrote, the response to Keating’s remark ‘propagated the message, educational and just deniable enough: Don’t cross Cheney’.

I was gobsmacked reading this biography, not least by Gellman’s account of how Cheney became Vice President, which forms its opening chapter. I was familiar with the picture of Cheney as either the stone-faced puppet master of a doltish president or the steely-eyed deputy commander-in-chief of the ‘war on terror’, depending on the media outlet.

I had read detailed accounts by Jane Mayer (in The Dark Side), Mark Danner (in Stripping Bare the Body) and Philip Gourevitch (in Standard Operating Procedure), among others, outlining Cheney’s role in laying the groundwork for the declaration of the war in Iraq, his defence of waterboarding torture as an ‘enhanced interrogation technique’ and his support for the rendition program. But I was astonished by the depth of insight into the dark arts of politics within the US government complex that enabled Cheney to become the most powerful Vice President in American history, and why, as the book’s reviewer in The Independent put it, ‘this must never happen again.’

ANGLER IS AN extreme example of the value of biography. An autobiography, by definition, is a person’s perspective on their own life; a biography is written by someone else and necessarily presents a range of perspectives. Autobiography has a long history, beginning with Saint Augustine’s Confessions, from 397 AD. Its power lies in giving readers access to the subject’s innermost thoughts and feelings. If the person is famous, the reader can feel privy to important events from the centre. Anyone writing an autobiography can choose what to include, who to praise, denigrate or ignore; the author has the first and the last word, the power to shape the story of their life as they like.
This may seem elementary, but it helps explain the generally higher sales of autobiographies, even though few are as artfully written as Augustine’s *Confessions* or as open to examining missteps, foibles and flaws. Nielsen BookScan’s top fifty best-selling non-fiction books published in Australia in 2009 included twelve autobiographies and just two biographies.

The post-career autobiography seems to have become an essential tool in enhancing, or restoring, the reputation of former political leaders – an authorised guide for future historians. George W Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard all released their autobiographies in 2010, and each sold well: Bush’s *Decision Points* raced to two million sales, Blair’s *A Journey* sold 92,000 copies in the United Kingdom in under a week – the best opening week for an autobiography since Nielsen BookScan began keeping records there, in 1998 – and Howard’s *Lazarus Rising* was the year’s sixth best-selling non-fiction book in Australia, with close to 70,000 copies sold.

Bush, as the leader of the world’s then sole superpower; Blair, as England’s first Labour prime minister in nearly two decades; and Howard, as Australia’s second-longest serving prime minister, were all important political figures with more supporters than detractors for many years. The records of all three were at best tarnished and at worst fatally damaged in their response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, declaring the war on terror and, in March 2003, invading Iraq. In their books all three defended their actions, but failed to address in any substantive way the documentary evidence critical of the reasoning behind the Iraq invasion, the war’s execution and its aftermath.

And yet the three leaders’ autobiographies have reached large audiences and were accompanied by extensive publicity tours that gave pride of place to their perspective and allowed them to restate as facts things that have been contradicted, with evidence, by others. This is not to suggest that the war in Iraq and its aftermath is closed for debate: political issues can be keenly contested by people of good faith holding differing ideological positions, as well as by people *not* of good faith who peddle propaganda rather than engage in debate.

Whether you think the books are propaganda or a defence of the three leaders’ records, there is a need to read other viewpoints and examine other evidence to make judgements about the decisions these men took. The stakes could hardly be higher: more than 100,000 civilians have been killed in Iraq and many more American troops have died there than died on 9/11.

The value of an autobiography is leavened by understanding that even the most insightful, self-aware people struggle to see themselves as others do. Most shy away from exposing their mistakes, cruelties or the things they are ashamed of. I am not thinking here of the so-called misery memoirs, the point of which seems to be a pleasing arc from abused childhood and drug-hazed adolescence to spiritual
awakening and redemption by publication. These, too, are prone to propaganda, as the revelations in 2006 by the Smoking Gun website about the many fabrications in James Frey’s memoir A Million Little Pieces amply demonstrate.

Rather, I am thinking about the rich, complex and, potentially, more truthful portrait of a person that emerges in biography. Historically, biographies were mostly written about people already or long dead; biographies of living people began to be written by journalists in the 1970s, according to Steve Weinberg in his 1992 book Telling the Untold Story: How Investigative Reporters Are Changing the Craft of Biography. Today they are commonplace.

What readers get with biographies of living people – when they are done well – is a work humming with the urgency of the journalistic engagement, a willingness to ask difficult questions, forage far and wide for answers, and a commitment to telling a life story that appeals to the broadest possible audience. Biographies of living people are unavoidably shaped by the dynamic between author and subject, which may be co-operative or hostile, or both. Gellman’s Angler and Michael Crick’s 1995 biography Stranger than Fiction – which revealed that Jeffrey Archer’s best work of fiction may be his own life story – were written without their subjects’ co-operation. More often, biographers of living people dance between their desire for access and their demand for independence.

They rarely co-exist comfortably, so we should be cautious of blithe claims on the publicity circuit. And be thankful when the biographical stars align, as they did for David Marr, whose subject, Patrick White, gave him extraordinary access and letters of introduction, and did not attempt to censor the resulting manuscript even though after reading it he said, ‘I think this book should be called The Monster of All Time.’

Marr’s 1991 biography is a sympathetic but not uncritical portrait of the Nobel Prize-winning author. Michael Wolff gained similarly rare access to the global media mogul Rupert Murdoch, his family and associates but his 2008 biography, The Man Who Owns the News, is sharp and critical, quite different to William Shawcross’s earlier biography, with which Murdoch also co-operated.

There have been several biographies of Bush, Blair and Howard, but it is worth highlighting that Gellman’s Angler was not reviewed in Australia, which is particularly interesting because Cheney was a notoriously secretive politician. His vice-presidential selection team refused to share information with anyone other than Bush. When Cheney was announced as Bush’s running mate, the campaign team had difficulty extracting even information on the public record such as his public speeches or voting record. This left the Republicans vulnerable to Democrat attacks about his previous opposition to, for instance, school lunch programs. Throughout the Bush administration’s two terms, the number of people working in Cheney’s office remained a mystery. When William Kristol boasted in 2003 that each Monday Cheney sent over a staffer to pick up thirty copies of his publication, the Weekly
Standard, this became ‘the best clue we have to the number of persons who work for the Vice President’, according to David Bromwich in the New York Review of Books.

More importantly perhaps, given Cheney’s reinvention of the role of Vice President, he and his office have refused to hand over his records to the National Archives and Records Administration. This denies them to future researchers, as well as to those who argue he should be indicted for his role in war crimes allegedly committed during the Iraq war.

Cheney’s admirers and detractors alike agree his appetite for work, attention to detail and understanding of Washington bureaucracy are prodigious. He liked to ‘reach down’, as he puts it, into the bureaucracy, often phoning mid-level officers to get ‘unfiltered’ information. Gellman displays a similar determination, impelled by a desire to uncover and understand. The seventy pages of endnotes testify to Gellman’s use of the Freedom of Information Act, his willingness to interview and re-interview, his development of other journalists’ incremental news breaks, his trawling of labyrinthine records of congressional sub-committees and his own news breaks for the book, resulting from his willingness to keep digging long after others had moved to the next frisson du jour.

A copy of the vetting form for Vice Presidents was one such news break; another was an interview with the House majority leader Dick Armey, who told Gellman how he was misled by Cheney about the relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein before the invasion of Iraq. Armey, a ‘tax-hating Texas good ol’ boy’ Republican, opposed the war and threatened to become a lightning rod for other undecided Republicans until Cheney called him in for a private briefing. Cheney told Armey that Saddam had personal ties to Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network and that Iraq’s ability to ‘miniaturise weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear’ had been ‘substantially refined since the first Gulf War’. Both claims were fanciful. Armey felt betrayed: ‘Did Dick Cheney, a fellow who had been my trusted friend – did he purposely tell me things he knew to be untrue? …I seriously feel that may be the case.’

Gellman criticises Cheney, but it would be wrong to deduce that Angler is unrelentingly negative or one-dimensional. Cheney mythology has it, for instance, that he profited from his former company, Halliburton, attaining contracts to provide services in Iraq following the invasion, but Cheney and his wife, Lynne, gave away an estimated US$8 million in stock options from Halliburton and six other companies when he became Vice President, and set up a charitable trust.

Cheney did not publicly discuss this, although such transparency would have helped him. Cheney is secretive, Gellman contends, not because he fears embarrassment but because it yields practical political advantages. If potential opponents within the Washington bureaucracy did not know what Cheney was doing, or where his responsibility began and ended, they could not counter him.
Accusations of venality over Halliburton, though, were on a shortlist of charges that could penetrate Cheney’s implacable presence.

The myth also holds that Cheney was the eminence grise behind Bush; Gellman lays out abundant evidence underlining Cheney’s key role but shows Bush was never just Cheney’s puppet. The very elements that made Cheney so powerful in Bush’s first term – his Terminator-like relentlessness in pursuit of a goal, no matter the opposition or public perception – diminished his influence in the second term, as the costs and consequences of the administration’s actions in Iraq and after Hurricane Katrina began to damage Bush.

All these things intrigue for what they suggest about Cheney’s make-up and motivation. For all his tenacious digging, Gellman can only go so far, as Cheney not only declined to be interviewed but, like his former boss, is unreflective by nature.

With someone like Cheney it may be less important to understand their psyche than to fathom the pattern of their actions. It appears that the defining moment in Cheney’s public career was his response to the curtailing of presidential power that followed the forced resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974. Reinstating this power drove his political purpose from that moment on.

When Cheney left office his approval rating in the Gallup poll was a low 30 per cent, which bothered him not a whit. His autobiography is scheduled for publication this year, and that infamous ‘never apologise, never explain’ mantra suggests we can expect a steamrolling restatement of long-held beliefs. Bush had ‘gone soft’ on the war on terror in his second term, Cheney told his authorised biographer, Stephen Hayes. Freed from the strictures of office, he was able to ‘forthrightly express those views’. No doubt Cheney’s memoir will be compelling.

More important, and the reason why Gellman’s Angler remains required reading, is that the current President is still grappling with the problems bequeathed him by the Bush administration. Whether the former Vice President engages with Gellman’s critique will tell us a great deal about the man.
'ARE you going? If he wins, are we going?’ It was October 2008, a month before the presidential election, yet many of my friends and family had begun asking this question. ‘Are you going to the inauguration in Washington?’ The question became more important even than ‘Are you voting for Barack?’

My answer was ‘yes’ with an exclamation mark. I transformed into a beacon, cheerleader, resource and more for all things that would lead, help and motivate my Californian friends to take this historic journey.

‘Girl, this will be something to tell my grandkids, in twenty years,’ I laugh to my friends. ‘And Cameron better not make me a grandmother before then! This will be like going to the March on Washington, with Martin Luther King Jr delivering his “I Have A Dream” speech!’

Every day the number of women in my circle of friends heading to Washington, DC grew. A short time after the election, a large list of women hoping and planning to attend was formed. We covered all the details anyone could think of for attending the fifty-sixth presidential inauguration.

I worked to persuade a dear friend to join the fun. ‘We could do a minimal food budget, especially if we rent a house. You have all the clothes and jewellery that you need. How much is Amtrak from Sacramento to DC? I would consider going that route with you.’

‘Melody, money is funny around our house. Hubby talking about walking away from the home since the value is lower than we paid for it…taxes is due – it’s always something.’

‘Joycey, you have to sacrifice and not buy anything new so you could buy a train ticket and have a tiny bit of spending money. Would you be interested in taking the train…it is cheaper and, since you have time off from work, the time to take the train from California to DC would not be a factor.’ I didn’t give her time to respond. ‘This is a worthwhile sacrifice… We could share cabs and the limos that my friends will have… Put together a bare-bones budget. Try!’
I was relentless, because Joyce and I have a great time together. I wanted her with me in Washington. So, knowing how much she shops, I added, ‘Oh, you have to institute a self-imposed spending freeze for November and cut Christmas spending by three-quarters...make this your Christmas present. We don’t have to do big-time all the time.’

‘I hear you, Melody! Pray for a miracle about the home finances and for the inauguration. Unless something miraculously happens within the next few weeks, I am going to have to pass...damn it!’ Joyce paused, and added, ‘I will definitely keep this in mind. I’m going through all my purchases from the last few months, some items are still in bags, and I will be taking everything back for credit.’ I could hear her mental wheels turning to try and make this trip happen. She went further, moving toward a ‘yes’ for the trip. ‘I will save on gas since I won’t be driving because of my knee surgery...save on food since I won’t be eating out as much. Don’t count me out!’

Joyce took back her purchases, tightened her belt and quickly got on board as we ironed out the tiny details for our Inaugural Journey. Many other women were going but Joyce and I had decided to be roommates, and we traded no fewer than twenty emails and three telephone calls a day for the next six weeks. We decided to fly, not hop on the train, to Washington, DC.

IT WAS 8 JANUARY 2009 when I realised I had been crying on and off for the past eight days. While I was co-ordinating my inauguration wardrobe, outfits, hair, makeup, accessories, and figuring out how I would stay warm for my ten days in DC without a fur, I cried. I did not cry for me, or for any joy about Barack Obama becoming America’s first black President. I cried deep, long, painful tears of grief for Oscar Grant III.

At the time of his murder, on 1 January 2009, he was twenty-two. He was the same age as my beautiful black son. The smile that I stared at, in the family photo of Oscar Grant, covered the front, back and inside of our newspaper. His face replaced the other black man’s face, President-Elect Barack Obama, whose face covered other newspapers around the country. Oscar Grant’s smile reminded me of the smiles of my son and his friends. Oscar Grant was like the other young black men in my community, in my city, Oakland, California. He was executed, shot in the back, by a rail cop, a transit police officer, while he lay, face down, on the cold, dirty, grimy grey concrete slab of the transit platform on New Year’s Eve.

As I matched up and packed my colourful bras, underpants, stockings, jewellery and scarves, I cried. As I organised my assorted folders holding the priceless tickets I had purchased for the Illinois State Society Presidential Ball and Gala, the Presidential Inaugural Cruise and Dinner around the Potomac River, the California State Society Presidential Inaugural Luncheon and Fashion Show, and the American
Music Inaugural Ball, I cried for Oscar Grant. I had tickets to the California Bash, ‘Fly Me to the Moon’, being held by the California Democratic Party at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. I cried for Oscar Grant. As I double-checked the times and dates for the private inaugural reception hosted by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, I cried for Oscar Grant. My undergraduate college, Mills College, was hosting a Presidential Inauguration Reception and I would be attending the Jack and Jill of America, Inc. Southeast Region Inaugural Reception. I cried for Oscar Grant. I confirmed my fine-dining reservations for an assortment of Georgetown restaurants that I would be visiting over the ten days. I cried for Oscar Grant. The Presidential Inaugural Summit Prayer Breakfast, the Fredrick Douglas Event at the National Archives, tickets for Bill Cosby at the Kennedy Center, the secured Capitol Tour with Senate and House Passes: these did not dry my tears for Oscar Grant or heal the wound in my heart for this murdered son.

I was completing a lengthy, humorous email to all of the women in our group travelling to the Presidential Inauguration on the day that Oscar Grant was buried. I was trying to dry my tears for Oscar Grant. I really was. Instead of celebrating the journey of a lifetime, I was trapped in a murder of unexplainable proportions. My husband called to me from the living room.

‘Melody, you need to come in here quickly…’

I don’t remember much else of what I saw on the television, except footage boldly titled ‘breaking news’. The tears, hurt, pain and grief for Oscar Grant had spilled into our streets. Oakland was burning. I was on fire too.

‘I have to go downtown,’ I told my husband as I grabbed my purple Converse, extra-large hoodie and a tear-soaked, crumpled wad of tissue. I knew he would not accompany me into our micro-warzone. ‘Bye,’ I called as I slammed the door to our lovely home and headed downtown.

I sent the following email instead of continuing the evening update about my flight, the Super Shuttle, my bed and breakfast inn reservation, and the great house that Joyce and I had finally scored not too far from the Capital. (When we paid out, in advance, astronomical amounts of money, we squealed like high school girls, ‘We can walk to Inauguration!’) Instead, on 9 January 2009, I wrote to my DC-bound friends:

Well, when I signed off last night, on email, I really did go into downtown Oakland, to see why and if my town was still burning…it was. Some of you know that I resigned my mayoral-appointed position of serving on the Citizen’s Police Review Board for Oakland and most of you know my love for Oakland and my love for the young urban folks in my town. What I saw during my two-plus hours, on the scene…in the mix, broke my heart. My heart was broken for my mayor, my former boss, who was soundly booed by the youth and elders as he tried to call for peace from the steps of City
Hall. My heartbreak is around and runs on down to the rampant racism that is alive and well within the Oakland Police Department. Our police force is 80 per cent non-urban and they do not like us. Period. (As a side note, the transit patrol is not the city police.) I observed the pain, anger, grief and rage. When I got to City Hall, I tried to connect with the staff and so-called community leaders, yet the face of fear was the only connection I obtained. I tried to do what I do, which is observe, get information, evaluate plans and see if I can help in any way.

While things were burning and breaking all around me I was, as I am, not scared at all. I only got scared when an officer picked me out of obscurity (I was on the opposite side of the street from a volatile exchange between some of the protesters and the police.) He quickly and angrily pulled out his billy club, held it over my head and threatened me, telling me to get my ‘blank’ across the street when I was not even in the crowd, in the way, interfering or inciting – nothing. I was standing by myself observing everything. I tried to speak to him in my ‘downtown’ voice and he continued to press toward me with his Hitler-style knee-high boots, while pulling and then raising his tax-dollar-supplied billy club higher over my face.

…I was mortified, shocked and seriously scared. I was trying to tell him of my disbelief of him even engaging and bullying me...all the while I was moving backwards, towards City Hall where the officials had sealed themselves inside. I moved very slowly, away from his evil ass.

One of our media-maligned urban youth injected himself between the angry officer and my now frightened self. He did what urban youth do...take their lives and freedom in their own hands. The youth pushed me away from the officer in a protective-son sort of way and faced off with the officer on my behalf. Other urban youth ran over and were pulling and carefully pushing me out of harm’s way while this young man and his posse cursed and confronted the officer on my behalf.

A band of suburban youth, white, angry and skilled in the tactics of civil disobedience and protest...there were hundreds of them running all around downtown Oakland, who the television neglected to show America, interjected themselves between the dreadlocked and afro-haired black urban youth and the now-enraged police officer and his ‘colleagues’ who swarmed our space like locusts. It was only when the suburban ‘kids’ taunted, cursed and challenged the police that the enraged police officer lowered his billy club and ignored their taunts, me, and the young black protesters. While grateful, I found this unbelievable. In the heat of chaos, race matters. It was chaos, it was violent, it was a very sad night in Oakland, but it was not because of the young ‘mob’ that the media named, but because of the ‘mob’ ways of the police.
I did not get the number of replies that I had received to my emails that I had sent to these ladies since October 2008. I did have a strong group of women who were glad for my safety, applauded my ‘foolish’ bravery and some who questioned why I would go out into the ‘mess’ of the night just a few days away from the event of a lifetime.

Oscar Grant’s murderer was arrested on 14 January 2009. I left Oakland for Washington, DC that night, at 10.30 pm, on a very full flight, while my city was again burning for Oscar Grant. We, in our tragedy, were a long way from the joys of Barack Obama, the fun and festivities of inauguration – some four thousand kilometres away from the patriotic waving of red, white and blue. While waiting to board my red-eye flight, I fielded jovial questions about the red and blue political party ribbons decorating my carry-on bag. Yes, I wanted to support Barack Obama’s plea for, invitation to and belief in bipartisan politics. We do not have bipartisan politics, nor do we have a history of inviting the red and the blue folks – the Republican Party and the Democratic Party – in our country to come together. We do not have a history of believing this could happen. Maybe Obama would get credit for changing the way we think, work and play in politics in America.

At the Oakland Airport I also realised that people did not want to talk about downtown Oakland burning five minutes away from us. We were going to DC. People had spent a lot of money and were using their vacation or sick days to travel from one side of the United States to the other to witness the swearing-in of our first black President.

‘We really don’t know what happened up there on that rapid transit platform on New Year’s Eve with that officer and Oscar Grant...’ These cautious comments made my jaw stiffen and my eyes water. Hmm, Oscar Grant is dead. Do you know about that?

I do not care what happened before Oscar Grant was murdered. People saw what happened. I saw the videos taken. I saw the television play the execution over and over and over again. I saw it. Yet my eyes, heart and head cannot accept that a young man, like so many I know, was executed while unarmed, with a knee pressed to his neck, his beautiful face forced into the pavement, while he pleaded for the officer not to take his life. I do not need to know anything else. Burn, Oakland, burn...

AS I FOUND my row and seat on the airplane, I imagined Oscar’s family was probably not planning to witness the inauguration. I imagined Oscar Grant III, like so many others, wanted to go but reasoned that the crowds, cost, weather and so on would make doing so impossible. I imagined... With every minute moving me further from my beloved city, I could not leave Oakland, with all her hurt, tears, pain and injustice, behind.

The five-hour flight was a mix of restlessness, tears and excitement. Waking from a nap, I wiped my eyes. ‘Allergies,’ I said off-handedly to the person next to me. She
wanted me to focus on the good things, the positive things. In other words, please shut up about Oscar Grant.

‘Leave Oakland behind for a few days,’ she counselled as she shared her party plans and excitement at going to see the Obamas. She made the Obamas sound like old friends. I forced pleasant smiles as she created a moat between me and my grief, filling it with descriptions of forthcoming swanky cocktail parties, breakfast celebrations and her wardrobe details.

The plane now rested at the arrival gate at Dulles Airport. Who was I kidding? Trying to leave Oakland behind was an absurd suggestion. It was right up there with ‘We don’t really know what happened on that transit platform...’ I could never leave Oakland behind. Oakland is the city that stirs my soul, brings me pain and brings me joy. Oakland is the city where I learned about the Halls of Congress, the powers of the Senate, and where I learned that I would see a black man become President. Oakland is where I was born. It is where grew up, went to school and got my first job out of college. I worked at City Hall, in the city manager’s office. Oakland is where my son, now twenty-two, was born. Oakland is where the son of another mother died a few days ago, aged twenty-two, and caused my city to come alive.

Retrieving my bag with the large red and blue decorative ribbons from the overhead bin, I focused on the gratitude I had for being in Washington, DC, which is another home of sorts for me. When I was working on my master’s degree in public administration I lived in Georgetown. I was a congressional intern on the hill and I also worked in the lobbyist office for the City of Los Angeles. I remember how upset I was when I learned that Oakland had not allocated resources to secure a federal lobbyist like Los Angeles. What I did not know was that Oakland’s Congressman, Ronald V Dellums, who I interned for, was such a deeply respected and effective force that any lobbyist or team would pale in comparison. Oakland did not need a lobbyist in Washington, DC back in 1983: it had Dellums.

When the shuttle dropped me at my inn I tried to forget about Oscar Grant and committed to keeping my thoughts on Barack Obama. I called home to let my family know I had arrived safely. My husband was happy to hear from me and asked a battery of questions about how exciting Washington, DC must be. I gave him one-word inaccurate answers: ‘Yes,’ ‘Sure,’ and ‘Ahh...’ Then I asked the burning questions I wanted answers to: ‘What happened? What happened last night after I left?’

He paused. I know when he pauses it is not good. ‘Well,’ he started. ‘I went downtown after I dropped you off at the airport and things had gotten worse. The windows of many of the businesses were broken, more fires were set, people really fought with the police and the officers started blocking off many of the streets. I almost got trapped inside the zone they had set up. It was bad, Melody.’
‘Okay. Dave, keep me posted and please do not throw away any newspapers. I want to read everything written about Oscar Grant and I want to know what people at home have to say about Barack, Michelle, Malia and Sasha.’

‘Hey, have a good time. Take lots of pictures – and Melody, things will be fine in Oakland.’

‘I will…and David, you make sure you take care of my city. Bye.’

WHEN I HUNG up I wondered how I would be able to enjoy the National Portrait Gallery in a couple of hours. I was doing everything I could to keep my commitment to having a good time.

An unofficial yet quite popular portrait of President-Elect Obama was already the centre of controversy. Seemed like some people were not happy that the gallery, where the official portrait of every President of the United States of America hangs, had placed a large portrait of the President-Elect underneath or behind a staircase.

That is also what happens to books written by African-American authors: our books are shelved underneath the escalator, on the wall facing the back of the store, or tucked on shelves close to the back door where the coffee is served. What was going on down at the National Portrait Gallery? It was time to see for myself what possible injustice was boiling over here.

The Washington newspaper said that no other presidential portrait had caused such division. A generous perspective noted that no other president-elect had a portrait displayed at the gallery, so people needed to stop looking at it as a racial incident. His portrait being removed from the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent presidential exhibit was a matter of protocol, nothing more.

‘What?’ I cried out in my quaint inauguration-theme-decorated room, as I read the article. ‘They removed his portrait already?’ The article continued that the portrait being displayed with the other presidents was a big mistake and concluded that Barack Obama had yet to be sworn into office – he was not yet President, and his portrait had to be removed immediately.

Many were outraged and wrote to the newspaper that they believed America was already showing its resistance to electing a black man as President. Others wrote that it was tacky and hurtful for the author interpreting protocol to hint that Barack Obama may be assassinated before he took the oath of office. At that point I folded the newspaper and said yet another prayer for Barack Obama and for the soul of Oscar Grant III.

As I unpacked, I turned on what looked like a new television set in my room. A television in a room at a bed and breakfast inn is rare. The proprietor explained that since it was the inauguration she made sure people could see everything while they were at her inn. At the prices she was charging, that seemed fair enough. I would only stay here for four nights, before I moved into a house I would share with a
friend from Sacramento. All accommodation in Washington was booked out at triple or quadruple the regular rate. I was told several times that rooms had been booked for over a year.

Mayor Adrian Fenty, of Washington, DC, is a strange fellow. He was on TV. His hat was too big and I could tell he probably doesn’t play well with others. It was just a hunch. As I hung my ball gowns, stacked my evening shoes and made sure my other outfits survived the journey, I heard him talk about street closures. Washington was closing streets to celebrate. Oakland, meanwhile, had closed streets to restore order. Two black men, Oscar Grant and Barack Obama, had elected officials and municipalities scrambling and making public announcements to address or anticipate whatever either man’s followers required to bring peace, a sense of calm, or a hint that someone was in charge of the surrounding chaos.

SUCH TELEVISIONS DIRECTIONS, pleas and eventually threats of arrest permeated the airwaves of both cities over the next couple of years. The time between January 2009 and now has been tough. Our country’s tepid to hate-laced response to the leadership of President Barack Obama, in tandem with the various components of the highly emotional trial for the murder of Oscar Grant, have left many uneasy.

I have been accused of having it ‘better’, of surely leading an easier life since a black man is in the White House. My truth is far from this careless assessment. The resentment, anger and evil wishes for President Obama and for the supporters of Oscar Grant are real. Discussions about race and racism are not happening in a constructive or productive climate. My city is still one bad decision – say, the petitioned early release of the convicted officer – away from imploding.

I am puzzled that mothers of all races are not enraged about the murder of the young man, and of the many young men of colour executed every day. I am guarded, alert and engaged in discussions about the worsened conditions of the black middle class, and I am clear that these conditions are not because we have a black President.

I have to believe that things will get better for everybody, so I pray. I pray for a country that can one day eradicate the hurt, the pain, and dry the tears that fall from the face of others. I pray for the scared, the threatened, and for those who have no compassion for the other man, his fellow man, the man in the White House and the man who died on the transit platform. I pray for forgiveness and justice so we may have peace, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness.

Melody L Fuller is a master of fine arts student at Stonecoast, in Maine. She is working on a memoir entitled ‘One Suitcase Now: A Woman’s Travel Confessions and Recollections’.
IF I am to write the true history of the Circus, I must start by telling you how my girlfriend ran off with the silent clown. ‘Harpo!’ we called out to him across the border from South Australia, my loyal friends nursing my ego.

The drama had unfolded in Sydney, city of adventure, romance and tragedy, where the summer rain pelts down on the Moreton Bay figs and the sultry air breeds emotion. We lay in a bedroom in Newtown – not the three of us, but it may as well have been. I had come over from Adelaide to visit her, my newly touring circus girl, but on our first night as we lay there in the darkness it was clear that something, as they say in the movies, had changed forever.

As always with huge and obvious personal events, it took me completely by surprise. My youthful feeling that she was the love of my life became crystalline in the air above us, porcelain-delicate, and I could only watch clear-eyed as it shattered. ‘I don’t want to make a choice,’ she said. ‘Can’t I have both of you? Can’t we make it work?’ My eyes traced the watermarks on the ceiling. The next day she gave me a present, a small wooden horse she found on High Street. I snapped its head off.

She didn’t last long in the Circus, by circus standards. She was a blow-in from theatre, an actor romancing the carnies. She was funny and talented, could run from a comedy routine to playing an instrument in the band to augmenting the numbers in an acrobatic group act. But she found the lack of structured rehearsals frustrating, the strange creative process opaque and chaotic. The silent clown, by contrast, stayed for years, a major figure onstage and off. But their lives, even after they had left each other and the circus, remained entwined with it. He married and divorced the girl from Albury who started off working backstage and ended up widely regarded as one of the funniest performers in the history of the troupe. The Actor moved in with one of the longest-serving founders.

Why am I gossiping, when I promised history?
THE TRUE HISTORY of this circus, which at its inception was given the suitably ambitious name Circus Australia – or, more famously, Circus Oz for short – should also contain a scene from South America. In fact, there should be many. One that the Circus itself loves to remember, for its magical realist connotations as much as any other reason, involves performing at the legendary glass opera house in the Brazilian jungle at Curitiba. Another is a scene at a Colombian airport, in which a certain Circus Oz performer managed to persuade the airline clerk to let him check in upwards of fifty bags of luggage – the total belongings of his new Colombian fiancée – without paying an excess baggage fee. This latter tale may, I suspect, have become exaggerated in the telling, but in a circus you can never tell, after all, which tricks are feats of skill that take years to master and which are bluff and lies.

The South American episode I am thinking of took place in Bogota, at the opening performance of the Circus Oz season there, one day in the early 1990s. It was on this day that I was first employed by the circus, by accident. When I say employed, I mean roped in. They turned to me in desperation. I happened, by very strange coincidence, to be sharing an airplane with the Circus, from Australia to South America, or rather a series of airplanes, dipping and hopping as they do to piece together an uncommon long-haul route. (I was lucky enough to be on my way to Caracas to watch one of my plays being rehearsed and performed there under the wing of an illustrious theatre company, directed by an Australian colleague, having somehow convinced a funding body that my presence would contribute to the future wealth of our national culture.) Circus Oz, as it happened, was performing at a festival in Caracas and at another in Bogota two weeks beforehand, and with only a minor change to my itinerary I could add on this side trip at the start.

A second circus girl had invited me, the one I later married. She worked behind the scenes, her feats involving money, planning, organisation and negotiation and, since it was Circus Oz, cooking the barbecue for twenty-five people every Sunday afternoon between shows. ‘I don’t want to have a relationship,’ I had told her at a pavement table at Rhumbarellas in Brunswick Street. I had to be clear. Despite the fun we were having, I was still smarting from the loss of the Actor. I couldn’t cope with anything serious. I had to break it to her. But, she replied, as the trams rattled off into the summer evening, and the footpath filled with the processions of the night, ‘what makes you think I want to have a relationship?’

I was smitten.

She said: ‘I’ll drive you home. Where do you want me to take you?’

I said: ‘My brother’s.’

But the directions I gave became more and more obscure, as we wound back and forth down Brunswick side streets, until I said, ‘You can just pull over here.’ It was in my brother’s street but further down, where there are no houses on one side, instead a wide verge under some big old trees. It was a bit like going to a drive-in without a screen. We stayed there in the car awhile, until we felt like moving, only by now it wasn’t to my brother’s anymore.
So we caught the plane to Bogota together, lightly, although in the end I arrived on my own, because she had to wait behind in Miami to help one of the technicians whose sound gear had missed a connecting flight. The cabin of the flight from Miami south I remember as being full of whitegoods, wealthy shoppers returning home with their booty.

Our hotel in Bogota, the Hilton, was a five-star high-rise tower. Several years afterwards we heard it had been bombed. This may or may not have been directly linked to the military police, who sublet several floors. One day, when, because of a blackout, we descended the stairs instead of riding in the lift, we came upon armed guards stationed in the stairwell on floors five to ten. Feigning nonchalance, we continued on our way down to the foyer, where we liked to sit and drink by the marbled fountain. Apricot-beige, the Bogota Hilton foyer, like all other international five-star hotel foyers of a certain vintage, the colour mandated by some invisible authority, determined to fend off the local hues of whatever lay beyond the sliding glass.

‘In front here is the main street. If you walk up that way, you will come to the centre of the city,’ Romero, our young local minder from the festival, briefed us. ‘But behind the hotel, in that direction – you cannot go. It is not safe to walk there.’ We looked out the high windows of our room towards those streets, darkly lit and unmade, and tried to spot the dangers. None was evident. Nevertheless, we believed Romero. Even in the main street we were wary, and some were robbed.

Bogota made sense of García Márquez. A horseman with a python wrapped around his neck rode past one day in the central business district. Barbecued sweet corn sizzled in the street below the bullring. Nightclubs were free to enter, but to leave you had to buy a bottle of spirits or equivalent – which you were allowed to drink but not take with you. To clear stragglers late at night they let off tear gas.

The nightlife area was called La Zona Rossa – the red zone. In a side street here the circus tent was pitched, on a bare patch of land behind high walls.

The Circus arrived in town, as usual, several days before the first performance, to fit the show into the new venue and complete the necessary technical and safety checks. They could never be sure afterwards whether, in this case, arriving earlier would have made any difference to how things turned out, or whether, as with Sydney for me, Bogota simply required each visitor to expect a certain amount of drama to unfold – a tax levied by the rarefied mountain air.

In Bogota at this time, the electricity tended to go off each afternoon for several hours. It might or it might not; the locals shrugged as if it were useless to make predictions. Needless to say this made it difficult for the lights to be reliably focused on the aerial artists in precisely the way they needed to be, reassured that they wouldn’t fall blinded to their deaths, or suffer catastrophic injury. You could accuse them of hysteria, but hadn’t their friend, the strong woman, broken her neck in Edinburgh, if not through accidental blinding then by some other freak technical malfunction? Didn’t this fear explain the clouds of grumpiness they carried with them, that threatened at any point to precipitate a storm?
Certain important locally sourced items, such as staging materials (the circus ring itself) were conspicuous by their absence, and Harpo the clown, now these years later directing the show – not without speaking, in case you are wondering, as would have been delightful but absurd – had dispatched himself heroically with Romero in a taxi to a distant part of the city where, it was rumoured, suitable hardware might be found.

These delays and other factors, now lost in time, conspired to bring us to the scene in question, on the afternoon and evening of the opening night.

OUTSIDE THE HIGH brick walls of the enclosure, an expectant crowd could be heard gathering an hour or so before the show was due to start. A sudden gloomy silence inside the tent heralded the latest city blackout. I should explain: one of the many tasks of the girl with whom I wasn’t having a relationship was to call the lighting cues for the follow-spot operators. Follow-spots are the large cannon-like lights positioned around the circus tent to follow particular elements of the action onstage. Their operators turn them on and off, focus their beams of light and change the colours of their gels, following relayed instructions. Circus Oz, wherever they are playing, usually employs locals for the job, since it is too expensive to justify adding extra members to the touring party. This is despite the fact that, as we noticed earlier, lighting in the circus is as much a safety issue as an aesthetic. In Bogota, the instructions needed to be transmitted by my friend in Spanish. Since she spoke no Spanish, she had to read from a prepared script of notes. This in itself would not have been an insurmountable problem – it had worked before, in other foreign places. However all of the delays meant there had been no time to rehearse with the follow-spot crew; no time for them to familiarise themselves with the show that they were hoping to illuminate; no time for my friend to familiarise herself with the words she was hoping to pronounce. Now, at the last moment, a first and final rehearsal had been scheduled in desperation immediately before the first show, the power was out and nothing could be done.

Romero said that the festival director would put in a call to the President about the blackout. In the meantime, as the advertised show time slipped further and further behind us, as the shadows of the mountains lengthened and the thousands massed outside the wall grew more vocal and impatient, the nervous tension that accompanies any opening night began to rise and pop and blister like a yeast dough.

I happened to be sitting uselessly in the empty bleachers. It was at this moment that my friend turned to me. I was about to perform my circus debut, on follow-spot, in English. Another circus hanger-on and I were quickly assigned towers of rickety scaffolding; we ascended to our positions and were shown in dim theory how the lights would operate, if and when the power came back on.

The blackout ended without fanfare, as blackouts do, galvanising a flurry of activity inside the big top, as all concerned hastened to be ready for the breaking of the siege. It was somewhere between two and four hours – to adopt a Latin
American perspective on the clock – after the advertised commencement time that the external gates were finally opened and the crowd, pent up against them, flooded inside in waves of indignation and impromptu speech-making. We unaccustomed tower dwellers – not long ago tourists whose only duty had been to remain unstabbed in any back street, but now, fleetingly, integral to this circus of life and death, far from the oversight of an Australian WorkSafe inspector – clung to our cannons with their gels of mandarin and mauve, expecting at any moment to be toppled over as the fitting consummation of a gesture of frustration in the audience eddying below, an elbow, a shoulder wrongly placed.

The show began against a crackle of hostility. The audience was siding with the bulls. I don’t remember all the acts the Circus played that day, the show they had assembled that year. Even those I can remember, if I was to attempt to describe them to you here I fear I would fail to convey anything precise or substantial about their quality, or the effect they had upon the audience that night. Suffice to say that the audience, full-blooded in their uproar, was nevertheless open to the swill of seduction, to the ridiculous beauty of the spectacle that unfolded, lit in clunking amber whenever my headphones alerted me. My friend that I wasn’t going out with whispered, from her own distant tower, ‘I think they like it.’ I had to admit she had a good voice for headphones.

At the end they stood up and shouted Australia! Australia! They were ready to join us on the beaches of Gallipoli, attacking the Turks with feather dusters. Romero grinned, the performers bowed, Harpo grinned and bowed. After that, Bogota opened itself for dancing.

What is a true history of the Circus? Could such a thing ever be agreed upon? Who would be the one to write it? Or would it not be one but many, for shouldn’t the true history of this obstinately democratic circus be a carnival of impressions, a phantasmagoria of cheap details and enticing lies? If so, how to do it?

I confess, all of this I come to mention only because of the boxes, really. Boxes in the back room of the Circus’s home in Port Melbourne, which used to be a post office next door to the Navy Drill Hall. The boxes – or, where a semblance of order has been achieved, the shelves – contain the true history of this circus in video form. A long line of chunkily familiar VHS tapes, which not so long ago filled the local video store but now seem black and heavy, and rattle unconvincingly, lead back like dominoes to their evolutionary forebears from the 1970s and ’80s. These huddle on the far shelves in small groups, nervously, embarrassed at being so gawky, fat or oblong, humiliated by their obsolescence. They are at our mercy, just a hand’s reach from the dumpster. I cannot even visualise the machines necessary to bring them to life, to reveal what remains, if anything, of their secrets. Time is moving so fast that already we need some kind of technological archaeologist to interpret these objects, only invented when our grandparents were old. Circus Oz, Paris Theatre, Sydney, 1980 says the
spine of one such ancestor. The first time I ever saw the circus was at the Paris Theatre, my friend told me once. I was nineteen years old and in that very audience on that very night I made up my mind I wanted to join them.

What was it exactly she felt and saw that night in Sydney? And if I could find the rare and precious video player, lovingly maintained, that once upon a time would have been a bog-standard piece of futuristic wonder, like an iPad is today, the video player invented for the fleeting vogue of this particular tape format, the name of which all but a very few fanatics have now forgotten, and if I could press the necessary buttons, engage the mysterious motors and thereby display the visions from this tape upon a screen, and look at them with her? Could she find it there, the true history of that night, at least?

What would we see? Would the years of waiting, clenched in that reel, have so upset the magneto-chemical connections that, Alzheimered, they remember nothing more than how it seemed to snow that evening, the performance for all intents and purposes having taken place inside a blizzard? (I am going out for a short walk, said the tightrope walker. I may be some time.) Even if, by some miracle, the outline of the performance could be inked in sound and movement, through and beyond the stupidity of the pixels, and acts, performers, gags, feats recognised – what would be recovered? A cabinet of curiosities – strange haircuts, costumes, political references, the longueurs of a slower age – glimpsed as if from prone on a deathbed, Charles Foster Kane-style, the fixed camera steadfastly refusing intimacy? But is there a Rosebud here too? An off-the-cuff quip to the audience, an idiosyncratic gesture, a choreographed movement of sheer blissful energy, a quintessential piece of sublime dagginess (arguably Australia’s truest cultural note)?

I, the curious onlooker, might find something to amuse or delight me, and I might begin to connect the pictures before me with other memories: the first time I saw Circus Oz, earlier that same year of 1980, in a small tent pitched on an island in the Swan River estuary of Perth, alive with the wit and fire of Robyn Laurie’s rude clowning, the driving pulse of the music, the thrill of shared endeavour, and the moment, which catches in the throat and in the blood (there is, or should be, always such a moment at the circus), when the sweetly impossible occurs: a man dressed in a white lab coat giving a farcical lecture on the history of science ascends a ladder as if it is an illustrative timeline, all the way to the ceiling, where he reaches the present day and his apparent finale, pauses, and – here crossing over to the sublime – continues on into the future, upside down, walking right across the ceiling to the other side, where he sits down at an upside-down drum kit and plays, just because he can, a drum solo. Later, I will see other versions of the act and discover its techniques, but in this first dazzling encounter with it I am, like a child, enchanted, tearful at the pleasures of short life.

But what would my friend, witness to the Circus Oz performance at the Paris Theatre, make of what she sees and hears unrolled from that old spool? Would the
watching of it conjure or erase the memories she carries in her body? Would the video pictures and sounds, like a sparkly lure, attract all manner of forgotten impressions from the depths of her unconscious? Or would they, by contrast, be strangely unrecognisable, pushing the event away from her, as if into the kind of musty display cabinet you might come across on a grey afternoon in the back room of a grand European museum?

Since I am a researcher, I will conduct experiments into this question, and report back to you my findings. I shall sit my friend down and listen to her stories of the Paris Theatre, afterwards show her the video and record her responses. I concede that there are hundreds of these tapes, and thousands of eyewitnesses – performers, audience, those in-between such as myself on the lighting tower in Bogota. But if I could repeat the proposed experiment with all of these people, would I not be edging closer to the true history of this circus?

I can’t help but imagine such a process as if in a scene from the film Brazil, a factory of memory-making. Countless rows of people plugged each into their own screen, data feeding in and out of every one of them. Each person speaking out loud in a stream-of-consciousness narration, adding, drop by drop, to a rain of noise which a giant ear-shaped machine above miraculously makes sense of.

Or else, the internet. The magic of the geeks! If we can put these circus videos online, as a number of us have a scheme to do (see www.circusarchive.net), can we not float them there in that virtual ocean, each one, or each fraction of one (each act in any given show?), like a solid post in a web of jetties, and each post attracting to it over time the barnacles and seaweed, the clinging mass of objects washed up there by the passing seas of memory and association: photos, stories, debates, jokes, useful links to other things that someone somewhere thinks connects? There will be crap washed up too, just as the real ocean chokes with plastic bags and lost containers. There will be problems enough to fill a book: philosophical, technical, ethical, administrative and aesthetic. If we are to do this thing we must start now, work feverishly, use guile and wit. The true history of the circus, even this one circus, is infinite. We can’t, like Borges’s Funes, remember everything, for didn’t the poor man find in doing so he could make sense of nothing? But perhaps, after all, something of this trick is possible.

I will report back.

David Carlin teaches creative writing at RMIT University and is the author of Our Father Who Wasn’t There (Scribe, 2010).
The synagogue was still there: an inconspicuous brick building in a poor part of Shanghai where tower blocks had not yet risen, on the far side of Suzhou Creek. The narrow houses were two storeys at most, with the ground floors given over to grocers and to brothels disguised as hairdressing salons. They were built wall to wall, and the doors and windows opened onto narrow pavements. Not a tree in sight. The only thing special about the neighbourhood was its ongoing resistance to modernity.

The Ohel Moishe synagogue was built by Jews who fled Russia in 1917, after the Bolsheviks seized power. As soon as they could afford it, they moved out to more expensive neighbourhoods, leaving the Ohel Moishe to its fate. In the late 1930s Jews who had been driven out of Europe by the Nazis arrived to renovate and revitalise the building, making it the focal point of their lives.

More than half a century had passed since that era as well. Now the synagogue served as a museum, with the elderly Mr Wang giving tours through re-renovated rooms. Photos hung on the walls. The holy atmosphere of prayer and song had evaporated; the dry parquet sighed under our feet. ‘At one stage there were more than fifteen thousand Jews who were living in this neighbourhood, Hongkew,’ Mr Wang announced in very proper English.

He had seen the ships carrying refugees moor at the nearby dock. The photos showed open trucks ferrying people to reception centres where soup kitchens and rows of bunk beds awaited them. The same box-shaped Chinese houses lined the streets, but dark, attractive Europeans were strolling the pavements – slim-looking men in well-cut jackets and elegant women in calf-length coats and dresses, with flamboyant hats on their heads. ‘They were hard workers,’ Mr Wang commented approvingly.
He had lived near the synagogue, surrounded by Jewish neighbours who taught him English and made him their interpreter. Later, when a Jewish family left in a hurry, he bought their house and furniture. Mr Wang pointed to two chairs in a corner: the leather seats were worn and the curved wooden arms had been repaired more than once. They were all that was left of the old furnishings and he had donated them to the museum. Mr Wang was grateful to the Jews for the prosperity they had brought him. ‘If there had never been any Jews in Shanghai this job as a guide would not exist,’ was his practical conclusion.

We stopped in front of a wedding photo. Although she wasn’t wearing a white dress, the bride was holding a large bunch of white flowers in her arms. A light veil hid her face. ‘That wedding took place in this synagogue,’ Mr Wang determined from the background, because he hadn’t been present at the event. In those days he never visited the synagogue itself, he explained apologetically. ‘I did know him by sight, though,’ he said, pointing to the groom. ‘He was a doctor.’

I could tell that the doctor was quite a bit older than the veiled bride, as he was the same age as her parents, who were standing next to her. Her father was wearing a bowler and looking expectantly at her mother, a magnificent woman with dark crescent-shaped eyebrows and made-up lips. She, in turn, was looking tensely and anxiously at the rabbi who was marrying the couple. According to the caption, the photo had been taken in 1940. In Europe the Holocaust was underway while here, in this strange world, these people were trying to build a new existence.

ON MY FIRST visit to Shanghai, now almost twenty-five years ago, I had stayed on the edge of Hongkew, in what had once been an apartment complex for Europeans. The residents were long gone and the high-ceilinged rooms were packed with metal beds that backpackers could rent for a couple of yuan a night. The slightest noise echoed through the corridors; the thresholds had been worn hollow. I wandered through the streets of the neighbourhood that had once been home to Jews from Germany, Poland and Austria. On an old map I saw that there had once been a Little Vienna Café, but I was unable to pinpoint its location. I walked past the closed and neglected Ohel Moishe without recognising it as a synagogue. It was hard to believe that Hongkew had once had thousands of Jewish inhabitants. Everyone I passed on the street was Chinese, dressed in the blue or green Mao suits of the time – except on a couple of scorching summer evenings, when men and women strolled the banks of the sulphurous Suzhou Creek in light-coloured pyjamas.

I kept searching for traces of the Jews of Shanghai and eventually obtained the name of a Viennese woman who spent the war years there: Edith Linden. She had settled in Sydney half a century ago, and I had recently telephoned her. Her voice was frail and hard to understand. Reluctantly, she agreed to meet me.
After arriving in Sydney I called her from the airport but she didn’t answer. I settled into a friend’s flat and called again. Again, Edith Linden did not answer. When the phone kept ringing the next day as well, I decided to visit the city’s Jewish museum. ‘Edith Linden?’ the staff member said. ‘She died last week.’ My heart sunk: I had left it too long. ‘But there are other Jews in Sydney who knew Shanghai well,’ she went on. ‘Bettina Streimer’s on duty this afternoon, as a volunteer. She was there – I’ll introduce you.’

Across from the Holocaust exhibition a small woman sat on a bench with an expansive purple shawl wrapped around her shoulders, waiting to answer questions about the gruesome photos on the walls. ‘Oh, have you been to the Ohel Moishe synagogue?’ Bettina responded happily. ‘Then you must have seen the wedding photograph.’

‘The one where the bride’s wearing a veil?’

She smiled. ‘Yes, that one. That’s me. In a dark dress: I had nothing else to wear.’ For a moment she was lost in her memories. ‘Ah,’ she sighed. ‘When I married Dr Streimer I was just sixteen. He was much older. Thirty-seven.’

In the photo Bettina’s face had been hidden behind the veil, but behind her gold-framed glasses I now saw her mother’s lively eyes. I sat down next to her and asked how she had met her husband.

‘I will tell you about Dr Streimer,’ Bettina said softly, ‘but first I want you to understand just how German my family was, how the events took us totally by surprise.’

She described the country of her childhood: Beselich, a village near Frankfurt, and the farm she grew up on. ‘The Heimstätte was owned by the family, but my father administered the estate for his brothers and sisters. He had fought in the German army in World War I and had been awarded the Iron Cross for bravery.’ She glanced at me to make sure I realised what a high decoration that was. ‘Every Sunday afternoon he and his old comrades in arms would get together at a bar in our village. They would sit in front of the fire, like brothers, at the Stammtisch.’ Bettina pronounced the German names and words perfectly, making it easy for me to imagine her as a Mädel with immaculate plaits, off to buy cakes at the local Konditorei.

‘Beselich was a Catholic place of pilgrimage,’ she continued. ‘At Easter a lot of people would come to our village on foot, lighting candles in chapels along the way. There was a large convent near our house. When I was little I went to school there. My mother used to fill baskets with food for needy families, and I would take them to the nuns and they would distribute them.’

She seemed to be combing her memory for more convincing details. ‘Both our cook and maid were Catholic,’ she said. ‘They were part of the family and taught me all about the Holy Virgin.’
I imagined a German farm kitchen with people chatting around a table. One of Bettina’s uncles had come to stay. The cook had baked fresh bread and a goose was roasting in the oven. A delicious Kuchen was steaming on the sideboard. Bettina’s father, the man with the Iron Cross, the man who sat around the Stammtisch every week with his fellow veterans, was called Strauss. It was hard to imagine a more German family.

It never occurred to Bettina’s father that Hitler’s rise to power, in 1933, would mean the end of their peaceful life. She was ten at the time. ‘An older cousin was the only one to foresee the disaster at that stage. He began planning his emigration to America, but that was something my father refused to consider. “The Germans won’t go along with Hitler: in a few months he will resign and everything will go back to normal” – that was his prediction.’

But Hitler retained power. There were only ten Jewish families in the area and a few soon moved to South Africa. Eventually, only the Strausses and one other family were left. At school Bettina was having a hard time of it. She was excluded from all sports. She was no longer allowed to speak in class. Her best friend, daughter of the local head of the armed branch of the Nazi Party, wanted nothing more to do with her. Unable to bear it, Bettina went to stay with an aunt in Frankfurt, where she could complete her education at the Jewish school, the Philanthropin. In Frankfurt she became friends with the daughter of the American consul, who provided her with quota numbers to apply for US visas. When Bettina showed the documents to her father, he tore them up. ‘We’re not going anywhere,’ he insisted. ‘This is our country. Where they speak our language.’ There was no recrimination in Bettina’s voice, even though her father’s actions could have had catastrophic consequences, because soon not a single country was admitting Jews. ‘My father was like that,’ she said, raising her hands in the air. ‘Germany meant that much to him.’

The day before Kristallnacht, the mayor of the village called her father. ‘Go to the synagogue,’ he advised him. ‘Save what you can – the synagogue is going to be destroyed.’ Her father collected an ancient Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and hid them in the mayor’s cellar. The next morning, in Frankfurt, where Bettina was still staying with her relatives, she accompanied her uncle to his clothes shop, in the centre of town. All of the windows had been smashed; everything was a mess. That night hundreds of synagogues had been burnt down and Jewish businesses destroyed. It was the beginning of the end.

Bettina’s father had also been arrested by the SS. ‘They’ll let him go soon,’ everyone tried to reassure her. Bettina went to the Frankfurt train station to wait for him. There she met the despairing relatives of others who were missing. They told her that there was one last chance of escape: Shanghai still accepted Jews.
Bettina and an aunt rushed to the Frankfurt offices of Lloyd Triestino, a shipping company that sailed to Asian ports from Italy. Hundreds of desperate people were already gathered in front of the doors. Bettina and her aunt joined them. They waited there for days. Friends brought food to the queue so they wouldn’t lose their place. Eventually a representative of the shipping company appeared on the steps to implore the crowd, ‘Please, stop waiting. We don’t have any berths left to sell. All our ships are full. I’m sorry, but we can’t help you.’

Bettina smiled sadly. ‘And then a miracle happened. A cigarette lighter exploded in that man’s pocket and his clothes caught fire immediately. My aunt was close by. Without stopping to think, she took off her coat and used it to smother the flames. She saved his life.’ The representative of the company was immensely grateful. He gave Bettina’s aunt a piece of paper with an address, a date and a time written on it. When she went there she was able to book passages to Shanghai for the entire family.

Again Bettina spent whole days waiting at the train station. A train stopped. A door opened and an old man got off, dressed in tatters. It was her father, who a few weeks earlier had looked young, handsome and athletic. Five weeks in Buchenwald had made him unrecognisable. He could still count himself lucky; the Nazis had released him because of his Iron Cross. Not one of his fellow prisoners would survive the war. Despite all he had been through, he was far from happy about the trip to Shanghai. ‘It’s plague-ridden,’ he said. ‘People there die like flies.’

But there was no alternative. In the end the Strauss family was able, with the help of their friend the mayor, to withdraw enough money from the bank to pay for the voyage. Everything they owned had been confiscated. With heavy hearts, and just ten marks each, they boarded the Munich train. ‘We had almost no baggage, but my father was lugging a package wrapped in cloth with him. He refused to tell anyone what it was.’

The next train took them to the Brenner Pass, a dangerous place where smugglers and bandits operated. At the border Bettina heard people being beaten; there were shots and screams, but she and her parents were left alone. They reached Genoa unharmed, but had to wait several days, because their ship was late. Some Italians took pity on them, feeding them and providing them with a place to sleep.

When the Conte Bianco Mano moored, some fifteen hundred passengers went aboard, all of them Jewish refugees. ‘It was a horrific voyage,’ Bettina recalled. ‘There was a terrible stench on board and not enough to eat.’ The highlight was Aden, where the passengers were allowed briefly on land. ‘Simon Arzt, the owner of the city’s largest shop, gave us all an orange and something to drink.’

In Shanghai they were greeted by representatives of an American aid organisation, who gave them water and a banana before directing them into the back of the trucks.
The first impression of Hongkew was not encouraging. ‘The neighbourhood had been heavily bombed by the Japanese and we drove past ruins that the refugees would gradually restore over the years.’ Bettina was too old to be allowed to live with her parents in the ‘family home’ and was allocated a place in the ‘women’s home’. As one of the youngest there, she slept on top of one of the triple bunks. She was fifteen and alone in Shanghai.

BETTINA AND I looked up. A woman in her late eighties, another volunteer, trudged past the Holocaust exhibition. ‘We are talking about Shanghai,’ Bettina said.

‘I thought as much,’ the woman answered. She had apparently survived the horrors of World War II somewhere else.

‘We’ve run out of time,’ Bettina said, tapping her watch.

The other woman nodded. ‘I’m going home.’

‘We can talk some more downstairs,’ Bettina suggested to me, ‘over a cup of tea.’

We moved to the museum cellar, where we sat down at a table. Leaning against the wall was an immense photo mounted on a board. A life-sized waiter with a black bowtie was leaning on a wooden bar in an old-fashioned café. Behind him, bottles of spirits gleamed on glass shelves. He was waiting for customers to come in and sit down on the Thonet bentwood chairs that were arranged around the tables. Bettina glanced at the scene. ‘That is the Little Vienna Café, on Chusan Road. We got that photo enlarged for an exhibition. They obviously don’t know what to do with it anymore. The daughter of the owner, Dita Beran, was a friend of mine.’

This was the café whose location I had tried to find: an Austrian-Jewish establishment in Shanghai. I tried to imagine what it had been like. Men in hats came in and started a card game at a table in the corner. Rickshaws pulled by Chinese coolies glided past outside. An Indian policeman in a Sikh turban peered in through the open door.

‘Oh yes, Dita Beran,’ said Bettina, who was deep in thought. ‘We went to the Kadoorie school together.’

I had read a little about the Kadoorie family. They were one of several Jewish families from Baghdad that had followed the British to Shanghai and settled there after the Opium Wars. By the time Bettina arrived in the city, they had built up a business empire. The Kadoories had generously made funds available for the reception of the European Jews. ‘There were so many students at the Kadoorie school that we were only able to go half-days. Dita and I were in the morning group. We started early in the morning and finished around noon. In the afternoons I worked at the hospital.’
Like everyone else, Bettina had to find a way to make a living. Former butchers started meat stalls on the street, doctors received patients, teachers instructed. Small factories sprung up around the Jewish homes. Former residents of Vienna or Berlin who could make shoes, candles or soap taught their skills to Chinese friends. The European Jews then ventured into the British and French parts of the city to sell the products to rich locals.

Hongkew had always been a very poor neighbourhood. ‘No running water or toilets, only unhygienic latrines.’ Bettina shook her head. ‘No wonder we all got dysentery in the summertime. Then there was an outbreak of cholera, then typhus, then smallpox.’ Her father was right. Shanghai was unhealthy. ‘You didn’t dare to drink the slightest mouthful of unboiled water; you were not allowed to eat anything raw.’

But the thousands of Chinese residents of Hongkew were well disposed towards the Jews that had settled among them. ‘The Chinese liked doing business with us,’ Bettina explained. ‘They didn’t hate us the way the Germans had. They didn’t see any difference between us and the British. Anti-Semitism was not a problem. It didn’t even occur to the Chinese.’

I looked over my shoulder at the Little Vienna waiter with his black bowtie. In the meantime the café had filled. There were heated discussions in German about the course of the war. Outside a Chinese wonton vendor was praising his wares. It was a misty day. Foghorns sounded on the Huangpu River.

‘I’d love to be able to walk into the Little Vienna right now,’ I told Bettina.

She cast a cool glance at the immobile waiter. ‘That bit of paper stuck to it is an old menu,’ she said. ‘You can see what you used to be able to order in the Little Vienna. Wiener schnitzel, of course, soup with dumplings, goulash...oh yes’ – Bettina interrupted her summary – ‘if you had the money you could get all those things, but not many people could afford it.’ She had never even had a drink there. Her biggest extravagance was an occasional bread roll from the Jewish baker on Ward Road. ‘Fresh-baked. The most delicious thing I’ve had in my life.’

Bettina got good results at the Kadoorie school and, after finishing high school, was admitted for training as a lab assistant at the Red Cross hospital, located in the fashionable French part of town. She got her practical experience at night, as all equipment was used twenty-four hours a day to process the thousands of patients. ‘I met my husband in that hospital.’ She smiled. Dr Streimer was a graduate of the prestigious medical faculty of Vienna. In answer to my question asking what was so charming about him, Bettina sighed: ‘Everything.’ For the first time, she was lost for words. ‘His attitude to life. He had two great passions: medicine and music. He passed them on to me. I learned a lot from him. I admired him.’

‘Was it love at first sight?’
‘Definitely. I was a young girl; he was a handsome, mature doctor. What do you think?’

After the wedding, Bettina moved to her husband’s flat on Jessfield Road, in the British part of the city. The newlyweds lived a more or less normal life and Bettina diligently pursued her studies. Dr Streimer had been in Shanghai for a few years and also worked in a private clinic that was attended by the British employees of British companies. Bettina was not so keen on the British in Shanghai. ‘They had big textile and cigarette factories where the Chinese worked under terrible conditions. Their monthly salary was no more than a bag of rice.’

Her husband’s other patients included Russian Jews. ‘People with money who had been living in Shanghai for a long time.’ From Bettina’s perspective the Russians, like the British, were completely lacking in solidarity. ‘They only looked after themselves and didn’t do a thing for the Jewish refugees from Europe. No, we got a lot more help from the Baghdadi Jews.’

From the corridor we heard the clinking of keys. ‘Oh dear,’ said Bettina. ‘Everyone’s already left – if we’re not careful we’ll be locked in.’ We hurried to the exit after I’d cast one last glance at the interior of the Little Vienna.

WHEN I GOT off the ferry in Double Bay, yachts were bobbing on the wintry water and the sky was bright blue. At the sailing club lunch was being served at tables next to the jetty. White wine sparkled in crystal glasses. Further along, exuberant children in blue and white school uniforms were playing on the grass. I was a little early for an appointment with Bettina. I looked at shop windows full of Italian haute couture and the menus of French restaurants, and drank an espresso in a delicatessen where hams hung from the ceiling and cheese was displayed behind glass. It was as if I had sailed into a European harbour on the barren Australian continent. While nibbling a biscotto, I reconstructed Bettina’s last years in Shanghai.

In 1943, two years after occupying the entire city, the Japanese began tightening the screws on the inhabitants. British and French residents were interned in camps and Jews were no longer allowed to live outside of Hongkew, which was to become a Jewish ghetto. Bettina and Dr Streimer had to leave their flat on Jessfield Road. Housing in Hongkew was primitive and hard to get. They counted themselves lucky to find a dark room without a toilet or running water.

The Japanese treated the Jewish inhabitants of Hongkew as prisoners; they weren’t allowed to leave the neighbourhood without an official pass. On the bridge over Suzhou Creek their papers were inspected by a much-hated Japanese man called Goya who made everyone bow to him. At the slightest provocation he burst into fury and lashed out. Bettina had told me that there was one man, a Mr Kaiser, who suffered terrible blows every time he crossed the bridge. ‘There is only one Kaiser,’ Goya would say, ‘the Japanese emperor.’
In 1945, after the atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese occupation came to an end. Sixty thousand American soldiers entered the city in a single night. Anticipating a likely communist takeover, an American general gave Dr Streimer the task of transferring almost three hundred children and seriously ill patients to safety. As a result, Bettina and her husband were part of the first group of refugees to leave Shanghai.

I paid for my coffee and walked away from the bay and the enormous houses that surrounded it. Bettina’s street was dominated by gnarled plane trees with flaky bark. I opened a white wrought-iron gate and rang the doorbell of the small house. Bettina, who appeared in the doorway, looked less fit than she had when I met her in the museum. ‘I have an infection in my leg,’ she told me, limping ahead to a living room where I immediately imagined myself in a Viennese teahouse. Cream furniture was arranged on a pink carpet. A collection of antique porcelain cups in a glass case caught my eye. Meissen, I guessed, from Germany. ‘No, no,’ Bettina reacted irritably when I asked her if they were a family heirloom. ‘We left with absolutely nothing, remember?’ Her mother had put the collection together after the war.

A delicious smell was wafting through from the kitchen. ‘I made some Fettkuchen,’ Bettina said, putting a dish with butterfly-like pastries down on the table, ‘from an old German recipe.’

‘You were on your way to Australia,’ I said, reminding her where her story had finished. Bettina poured the coffee.

‘A few of the patients that had been entrusted to my husband’s care were in a very bad state. Especially Mr Bergmann, who had a serious heart condition. In Hong Kong we were going to transfer to an Australian ship, but it turned out to have been requisitioned by the navy.’ First they had to camp in the harbour. The British authorities in Hong Kong refused to issue transit visas to the Streimers and their patients. They were stuck on the wrong side of customs.

‘Then another member of the Kadoorie family came to our aid. This one was a cousin of the Kadoorie who had founded the Jewish school in Shanghai. Another multimillionaire. He talked the Brits into admitting us and cleared a whole floor of the Peninsula Hotel, the most beautiful hotel in Hong Kong, which he owned.’ Bettina smiled. ‘We were given the use of two ballrooms to set camp beds up in. The men slept in one and the women in the other.’

Dr Streimer visited every shipping company in Hong Kong in search of a ship to take them to Australia. ‘But a lot of big ships had been sunk during the war. There were mines everywhere and you could only sail in daylight. Small coasters were still operating, but they could only take two or three people in one go.’ They had no choice but to see off a few patients at a time, so that the group gradually grew smaller. Bettina and Dr Streimer had to stay with the deathly ill Mr
Bergmann. No ship’s captains were prepared to take him on board and the British authorities absolutely refused to allow him to stay. They had been at the Peninsula for more than a year when Dr Streimer met the captain of the *Taiping*. He was willing to risk it, on the condition that Dr Streimer accepted all responsibility for his patient.

‘On the way we got caught in a typhoon. For eight days, we were tossed to and fro on the waves. Everybody was as sick as a dog.’ But Mr Bergmann survived the voyage. The *Taiping* reached the coast of Australia safely; sailing into Sydney harbour, Bettina cried her eyes out. ‘I had said goodbye to my parents and aunts. They had gone to America. They couldn’t get permission to come to Australia, and my husband and his parents couldn’t get a visa for the US. I was an only child; my family meant the world to me. Now I felt all alone in a completely foreign country.’

Dr Streimer, who was so successful in Shanghai, was at a complete loss in Sydney. His Viennese qualifications were not accepted. To gain accreditation he had to do an additional three-year course at the University of Sydney. The fees were enormous. What’s more, they needed to support Dr Streimer’s eighty-year-old parents. Bettina worked day and night nursing to make ends meet. ‘They were terrible years,’ she said, shaking her head, before adding, ‘But there were others who were much worse off.’

One of them was Dr Sonnabend, a concentration camp survivor who had studied with her husband. He lived in an attic with his child and wife, who spent all day doing piecework on a rattling sewing machine. ‘There was no quiet corner for him to sit; the man could not study at all.’ A large proportion of the group of Jewish doctors dropped out in the very first year. ‘Talented, highly educated people like Dr Sonnabend had to go and work in a factory, while inland Australia was suffering a tremendous shortage of doctors.’ Even after passing with honours, Dr Streimer couldn’t work, because only ten foreign doctors were given a work permit each year. ‘They put all the names in a hat and pulled out ten,’ Bettina recalled. Dr Streimer wasn’t one of the lucky ones.

‘We had to sit through another twelve months of looking after my husband’s parents. I was overloaded with worries. When I heard the bad news I was pregnant. I lost my baby soon after.’ A year later the papers were finally in order. The Streimers bought a house in Bondi, where most of the people from Shanghai had settled, and opened a practice. Bettina did the biopsies and blood tests, having qualified as a medical lab assistant in the meantime. ‘We borrowed every penny. We didn’t have a dollar of our own and the interest at the time was ten per cent. We had to work day and night to pay it back.’

After a year a son was born. ‘He played in our back yard with the kids of the other people we knew from Shanghai. The grandmothers looked after them – our
generation had no time for any of that; we had to work.’ Bettina’s friends made model
garments on a second-hand sewing machine. Their husbands took them to shops for
orders. Some of the couples started a deli or milk bar. Life was constant work.

Still, Bettina’s most beautiful memories date from that period. ‘We all lived
together in Bondi and we visited each other every day. We ate cakes, drank tea,
played cards. We relied on each other’s company. None of us had any money. Our
kids loved soccer. After a while we had a Viennese soccer club with a clubhouse.
Sunday was soccer day. The Hakoah club came to Bondi. We used to go there to
dance and let our hair down. Everyone knew each other. At Christmas we went to
the Blue Mountains, renting three or four holiday homes next to each other. There
was always someone with a truck we could fit the whole group and all our gear in.’

Bettina fell silent; a dispirited expression had crossed her face. ‘The group of Jews
from Shanghai is disappearing,’ she said sadly. ‘They are almost all dead now. The
last time I went to the Hakoah Club was five years ago and I didn’t know anyone
anymore. Nowadays most of the members are Russian Jews; they speak Russian
together. Maybe they went through things I can’t understand behind the Iron
Curtain, I don’t know, but I never had much contact with them. That last time in the
Hakoah Club I saw Peppi Weiss, one of the club’s Viennese founders, playing a
pokie. He’d been a patient of my husband’s in Shanghai already and often came to
the surgery in Bondi. I knew he had asthma and had recently lost his wife. He didn’t
look comfortable at all standing there at that poker machine. I walked up to a boy
who was working there and said, “Get Mr Weiss a chair! Do you know who that
is?” I felt terrible about everything that had been lost.’

Bettina looked out at her garden. ‘Ah,’ she said hastily, anxious to put her gloomy
words in perspective. ‘Dead trees always get a new shoot. Fortunately. The world
goes on.’

Her son Jeffrey had become a psychiatrist and taught at the University of Sydney.
Like his parents, he was on the go day and night, combining studies, work and
family. His daughters were the first generation of Streimers who were able to take
things easier. ‘A medical career is just too hard,’ Bettina concluded. ‘One of my
granddaughters did law, the other art history. The youngest plays beautiful violin.’
Dr Streimer’s love of music had come to fruition, two generations later.

IN MANY WAYS Bettina managed to create order in her cruelly disrupted life.
When her mother and aunts grew old in America, she brought them to Sydney.
Here, in her care, they spent their last years. ‘My father died in San Francisco; I
wasn’t able to do anything for him, but he still had my mother and his sisters.’ She
didn’t need to reproach herself on his account. She had revisited all of the German
and Chinese houses she had lived in, so that she could see them as more than just
places she had fled. Her son accompanied her to Shanghai. She visited the Ohel
Moishe synagogue, but their flat on Jessfield Road had been cleared for a roundabout. ‘And Hongkew still hasn’t got a sewerage system.’

In Frankfurt, Bettina met her former classmates at a Philanthropin reunion. Women had come from all over the world. Not one of them still lived in Germany. ‘We reminisced and sang Heimat songs. The mayor of Frankfurt came to meet us. He agreed with us that after the war Frankfurt became a business town; it lost its culture.’ That grieved Bettina, but she added optimistically, ‘I really fell in love with Vienna, my husband’s home town. They still have the theatres and concert venues we used to have in Frankfurt.’

Bettina had even visited the farm where she was born. It was in other hands. Shortly before leaving, and under great pressure, her father had sold the house and land for a paltry sum. The contract had proved binding. ‘That doesn’t matter,’ she said, brushing the injustice aside. She had visited the neighbours and got to know the new generation. She had managed to track down the address of the great granddaughter of the cook who had served the Strauss family so faithfully. The Catholic nuns were no longer there; the convent had been turned into an old folks’ home; things change, Bettina accepted that.

Of the ten Jewish families that had lived in the area, only two brothers had returned. She had spoken to them. She had made arrangements with a German official for the renovation of the Jewish cemetery and could now leave the dead behind with an easy heart. And the same man had also undertaken to restore the synagogue, which had been destroyed on Kristallnacht. The synagogue her father had rescued the Five Books of Moses from, at the last moment.

‘The Torah,’ Bettina said quietly. ‘I haven’t told you about the Torah yet.’ The books had been inside the mysterious package her father had taken to Shanghai, but only there had he revealed what he was carrying. When Bettina’s mother came to Sydney, the Torah was in her suitcase. Bettina found a home for them in the Great Synagogue of Sydney. ‘And then,’ she continued in a hoarse voice, ‘a fire broke out there five or so years ago. The books went up in flames. Only ashes were left.’ Bettina looked at me blankly.

‘Arson?’ I asked.

She raised her hands. ‘A short circuit, apparently.’

I could tell from her face that she didn’t believe it. ‘Terrible.’

Bettina nodded. ‘It can’t be helped.’

I IMAGINED BETTINA’S life as a big, complicated piece of embroidery with all of the threads finished off neatly, and yet with an enormous hole in the middle: the loss of the Torah. She went into the kitchen to make some fresh coffee, and I stood
up to look at the paintings on the walls. I hadn’t been able to see them properly from the dining table but the golden frames had raised expectations of something romantic. Flowers, a castle on the Rhine, paintings in keeping with a pink and cream Viennese teahouse. I was wrong. They were small human figures in vast Australian landscapes where the only shade was provided by sparse gum trees.

‘I love the Australian light too much,’ Bettina said, standing with the coffeepot in her hand. I had just asked her whether she missed Europe and would prefer to live in Vienna. ‘Europe’s too dark.’ No, she was an Australian now, even if that wasn’t something she tended to dwell on. ‘I am too busy for things like that.’ She had only just been able to squeeze my visit in between two other appointments. When she wasn’t on duty at the museum, she visited schools to tell children about the Holocaust. The next day she was flying to Melbourne to attend a meeting of the anti-cancer foundation she was involved in.

Over eighty, and with a bad leg – wasn’t it time, I wondered, that she started taking things a little easier?

Bettina looked at me reproachfully. ‘People must make themselves useful,’ she said. ‘Otherwise there’s no point living.’

Bettina Streimer died on August 2010.

Carolijn Visser originally wrote this in Dutch, in Miss Concordia: Women Around the World (Amsterdam, 2006). Her memoir ‘Food and prayer’ was published in Griffith REVIEW 27: Food Chain.

David Colmer is an Australian writer and translator based in Amsterdam. He won the 2009 NSW Premier’s Translation Prize for his body of work and in 2010 his translation of Gerbrand Bakker’s The Twin won the prestigious IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

This translation was supported by the Dutch Foundation for Literature.
TWO months before my husband, John, died of secondary bone cancer, I asked him if it would be all right if I took a few pictures of him in bed. I was not looking to add to our collection of photographs of us as a couple. I wanted permission to photograph his primary tumour. In his calm way John consented to my request, and with what upper body strength remained he propped himself up as straight in bed as his besieged spine would permit.

When we think of someone being in bed, we tend to imagine the person lying down. But John’s primary tumour bulged from his sacrum like a loaf of ciabatta, and for months lying on his back had been impossible. Due to the spread of metastases through his pelvis and femurs, he had gradually lost the use of his legs and was no longer able to walk. His right thigh, swollen out of all symmetry with his left, billowed in front of him like a sail.

Despite almost constant pain from the tumour pressing on the nerves in his spinal cord, John shifted onto his left side, and I took a handful of pictures that captured the distortion of his lower back and right leg into an exaggerated S-shape. I remember being struck by how sanguine he was about my desire to look at him through a camera lens. He stared straight ahead, asked no questions as I clicked the shutter.

My sudden need to take these pictures surprised me. We had plenty of framed photographs of us in healthier times scattered around our home. Perhaps my impulse masked my accelerating distress, and I hoped to slow the march of John’s disease by capturing its most obvious sign within a viewfinder. I was looking to record the evidence of the foreign invasion of John’s body, of the destroyer attacking bones, and lives. That cancerous mass of tissue in my husband’s back was slowly twisting him towards death, and all I could do was take its portrait.
Most disturbing was my suspicion that, while John still breathed, I was using the camera to help me begin to think about him in the past tense. He seemed to understand and accept that I would need these photos. To look at them in the days to come, when they would exist and he would not. In my distress, I took the photographs in the belief that the proof they provided would help me make sense of the extraordinary. That they might help me tell myself the story of what had happened – to him, to us – and that I might understand it.

When my husband and I looked on the computer at the images I had taken of him, our respective reactions could not have been more different. John was curious to see for the first time what to now he could only feel. He had accepted what was happening to him, and saw the pictures simply as proof of the reality of his disease. But I, who saw his tumour every day, felt only shock and shame. Despite my familiarity with John’s body, the act of framing it exaggerated his frailty. Using my privileged viewpoint, I had inadvertently transformed my husband into a medical subject. The photographs made John look to me – the person who knew him best – in the same way he might appear to one of his specialists. I had anticipated feeling more distant, relying on the camera’s ability to keep me simultaneously close to and remote from my subject. I had hoped that taking photos would somehow help ameliorate my fear. But my tactics failed miserably. I achieved the distance I sought, but it only reinforced my helplessness and rage at what was happening to my husband’s body and, by extension, to our life together. Suddenly I felt not like a wife but a voyeur, and ashamed.

EMBEDDED WITH AMERICAN marines in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province in August 2009, the Associated Press photographer Julie Jacobson took a picture of Lance Corporal Joshua M Bernard shortly after a rocket-propelled grenade mortally wounded him. Jacobson, approximately twenty metres away from the injured marine, photographed the moment when members of his unit ran to his side to help him. Although evacuated within minutes, Bernard died of his wounds the same day.

US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates urged the AP not to release the photo for distribution, and Bernard’s family twice asked for the photo not to be published. The New York Times was one of a few news outlets that chose to publish the photo, which was titled ‘Death of a Marine’ even though Bernard was still alive at the time it was taken. The response was immediate, and it polarised into the usual camps – one defending the newspaper’s right to publish images that depicted the reality of war, the other protesting the right to privacy of the dead Marine’s family. The public debate was so heated that it led to a tweaking of official military policy for embedded media.

I saw ‘Death of a Marine’ for the first time in late 2010, when I read that the photo had won Jacobson the 2010 Galloway Award for military reporting, one of photojournalism’s highest accolades. The photo is blurry, and taken from an
understandable distance with a telephoto lens, but there’s no mistaking Bernard’s near-severed leg or the profuse bleeding as his fellow marines rush to his aid. The Galloway Award judges described her photo slideshow and accompanying narration as a ‘gripping tale of combat’ that showed flying bullets and the efforts of Bernard’s comrades to keep him alive.

On the AP blog Jacobson wrote of her experience: ‘I shot images that day well aware that those images could very possibly never see the light of day. In fact I was sure of it. But I still found myself recording them…I was recording his impending death, just as I had recorded his life moments before walking the point in the bazaar. Death is a part of life and most certainly a part of war. Isn’t that why we’re here? To document for now and for history the events of this war?’

Jacobson’s comment about her desire to ‘record…his impending death’ startled me, because I realised that was exactly what I was doing photographing John’s body. But my act was private and domestic, the result of a relationship of intimacy and trust. I could be certain that my photos would never be published, because they were mine to choose what to do with. Jacobson, employed by a global press organisation, has no such power. The photos she took were not hers to publish or to keep to herself. Similarly, I tried to give John as much dignity as the circumstances would permit. War photography admits no dignity for its wounded subjects.

I wondered whether the New York Times would have published the photo if Lance Corporal Bernard had somehow survived the attack. Or if he was lying in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, alive but with multiple amputations, disabled and striving with daily physical therapy to regain some autonomy in his life. And if so, whether Jacobson would have won that award. Every photo records loss – Roland Barthes saw death in every photograph he looked at – but it seems that photographs of war casualties are easier to process if the subject is dead rather than disabled. A photo of a dead soldier reminds us that it cannot change anything, that it cannot conjure life out of death; but it is somehow less confronting than a picture of a ‘wounded warrior’, a living casualty of war. I suspect that, whether in public or in private, suffering and sacrifice are more palatable and admirable in retrospect.

In public, images of suffering are mostly confined to art museums, where the statues of the Pietà define the genre. In the media, pictures of disabled or damaged bodies are generally permissible only as images of conflict or destitution, from remote corners of the world. In Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), Susan Sontag argues that we have become so accustomed to this strict media diet that we expect to see pictures of diseased or injured bodies only from distant places: the Congo, Darfur, Libya, Iraq. Digital pictures of anonymous civilian bodies suffering the wounds of famine, epidemic and war, rather than the bodies of soldiers sent by the governments we elected.
Fewer than half a dozen graphic photos of dead American soldiers were published in the first five years of the US invasion of Iraq, despite there being more than four thousand Coalition fatalities during the same period. Three years later, with the Coalition body count at more than seven thousand, the number of wounded soldiers in their tens of thousands, and a tally of civilian dead that defies belief, the pictorial censorship of our current wars continues. Gail Buckland, a professor of photographic history at Cooper Union in New York, told the *New York Times* that our limited access to pictures of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan means that we are ‘more impoverished today than Americans were in the nineteenth century’, when battlefield photographs by the earliest ‘embedded’ journalists such as Mathew Brady and Timothy O’Sullivan documented the domestic atrocities of the Civil War. The Vietnam War was the most photographed conflict of the twentieth century, due to the unprecedented access granted photographers. But in our current wars a curious paradox seems to be at work – on the one hand, the proliferation of media channels all competing for viewers, readers and advertisers with a relentless parade of images; on the other, a striking absence of photographs and video of those dying and killed in combat. Despite editorial guidelines that regulate but hardly inhibit such photographs, newspaper editors seem loath to publish pictures of the gruesome truth of war.

Two examples cited by Clark Hoyt, then Public Editor for the *New York Times*, illustrate the ambivalence towards published photographs of the dead and dying. In January 2007, the photographers Robert Nickelsberg and Damien Cave were embedded with an army company helping an Iraqi unit search for weapons in Baghdad. Staff Sergeant Hector Leija, to whom the photographers had been talking to minutes earlier, was shot in the head. The two men helped evacuate Leija, and Nickelsberg followed the stretcher downstairs to an armoured vehicle, taking pictures. Leija died that morning. Four days later, when Leija’s family had been notified of his death, the *Times* published a photograph of him on the stretcher with another soldier’s hand covering the wound. Leija’s family was distressed by the coverage, and the army threatened to ban the photographers from embedding with the military. In stark contrast, João Silva’s 2006 photographs of Lance Corporal Juan Valdez-Castillo, a marine seriously wounded in Karma (near Fallujah) and rescued by Sergeant Jesse E Leach, led not to threats and outrage but to a medal for Leach.

Leija died, and Valdez-Castillo lived. Does the different response to the published photos boil down to the difference between life and death? Rescue and survival is a story with a hero, but death is not much of a story at all.

Photojournalists and historians alike remind us that photographs will help prevent us from forgetting, but I wonder if that’s partly just a convenient defence against the inevitable waning of public attention to the stories of individuals and groups who will always remain strangers to us. No one who has lost a friend or
family member to combat, disease, accident or plain old age ever forgets that person, though some details – the timbre of his voice, the exact shade of her hair colour – might fade. Photographs of those we love trigger feelings and memories, but not always. Sometimes, as Barthes discovered during his famous search among his photographs for a ‘true’ picture of his mother’s face after her death, they don’t even do that for us. Images of fallen and injured strangers occasionally outrage but rarely haunt us.

Perhaps I expect too much from photographs – or too much from myself when I look at them. Whether looking at ‘Death of a Marine’ or the photos of my husband’s cancer-ravaged body, I feel a range of useless emotions: anger and helplessness, pity and enervation. I wonder if through the act of observing I have exploited, or am colluding in the exploitation of, these differently wounded bodies; if the photographs are in some way pornographic; if they can ever be more than a monument to their own futility, and to the futility of the conflict or the disease they respectively represent.

I was relieved to find Sontag so generous on this point: ‘It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer enough, when we see these images,’ she writes. ‘Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalisations for mass suffering offered by established powers.’ But in the universe of private suffering, there is no rationalising, no governing logic, no lesson to learn.

One photojournalist who wants more from her work than a photo essay in a magazine is Nina Berman. She had heard reports from Iraq about soldiers being wounded, but realised she was seeing no images of them. Nor could she find any listings of the wounded from the Department of Defense or anywhere else. When she approached magazines and newspapers to suggest a story, they weren’t interested. Believing that mainstream news media had ignored its responsibility to cover all aspects of the experience of war, she decided to do it herself. Berman photographed soldiers seriously wounded in Iraq when they returned to the US, mostly in their homes, but also at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The result was the book Purple Hearts: Back from Iraq (Trolley).

Until Berman’s book was published, in 2004, the website of the Wounded Warrior Project, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to ‘honour and empower wounded warriors’, contained no pictures at all of its constituents. A representative approached Berman for permission to use her photographs on their website, to help raise funds for their programs for injured service members. In exchange, the organisation created (and still maintains) Berman’s website. Their collaboration raised more than $100,000. ‘The greatest casualty is being forgotten,’ waves the tagline like a flag across the top of the Wounded Warrior homepage.
*Purple Hearts* confronts the taboo on looking at pictures of bodies in pain. Berman’s photographs actively resist the ‘narrative of recovery’ that all too often accompanies photos of disabled bodies in order to ease the viewer’s own discomfort as she regards the suffering of others. Such narratives provide a context that might be acceptable to us, if not to the subject of the story. Thus, a soldier is typically filmed ‘recovering’ from his injuries in a physical therapy clinic, busily ‘overcoming’ his newly acquired disability. Images of wheelchair users are more acceptable if they belong to muscular Paralympic athletes who are trumpeted as having ‘defied the odds’ or ‘conquered’ their disability (always conveniently in the past tense), and now parade their medals as a ‘triumph of the human spirit’.

In every story of this type, the subject moves beyond personhood, becoming ‘a hero’ or ‘an inspiration’ to others, both exalted by his suffering and kept at a safe distance from the conscience of the viewer. A body in the process of ‘overcoming’ is a story that has no beginning, no end and no guilt by association. That Berman’s photographs were co-opted by the Wounded Warrior Project epitomises the mixed cultural messages about disabled bodies. The phrase ‘wounded warrior’ both elevates and sanitises the real struggles – physical, psychological, bureaucratic – of newly disabled soldiers with its soothing alliteration and lack of any specific war or government complicit in their wounds.

An effective antidote to claims of exploitation and ‘amputee porn’ is Berman’s accompanying text in *Purple Hearts* – not the photographer’s own narration (as in Julie Jacobson’s award-winning example) but the soldiers’ own words, transcribed from interviews with the author. Far from embittered, the soldiers mostly speak of their pride in having served their country, and of how they miss their mates back in Iraq. ‘It was the best experience of my life,’ says a combat engineer who lost his sight and one leg to a bomb. Specialist Jose Martinez, who suffered extensive burns to his face, head and body when the Humvee he was driving hit a landmine, and who spent his first year back from the war in and out of surgery, says without irony, ‘I’m this great picture of the army.’

PICTURES OF UNHEALTHY or damaged bodies, bodies in pain and bodies that suffer, remain taboo. But unlike the images of war or religious suffering that are sanctioned content for art museums and the public sphere, images of diseased, disfigured or disabled bodies are largely deemed a private atrocity, the province of the personal and domestic space. The messy realities of death and dying mostly remain the sombre privilege of carers and families, sequestered in private homes and public institutions.

There was no ‘overcoming’ my husband’s cancer, no triumph over his terminal illness. John died a few weeks after I took those photographs, and he remains the only other person who has seen them. They were – they are – part of my mourning,
and remain private, however quaint that concept has become. I never made prints of
them, and have looked at them only a few times on my computer screen. They are
too upsetting, for they remind me both of John’s suffering and of my own, very
different, distress.

But as the years pass, I still cannot bring myself to delete the series from my
computer. They are a silent reminder of how I participated in the process of his
dying; how I used technology to help me document it and to distance myself as he
slipped away; how helpless I was to alter the inexorable course of events – or to stop
looking.

Virginia Lloyd is a columnist and freelance writer who mentors memoir writers. She is the author of The
Young Widow’s Book of Home Improvement (UQP, 2008), which was excerpted in Griffith REVIEW 17:
Staying Alive.
FOR a moment he doesn’t recognise me. He stares at me, rheumy-eyed, then breaks into a smile.

‘Very nice,’ he says, ‘very nice.’

I’m in a suit and tie but he’s still in his pyjamas. Earlier, I’d spoken to the nurse. ‘He’s a bit stroppy this morning. Wouldn’t let us shower him. We tried to call you but your phone didn’t answer. We gave him a few drops under his tongue to calm him down. I hope that’s okay?’

‘Sure,’ I’d replied, glancing at my watch. ‘Anything for a quiet life.’

I take off my jacket and tie, and roll up my sleeves. He looks at me quizzically.

‘Come on,’ I say. ‘I’m going to give you a shower.’

‘I don’t need a shower,’ he replies, but I’m conscious of the time. We can’t be late today, so I gently steer him into the shower room. He protests but his aphasia and dementia muddy any coherent objection.

He’s still chatting to himself as I remove his top and two singlets, both of which are on backwards. I have to bend to remove his pyjama bottoms, while he steadies himself with his hand on my back. It’s not the greatest position for me to assume: a little too close to those areas of your ninety-year-old father’s torso that you’ve spent the last sixty years not contemplating. I turn on the shower and shepherd him toward the spray.

I look at his body. It’s bent now, and diminished, almost mummy-like. Bones protrude from his rounded back and, when I put my arm around him, his shoulders feel like a bunch of keys in a small cloth bag. His skin is parchment-thin and covered with a white thatch of body hair. His legs have atrophied; they are like sticks. His backside is flat and flabby, a newborn baby’s.
Is this the same body I remember, a body that carried me as a child effortlessly as we swam in a cool grey sea? Is this the same body that boxed, played football, knocked out the next-door neighbour and fathered children? Is this the body of an upright soldier and policeman? The frame that carried him through a world war, twice wounded?

‘I’ll do your back and chest, Dad, but you’ll have to do the other bits,’ I say.

‘Do my crack, will you?’ he says, blank-faced.

I know he’s winding me up. ‘I’m not doing your bloody arse,’ I say, laughing. ‘That’s your job.’

He looks at me and smiles. ‘What about this, then?’ he says, grabbing his shrivelled penis and tugging on it.

I still can’t quite get used to his newfound lack of inhibition. He was always such a modest man. Sexuality was only alluded to in slightly off-colour jokes, a way of distancing himself from any intimate discussion.

I look away. ‘Go on, you silly old bugger. Get on with it.’ Now I’m the modest one.

He laughs again and starts vigorously soaping the assigned areas.

‘All of it,’ I say. ‘Not just that bit.’

I towel him down while he grins and grunts approval. I almost expect him to shake himself like a dog when I finish.

‘Bloody marvellous,’ he says, flushed and smiling.

In front of the mirror I lather up his creased face and start to shave him.

‘Christ,’ he says, when I nick his top lip.

I apologise, but shaving him is difficult, like knotting a tie on someone else, and complicated by a craggy and unpredictable facial landscape.

In his room I manoeuvre him into his socks and underpants, and get him to stand while I put on his shirt. I pull up his grey serge trousers and slip on his favourite brown loafers. I’ve brought along one of my ties.

‘Is this okay?’ I ask.

‘Bloody beautiful,’ he says.

I can tell he’s enjoying this.

‘Where’s your comb?’ I say. He looks at me conspiratorially, winks and taps the side of his nose. He beckons me over to his bedside cabinet and opens the bottom drawer, revealing a dozen or so identical black combs. This is done with theatrical solemnity but it slows down the proceedings, and I’m starting to get impatient.
‘Where did you get all of those?’ I ask, knowing full well the answer, but he taps his nose and winks again.

He’s become a hoarder of late: in addition to the combs there are dozens of towels stolen from the laundry, four cans of shaving cream, a collection of used disposable razors and a drawer full of incontinence pads, all of which he offers to me as gifts on my weekly visits. Nobody else is allowed to touch these items. To do so and to ignore the warning on his clinical notes (hoarder, may become aggressive) is to invite his wrath, as the new ward nurse, from Kenya, found out last week.

Reminded of this episode, his face clouds over. ‘Black bitch,’ he says angrily.

‘Hey, that’s enough of that talk,’ I say sternly. For a moment he looks like a chastised child, embarrassed and defiant at the same time. Age and dementia have removed any sense of propriety or self-censure, and inhibitions and prejudices that were once kept in check now emerge, often forcefully.

‘Come on,’ I say. ‘Stand in front of the mirror.’

I slip on the blazer with his regimental crest on the breast pocket, and stand back. He looks distinguished, the formality of his dress seeming to add more structure, more dignity to his appearance. He’s always been aware of how he looks, and even in his current condition he still chooses his daily wardrobe – though, it must be said, with varying degrees of creativity. Last week, as I undressed him for his shower, the various items of his wardrobe were carefully chosen but the effect was somewhat compromised by a sleeveless cardigan under his shirt and a pair of Hawaiian-patterned short pyjama bottoms worn over the tops of his trousers.

‘Are we right?’ I say, extracting his wheelchair from behind the door.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Of course. Let’s go.’

As we emerge from his room the staff form a respectful phalanx of approval. They know this is a special day, and heads turn. Most have never seen him presented like this, and I think some are a little surprised.

‘Good luck,’ one of the nurses shouts. My father returns their good wishes with a regal wave and a smile. He’s lapping it up.

OUTSIDE IN THE car park, the autumn sun casts deep shadows.

‘Where’s your car?’ he says squinting in the glare.

I point it out in the distance. He’s seen it many times before but each viewing excites him.

‘Oh Christ. Black,’ he says. ‘Bloody beautiful.’ It seems nothing can go wrong today.

My wife is waiting in the car. Nursing homes make her edgy; the smell of the wards and the proximity to frailty – to death – unsettles her. His eyes light up when
he sees her, even though he’s never quite sure where she sits in the female pantheon. Wife, mother, sister, daughter: they are all interchangeable entities now.

‘Hello, Denzil. Don’t you look smart?’ she says.

He beams again.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she says to me, glancing over my father’s shoulder while she helps him into the back seat. ‘And your bloody shirt’s all wet.’

I shake my head. ‘Don’t ask.’

We pull out of the driveway and into the traffic. My father has not stopped chattering since we dicked him into the back seat. It’s largely nonsense talk – his own jabberwocky language, its twisted vocabulary eerily woven through the more familiar rhythms of English, and punctuated by facial expressions and body language that at least give us some clue to his mood, if not to the meaning of his monologues.

As we join the expressway he starts reciting a series of seemingly meaningless words and sounds. ‘Tim,’ he says. ‘Wag, fidle, cabon, dij, cuv.’ As the traffic thins, he pauses, but soon starts up again. ‘Stu, jark.’

My wife looks at me, puzzled.

‘Number plates,’ I say softly. ‘He’s reading number plates.’

‘Nice trees,’ he says, and then starts whistling softly, inwardly.

My wife shoots me another glance and shrugs her shoulders. I clear my throat.

‘You know where we’re going today, Dad?’ I say. He keeps whistling and doesn’t answer.

‘I say, Dad, you know where we’re going today, don’t you?’

He pauses. ‘Hmm,’ he murmurs, his fragile concentration broken. I can see his confused face in the rear-vision mirror. He catches my mirrored, enquiring eye.

‘Momma,’ he cries triumphantly a moment later. ‘Momma.’

‘That’s right,’ I say. ‘Dorothy.’

Momentarily he’s lost in his thoughts, but soon the whistling starts again.

‘Thoroughly enjoying myself,’ he says, rubbing his hands together briskly – and then, under his breath, ‘I’m thoroughly enjoying myself.’

I ponder his reaction and wonder whether he understands the significance of the day. My sister and I worried that he might be aggressive or angry, his common reaction of late to events that confuse and upset him, but once again he has confounded us. He’s spent his life confounding us: at once feckless and stubborn, drunk or sober, distant yet caring, vulnerable but strong, an enigma whose self remained buried within, far from the caring curiosity of his family.
As a child, I knew somehow that he was not a settled man. Ill at ease with others, he disguised his awkwardness with a quick wit and a fragile bonhomie. By the time I was in my teens I had lost interest in his inner complexities, exhausted by my attempts to understand him. As he further descended into alcoholism my connection with him became more tenuous. Had it not been for my mother’s total dependence on him I would have probably severed my connection with him there and then, but in those days wives rarely left hopeless husbands, preferring a joyless marriage to the perceived shame and uncertainty of divorce.

When he was in his sixties, perversely, he gave up the booze and cigarettes overnight. ‘The contrary old bastard,’ my sister said, but we were pleased when he and my mother retired to a small town on the far north coast. I’d bought them a modest house by the sea and told them it was theirs for as long as they wanted it. It seemed like a new life, free of care, free of fear, and I hoped it would make them happy. And for a while it did. Predictably though, the novelty waned and they returned to Sydney, bored with the bleakness of their own company, hoping for another new start.

I GLANCE AT him as the afternoon sun strikes his worn face and know he will never be able to explain his life to me now. It’s too late. His memories are all but gone. I realised some time ago that we both missed a fleeting moment of curiosity and recognition.

For most of my adult life I faulted him for our lack of intimacy, but now I know I’m as much to blame as he was. Why was my curiosity so self-serving, and why did I save it in the main for the trite and the spectacular? Why did it take me so long to understand that a caring curiosity for a loved one is the ultimate intimacy?

So much has happened in the last three years: my father’s accident; my mother’s swift and brutal decline into full-blown dementia, tearing apart already fragile and tentative lives. How quickly things change and how quickly we are forced to evaluate our lives. How efficiently dementia has taken my mother and father while tantalising us with their physical presence. With a futile urgency I longed to unscramble his thoughts, to make sense of things, to draw closer.

Just after his accident I sat by his bed each day and talked with him. Even at this point dementia had him, broken and bruised, in its grasp – but we were able to have a fragile, disjointed conversation. We talked of his childhood and his mother and his village in Cornwall. He spoke of his seven years as a young soldier; of fear and of death and of the fighting in France. He told me of his time lying badly wounded in a field in Normandy, blood-soaked and alone, life draining from him.

He told me things I’d never heard him speak of before. Drawn to his past and curious to locate his memories, I visited the field in Caen the following year. In the middle of a bitter Normandy winter, overcome by the spectral
presence of my father and all those young men who suffered and died on this spot, I fell to my knees on the frost-hardened earth and cried insonably.

Last week, as I sat with him on his balcony, I asked him to read the front page of the newspaper. I do this sometimes, but it is for my benefit, not his. His aphasia does not affect his reading skills, though his comprehension is muddled. I ask him to do it so that I can hear my father talk sensibly again, string more than five or six cogent words together, cut through the confused babble. I do it to remember him.

Sometimes too, he remembers me. I know he regards me as a familiar face who takes him for a drive and showers him but probably, most importantly, as someone who sits and listens to his earnest talk. I think it makes him happy and if he is happy, then so am I. I no longer need him to call me his son. To expect him to do so is more to do with my guilt, my conceit.

A few weeks ago, though, in his room, he suddenly stopped talking. He looked at me strangely and then beckoned me over. He struggled out of his chair as I moved toward him. Momentarily he lost his balance, steadied himself and then threw his arms around me.

‘My big darling boy,’ he said, gripping me and holding my face close to his rough, stubbled cheek. And then he kissed me. I held him even tighter while the tears stung my face.

‘ARE YOU OKAY?’ my wife says. She touches my arm, worried. ‘Don’t think too much about it. You need to be strong today. You’ll be all right. You always are.’

We round the corner, pass through the wrought-iron gates and follow the signs to the car park. There are a few familiar faces milling around the chapel, mainly friends of mine and of my sister. Some remember my parents from our childhood; others are there to add support. There are few of my parents’ contemporaries: most have died or drifted away.

An old family friend approaches. ‘Hello, Denzil,’ he says. ‘Long time, no see.’

My father smiles and shakes hands vigorously. He has no idea who this person is but he replies all the same. ‘Yes indeed, long time.’

Others gather around him as I push his wheelchair into the throng. I can see that some are shaken by his appearance, having last seen him thirty years ago, robust and imposing. Most have fond memories and are just happy to see him.

I leave him with a group of friends while I seek out my sister.

‘Are we okay?’ she says. I nod and point out those gathered around the wheelchair.

She laughs. ‘Look at the old bugger. I think he’s really enjoying himself.’
MY MOTHER DIED on 15 April 2010, aged ninety-one, her body and mind ravaged. She weighed 30 kilograms. Even her nappy wouldn’t fit her.

She wanted to die. We wanted her to die. For a year or so before the dementia took away her understanding, she would point out frail and diminished patients in the nursing home. ‘Don’t you ever let me get like that,’ she would say; but we did, watching her deteriorate without dignity, without hope.

My father would walk the corridor of the nursing home, from his room to hers, and sit by her bedside for most of the day. He would look at her, tut-tut and shake his head ruefully. Somehow that said it all, a poignant summation of her condition.

I’d never planned a funeral before and the prospect filled me with dread, but my sister and I negotiated the arcane rituals, knowing that certain things needed to be done. We met with the undertaker – or bereavement consultant, as they now prefer to be called – and viewed our mother’s waxen corpse, coiffed and tidied in a satindlined coffin. I kissed my mother’s cold forehead and held my sister’s hand.

In the funeral home’s courtyard afterwards my sister shook her head angrily and said through tears, ‘What the fuck is it all about? I mean, is that it?’

WE WHEEL MY father into the chapel and immediately he is transfixed by my mother’s photograph on the incongruous plasma TV screen looming above the lectern. He ignores the white coffin covered in cream roses on the curtained stage. Someone cues the music and the images on the screen shuffle through an organised sequence: my mother as a sepia schoolchild, baking a cake; a portrait at twenty-one, during the war; a photograph of her and my father on a windswept beach.

‘Who’s that handsome bloke?’ I whisper, and he looks at me, confused. ‘It’s you,’ I say, ‘on the beach at Bonny Hills.’ He shakes his head, failing even to recognise his own image.

The family occupies the front row: me and my wife, my sister, her husband, her two grown children and Denzil in his wheelchair. He’s solemn now, the music and the serious faces of the mourners conspiring to subdue his ebullience. The celebrant steps down from the stage and makes a special point of greeting my father. She seizes both his hands and talks to him quietly with her face close to his. He accepts this intimacy from a stranger with dignity, composing himself as she goes back to the lectern.

After a while the room stills and the strains of ‘Jerusalem’ fill the chapel. The celebrant speaks of a woman she never knew.

Soon it is my turn to speak. I mount the stage, grasp the microphone with one hand and shuffle my notes with the other. I look up and scan the expectant, half-
empty room. My father regards me intently, but as I catch his gaze I have to look away. I’m barely maintaining my composure, and I know that looking for too long at his innocent and confused face will tip me over the edge.

‘My mother was born in a small village in rural Essex in 1919…’

My voice seems oddly distant, but it’s strong and I press on, trying to avoid thinking about what I am saying, trying to erect a barrier between my words and my grief. I talk of my mother’s harsh upbringing, of wartime England and of the opportunities that eluded young women like her during those tumultuous times. I recall our childhood, our escape from drab postwar England and the voyage to Australia.

‘For my mother, this five-week voyage was a brief chance to retrieve some of that lost opportunity – a glimpse at another life. She embraced it. I remember her, perfumed and glamorous, sweeping into our cabin to tuck us in and wish us goodnight with the sweet smell of sherry on crimson lips and the rustle of her flared black satin dress as it brushed the doorway on her way out. One evening my parents were invited to dine at the captain’s table, an event that she spoke of proudly for years to come. There were a thousand passengers on that voyage, a fact that didn’t go unnoticed by my mother. “It’s not just anybody who gets invited to the captain’s table,” she would say.’

And then I am finished. I choke on my last words.

‘Safe journey, my love.’

I look toward my father. I realise that I am looking for comfort, for a sign of his approval. I am twelve again.

My nephew, a man-boy, speaks next of his grandmother, but he is overcome by sadness and finishes his childhood recollections barely able to speak, tears rolling down his face.

My sister too fights back tears, but stiffens and delivers her eulogy. She talks of the love between a mother and a daughter, and I realise it is a love a man will never fully understand. Her words hang in the air as she descends the stage and takes her seat. I draw her close to me as she carefully blots her tears.

The celebrant asks us all to stand, but indicates that my father should stay seated in his wheelchair. He’s having none of it, and attempts to get to his feet. There’s a moment of panic as his chair starts to move from under him but I rush to the aisle, hook my arm under his armpit and drag him upright. He holds my arm tightly, stands ramrod straight.

My mother’s coffin is theatrically retrieved by an invisible mechanism and, as the curtains close around her, the music begins again. This time it’s another of my mother’s favourites, an instrumental version of Psalm 23.
When we were children, our house was always filled with song. Both my mother and father had good voices, but my father’s deep baritone was a cut above. In his younger days he had been asked to sing professionally, but he lacked confidence and self-deprecatingly dismissed these approaches. Even now, in the nursing home’s choir and music therapy classes, his voice can turn heads.

He starts to sing, quietly at first, then rising to a rich, sonorous chant. ‘The Lord’s my shepherd, I shall not want…’

He is word-perfect, the aphasia and dementia temporarily banished. Behind him, the congregated are at first unaware of the source of the singing, but when it becomes obvious that it’s my father’s voice women weep quietly and men clear their throats and look at the floor. He leans on me and I hold him tight, feeling his voice resonate and rumble through his fragile frame, seeping into me, making us one.

It is in this moment that I realise I am closer to him now than I have ever been. It is an imperfect closeness, tempered by guilt and lost opportunities, and confused by the unexplained; but it is closeness all the same. I know now that there is no need for forgiveness, only for understanding. Whatever or whoever made him the man he is also made me. He is my father. I am his son.

---

Brian Geach’s writing has been published in many newspapers and journals, including The Australian and the New York Review of Books. Based in Sydney, he is an internationally awarded photographer. He gained a master’s in writing from James Cook University in 2010 and is working on a memoir about his relationship with his father.
Hospice
Laura Jan Shore

You never tire of the sky,
captured within the frame and sash,
spun sugar, your tongue can almost taste
before it melts away.

You bask in brushstrokes
milky blue,
where white fire congeals
into shaggy buffalo and swans.

Mornings are pale
to match the tint of these four walls
and you imagine you’re afloat
in a bedroom built of sky.

We wheel you through floral gardens,
but your camera’s pointed up.
Your album all blue and white.

When lightning ruptures mackerel sky
you can not turn away
but watch as spears of wet
glance off the glass.

You plunge with them
to permeate
layer by layer, the dark.

Visitors carry the wind
wafting out of pockets.
They are a jumble of colour and chatter.
But your eyes slide to the crimped striations of grey.

In the mirrored black, tonight,
lie a few pricks of light and the thin moon
of your pillowed cheek
wells upward.
A NEW male human being entered the universe a year ago, with one-eighth of his genetic material identical to my mother’s and one-eighth identical to my father’s. Those millions of delicate fragments of code, assembled around a hundred years ago, were duplicated perfectly, then duplicated perfectly again and finally copied into a microscopic drop of cell matter, to begin yet another voyage through space and time and consciousness with its own unique human identity. It is a mystery, to me. But tens of thousands of mysteries like that happen every day.

Within a hundred years the billions of molecules that make up this lively, cheerful, noisy creature will disperse and never reassemble again: except for that tiny fraction that may end up in another human’s genetic make-up to travel down the centuries, mixing with other genetic material and incarnating again and again.

The need to mate and produce children is hard-wired in us, like the need to eat and drink. Without that permanent universal instinct the human race would have become extinct before it had become human.

Human infants, unlike the young of most other animals, are vulnerable for many years after they are born. The function of the family is to protect and nurture children through that period. Family is older than humanity, and has nothing to do with any particular society, culture or religion.

The separate and very different instincts to mate and to nurture children are both essential for the survival of the human race. It seems to me that there is no philosophical, social or moral meaning – or any real purpose – behind this. It’s just that without this complicated mix of instincts and social structures, there wouldn’t be anybody here to talk about it.

In most societies the instinct to mate and thus to breed results in sexual desire, love and bonding, which results in family, and family eventually makes possible what we call civilisation. In Civilization and its Discontents (1931) Freud says that civilisation is ‘a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single
human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one
great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has to happen, we do not know; the
work of Eros is precisely this.’

Nations, yes; but sadly the unity of mankind remains an illusory hope.

THEORY IS FINE, but what we think about family is conditioned by our
experiences growing up within our own families. My father, Frederick, has been
dead for most of my life. I still dream about him, from time to time, but less now that
I have become older than he ever got to be: he died at forty-eight.

He was born in Rylstone, in country New South Wales, in 1914, the youngest of
five children – three other boys and a girl. His father was a wheat farmer, and when
my father was a baby his parents gave him away to his aunt – his father’s sister – to
bring up, in Moruya, a coastal dairying town three hundred miles away. Aunt Em
was childless; she was a nervous, anxious woman.

My father hardly ever saw his real parents. People didn’t travel as much then,
and the highways were mostly corrugated dirt roads, dusty in the heat and muddy
in the rain. In the 1920s his parents may have had a tractor, or perhaps a truck to
help with the farming, but I doubt they had a car to drive about in.

And after all, they hardly knew the boy.

As a boy he must have been a rather sad figure, as I see him, with few
friends. He studied hard at school, and won a scholarship to a state-run
agricultural boarding school at Yanco, near Leeton in central-western New
South Wales, three hundred miles away from both his real parents and his
adoptive parents. He graduated with a teachers’ college scholarship, trained,
and taught at a small school at Bodalla, twenty miles from his childhood
home. He met the mother of two of the children at the school. Her husband
had left her years ago, and she and her boy and girl were living at home
with her parents. Her father was an important man in the district, the
manager of the Bodalla Company, a large and wealthy dairy farming co-
operative.

My father married her. Soon he was transferred to a one-teacher school at
Bredbo, a tiny hamlet on the Southern Highlands, where I was born.

After five years my father managed to get a transfer back to his home town of
Moruya. The school was much larger, with a dozen teachers, and took children from
all around the district. My father loved teaching, and was good at it, rising to be
deputy headmaster. But he was also driven by a need to have a farm. He saved his
money, borrowed some more money and bought a farm, but before long was asked
to choose between his teaching career and the farm. If you were a schoolteacher, you
couldn’t have another job. He chose farming, and gave up teaching.
A business partnership with a distant relative followed, allowing him to buy another farm, then an adjoining farm, then an abandoned cheese factory, which was soon converted into a soft-drink factory. The farms did okay in the good seasons, and badly in the bad seasons; I remember a terrible flood that washed away the only bridge into town, and one summer there was a savage bushfire that destroyed and blackened the bush for fifty miles around our house, but the house was spared. And the soft-drink factory did well; it’s still doing well, over fifty years later.

My father was a kind man. As a teacher he was loved and remembered. He seemed to care especially for disadvantaged children, offering them patient encouragement and help. But he was always preoccupied, and he never said much to me about what he was thinking or feeling. He was driven by a particular purpose, but I only worked out what his motives were in my forties, when he’d been dead for twenty years. These insights came slowly, by adding things together, and I wonder whether he was ever conscious of what drove him so hard.

I came to realise that he wanted to show his father – his distant father, the father he loved but hardly knew, who had abandoned him – that he had done well at last, that he had learned agriculture, passed his exams and made good as a farmer, just like him. He was worthy of being loved. When he was about forty years old and business was going well he took a breather, and invited his parents – his real parents – to visit.

How long did it take them to travel the three hundred miles from Rylstone? A couple of days, perhaps, over the mountains, through the silent empty bush. I dimly remember them as a pair of shy strangers – the man tall and thin and grey, the woman plump and grey – with nothing much to say.

In my memory I have a picture of the two men, my father and my grandfather, leaning on our front gate, staring at the landscape. The hills there are covered with thick eucalypt forest; the bush stretches to the west, virtually uninhabited, for hundreds of miles. A leaden river crawls along the valley floor far below. The sky is a hard blue. The sun burns down. In this memory picture they are just staring, not saying anything.

What is there to say?

My mother was raised in Bodalla, a coastal country town. She was a shy woman with a pleasant, diffident manner. She had hardly any friends, except for her family. In her twenties she had married a journalist and went to live in Sydney. Her husband had been in World War I and drank too much as a result of what he had seen and lived through. They had two children, a girl and a boy, and then her husband disappeared on a drinking binge and was never seen again. She somehow raised the children, then met my father and married when her children were in their early teens. She was forty-one when I was born, in 1943.
At least, this is what she told me, and she told me as little as possible. She was what you might call a low-discloser. I never thought of my mother as a liar, but what she told me was untrue.

Many years after she died in her eighties, I discovered that it was not her first husband who had left her; she left him. She went home to the country, taking the children, and they lived in her parents’ house. She found a job as a telephonist and they somehow survived, partly on her salary and partly on the charity of her family.

Her husband visited them at one point, but didn’t stay long, and left. I wonder what he said to her. That he was sorry for his drinking, I suppose. And the children – how could he explain to them how or why his life, and their lives too, had fallen to pieces in his hands? I see him getting on the bus back to Sydney, a battered suitcase in one hand, his ticket in the other, blinking in the early morning sun, hungover again.

Then he disappears, forever.

I DREAM A lot about little children. They appear out of the dark, and they smile at me, that smile of pure exhilaration that only babies have, and they hug me around the neck. I need to protect them, to make sure they’re safe and well.

I’m half awake. From the kitchen I can hear sounds of my mother preparing breakfast. Somehow I’m a young boy again, at home, in my bed. The sun’s just coming up, shining through the curtain. Outside, in the valleys of deep bush, parrots are calling to each other. Everything is all right; everyone is alive.

When I wake up the children are gone. I think about distance, about being far from home, about wanting to leave and wanting to return, that exhausting action we call travel, or flight, or escape, or adventure, or homecoming. I see a boy grow into a man. I see myself fading back into the past, a once-familiar country that has grown strange and distant, that has somehow been obliterated. The farm is not there any more. My parents have been dead for decades. The house is empty.

This piece was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, and the Perth International Arts Festival as a catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition Raised by Wolves.

John Tranter has published more than twenty books of verse. His collection of new and selected poems, Urban Myths: 210 Poems (UQP), won the 2006 Victorian Premier’s award for poetry, the 2007 New South Wales Premier’s award for poetry, and the 2008 South Australian Premier’s awards for poetry and best book. His latest work is Starlight: 150 Poems (UQP, 2010). He is the founding editor of the free internet magazine Jacket (jacketmagazine.com) and the founder of the Australian Poetry Library project (poetrylibrary.edu.au). johntranter.com
Waking up
Counting my blessings
Toni Jordan

‘THERE are two types of people in the world, aren’t there, Aunty Tone?’ asks Bella, who is five going on thirty-five. It is the first week of 2011, and I’m babysitting my niece and nephew while my sister and her husband take a long-overdue holiday. I open one eye a smidge. She is standing in her princess pyjamas, hair a nest of auburn sleep curls, by my side of the bed. In one hand she holds a pink plastic horse by its silken tail. By the light coming through the window, it might be 4.30 or 5. In the morning.

‘Is that right, Belle?’ I say. See how my mouth moves, even though the best part of my brain is still asleep?

‘Yes.’ She is full of confidence, as always. She rocks backwards and forwards on her bare feet. I wonder if I can tempt her into bed with me, for a cuddle that may just turn into a quick nap. ‘There’s fast wakers and slow wakers,’ she says. ‘I’m a fast waker. So’s Mummy and Daddy. Will is a slow waker. Like you.’

‘Uh-huh,’ I say into the pillow.

‘Aunty Tone,’ she says. ‘When are you going to wake up?’

NOW THAT I am self-employed, I can indulge my passion for slow waking whenever I like. After all, if I work 10 to 6, or even 11 to 7, by myself, in my study, in my tracksuit, no one would know or care. All right: to be completely honest, often it’s 12 to 8. Sure, some days I teach classes, but those days are the exception and a novelty; it’s almost fun to get up, shower, dress and walk to the train pretending to be a proper productive member of society. For nineteen years I worked full-time in business hours, and now I can’t imagine how I ever made it to the office or the lab at a reasonable time every day. (My former colleagues might argue that I did not.) The up-teeth-shower-dress routine seemed like the curse of Sisyphus. When I worked as a university research assistant, I felt like crying every morning when the alarm went off. It was all I could do not to scream to the heavens: ‘I did this yesterday, for God’s sake! Will it never end?’
Now all I have to do in the morning is look after myself, and feed the dog. I don’t even have to make breakfast if I don’t want to. *I have no one else to look after.*

No one disturbs my sleep. Sleep is my Olympic event. When not babysitting, I fall quickly and wake almost precisely eight hours later, head on the same spot on the pillow, curled to the right in the same position. When I wake, *I have no one else to look after.* No one else to dress, or feed (aside from the dog), or get off to school. In the mornings, it’s all me, me, me. And still I can barely manage. *When am I going to wake up?*

I’M NOT VERY good at answering questions. Sometimes, at writers’ festivals, I don’t know what to say when I’m asked a question, so I stand there, my fraudulent self, next to people more accomplished and erudite. Like most other writers I know, I have no answer to ‘Where do you get your ideas from?’ I can only say, in all honesty, that if I knew, I’d get them more often. Not all the questions I am asked are about writing. Once I was asked my opinion of the primary school curriculum. I have no opinion on this whatsoever. Sometimes people ask, ‘Do you have children?’ And when I say no, occasionally they ask another question. They ask, ‘Why not?’

I’ve been asked ‘Why not?’ in libraries and at dinner parties, by strangers and casual acquaintances and the partners of people I barely know. Once I was asked ‘Why not?’ by a sales assistant I was idly chatting to while trying on winter coats. For the life of me, I do not know what to say, so invariably I stand, mouth open, while they smile politely back at me with their eyebrows raised quizzically, like they were asking if I knew the way to the loo.

Sometimes, if it’s been a long day and I’m tired, I’m tempted to be terse. ‘If I knew you were so interested in my ovaries I’d have brought my gynaecologist,’ springs to mind, but I’ve never said it. Other times, I think I should be flippant. ‘Sex is against my religion,’ would be okay at a pinch. Or: ‘If I wait a little bit longer, I’ll be able to clone myself.’ Or: ‘I’m not sure. I love kids, but I couldn’t eat a whole one?’ ‘I would, but I can’t get enough of that back-door loving’?

THE PEOPLE WHO ask me why I don’t have children don’t mean any harm, yet it staggers me. It makes me feel like I’ve been slapped, every time, but it’s done without any malice – it just points out that my position of married childlessness is considered an oddity.

If they follow up the question with a smug ‘Well, you’ve still got time,’ well, that’s when I feel totally enraged. Adding stupidity to insensitivity is a bridge too far – are they blind? Or just incredibly arrogant? Do they think this state they have, this childed piece of heaven, is worth me dragging my middle-aged body through some kind of scientific or social experiment? Because clearly, to them, my life as it sits now can’t be worth living. I should be prepared to pay anything, risk anything, to
achieve what they have. My teens and twenties and thirties – they were wasted, really. The then-me was just seat warming for the future-me, the mother-me, for this role I was destined to play, for this only real contribution to the world that I could possibly make.

SOMETIMES I THINK Bella is right. The world is divided into two types of people. Not those who believe that the world can be divided into two types of people, and those who do not. People who have children, and those who do not.

At noon one Sunday I was in Barkley Street, waiting for the bus after my yoga class. On Sundays, noon is early in St Kilda. People are still wobbling from nightclubs, shoes in hand. It was autumn, so the light was feeble, which made it seem even earlier. After yoga, I stand straight and think clearer. My breathing is slow and even.

Waiting at the bus stop with me was a woman and, I guess, her son. She was in dark jeans, black boots and a jacket. She wore a lapis-lazuli pendant, the stone iridescent peacock blue. The boy was eight or nine, fine-boned and pale-skinned, with fair hair that was either adorably tousled or filled with product – I could not tell which. He was bored with waiting for the bus and was climbing over the seat like a monkey, then running along the footpath, then swinging his Razor scooter in the air by the handle.

I watched him careen the scooter across the pavement, then he dropped it, climbed up the back of the seat and then jumped off. His mother said, ‘Oh, stop. No, Lachie. Don’t,’ and she giggled and touched his chest with her hand. She reminded me of Mr Humphries. Ooh, you are awful.

After a while Lachie grew tired of the climbing and jumping, and his mother grew tired of the flirty admonishing. She started texting, and he stood on the seat and began yelling at passing cars, at the top of his small voice on this quiet Sunday. At first it was HAPPY NEW YEAR (for what reason I’m not sure), then MERRY CHRISTMAS (likewise). Then, I’M GOING TO DIE SOON.

Passers-by jerked their heads and stared. His mother looked up from her phone and giggled. ‘Don’t say that, Lachie. That’s not very nice,’ she said, so Lachie yelled again, to a different set of startled passers-by: NO, I’M NOT.

When he tired of that he decided to see if the bus was finally coming, at first from the footpath. Then he ventured into the bike lane and, when this proved too easy, he stood in the middle of the road and looked up at the sky, his fragile arms outstretched, skin almost translucent against the dark grey of the road. One car swerved, another tooted, yet still he stood there.

From the seat at the bus stop, his mother gave him a quick glance, then went back to her texting. ‘You’re being careful, aren’t you, Lachie?’ she cooed.
THE REASON PEOPLE want to know why I don’t have children is, perhaps, to
decide whether I am merely unfortunate or wilfully evil. (Or perhaps there is a third
option. To paraphrase Mr Wilde: to have only one child might be may be regarded
as a misfortune; to have none looks like carelessness.)

Back in 2007, Senator Bill Heffernan said that Julia Gillard shouldn’t lead the ALP
because ‘anyone who chooses to remain deliberately barren...they’ve got no idea
what life’s about.’ And this year, Mark Latham said, ‘anyone who chooses a life
without children, as Gillard has, cannot have much love in them.’ Perhaps people
ask the difficult question of why I don’t have children so they can find out if I am
‘deliberately’ childless. So they can find out: Do I know what life’s about? And: Do I
have much love in me?

This is a brilliant idea, I think. It sometimes takes months or years or decades to
understand someone’s heart and character, and even then, no matter how certain
we are, we can find to our great sorrow that we are mistaken. How astonishingly
helpful to know these things straight up, from one little question, right from the first
time you meet someone.

A FEW YEARS ago I was chatting to an older couple I know well, about this and
that, work and weather, politics and movies. The conversation turned to another
couple I knew only slightly, friends of these people.

‘Oh,’ said the wife. ‘It’s terrible what happened. Terrible.’

‘They’ve split up,’ said the husband. ‘He left her.’

‘Out of the blue,’ the wife said.

‘Because she was barren,’ the husband said.

Other than in political debate about the worthiness or otherwise of female
politicians, the word ‘barren’ is rarely used these days in polite society. In the Bible,
everyone who was anyone was barren: it was the olden-day equivalent of having a
blog, Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and the unnamed mother of Samson; Hannah,
Michal and Elizabeth. All of these, except for Michal, conceived at a very late stage, a
blessing from God.

If all these women, and their husbands and communities, were so convinced
there would be no baby, they must have been post-menopausal when God gave
them this miracle. I think of these biblical women, living a harsh life in a Middle
Eastern desert: scraping for food, bent down by work and dust and heat. I see them
at fifty-five with a toddler, or at almost seventy with a teenager. I wonder what these
women thought about their blessing at 4.30 in the morning.
AT FLINDERS STREET Station, I passed a young man and woman sitting at a table in the food court, holding a baby. They were a handsome couple, with glossy black hair and striking features. The baby was eight or ten months old. It sat on the man’s lap while the woman fed it with a spoon. As I passed, I saw that in her other hand she held a meat pie. She was carefully digging out the filling and blowing on it, and feeding it to the baby. This seemed strange to me, and the image has stuck in my mind: the baby, the woman and the pie. But it might be normal parenting behaviour. I just don’t know.

I am an educated person of sound mind and body in a first-world country, which makes me one of the luckiest people who has ever lived. Still, sometimes I feel apart from much of our national conversation. When shop assistants wish me a happy Mother’s Day, how should I respond? The weekend papers, with acres of parenting columns and advice and kid’s activities and ads for toys, seem like anthropological evidence from a distant civilisation. Politicians never speak to me. I will never be a Working Family.

The job of an aunt is nothing to sneeze at. There are birthdays to remember and babysitting to do and long chats to have over the phone. My two nieces and nephew live in regional Queensland, so there will also, I hope, be first tickets to the ballet and the AFL, visits to markets and the snow.

My sister and I talk on the phone often. Sometimes she rings me in the morning, to talk about my mother or my grandmother or just to say hello. It’s early for me, but not for her. When she hears my drowsy voice she apologises. ‘I always forget,’ she says wistfully, ‘that you can sleep in as long as you like.’ I never forget that she cannot.

---

Toni Jordan’s debut novel, the international bestseller *Addition* (Text, 2008), was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Her second novel, *Fall Girl* (Text), was published last year in Australia, and will be published in the UK, Germany, France and Taiwan. Toni teaches creative writing at RMIT University. Her fiction has appeared in *Griffith REVIEW 26: Stories for Today*. 
Deep connections, artistic inevitabilities

The journey from book to film

Raimond Gaita

FOUR years after the release of the film adaptation of *Romulus, My Father*, it still feels strange to refer to the characters in the film as characters rather than as real people – to Romulus but not to my father, to Christina but not to my mother, and to Rai but not to me.

Readers of the book are often intrigued to know what I think of the film. I am glad to be able to say that I think that director, Richard Roxburgh, made a film of heartrending power and delicate beauty, with fine, sometimes superb, performances from the cast. It is beautifully photographed and directed with eloquent restraint. I admire Richard’s integrity in refusing to flatter his audience, or to look over his shoulder at what critics might say.

When my wife, Yael, and I first saw it in a rough cut with only one of the producers, John Maynard, in the theatre with us, we cried almost throughout. After the screening we drove from Melbourne to our house in the country, where we met up with John and his son Billy. Yael and I spoke not a word to each other on that drive and we found it hard to converse with John and Billy over dinner.

The film premiered in Castlemaine. Or rather, that was where it had its ‘world premiere’: an ‘Australian’ premiere was to follow in Melbourne a few days later. A small platform was erected in front of the cinema, and Eric Bana, who played Romulus, spoke, as well as Richard, the screenwriter and others. When it was my turn, I suddenly realised that I was looking at a spot, only three or so metres directly in front of me, where my father parked his motorbike when we went from Frogmore, our house, to the ‘pictures’. There, I remembered, he dressed me in a greatcoat that trailed a couple feet on the ground, after having first put newspapers to my chest, and a leather hat and goggles on my head. To my embarrassment he did this in front of the crowd who stood on the footpath talking after the end of the film.
FOR A VERY long time I did not want the book to be adapted to film. I had many offers, at least twelve, which my agent, Margaret Connolly, declined on my behalf. Because she knew that I had no interest in the prospect – that I was suspicious of the very idea of it – she sometimes told me only a month or so after it happened that so and so (often a distinguished director) had asked for the film rights. One day, early in January 1999, she phoned me to say that a young actor and theatre director in Sydney had persistently phoned her to ask for the rights. He was, she said, popular for his Hamlet at the Belvoir Street Theatre in 1995. She asked if she could give him my phone number in London. Knowing how she had previously responded to people asking for the rights, I was impressed. Let him have my number, I told her.

Within a day or so Richard rang – from Africa, I think – and asked if he could visit me in London. I told him I would prefer that he didn’t, because if he came all that way I would feel that I owed him something. He would come nonetheless, he said. And he did, to my flat in London, on a cold January night, dressed in jeans, a white cable-knit pullover and a leather jacket, and holding two bottles of red wine.

I had expected someone cool in a slick sort of way, someone I wouldn’t like. Instead, he was straightforward, intense and charming. I was impressed by his love of the book and by his desire to direct a film true to it. Even so, I told him that I would not give him the rights. Ever resourceful, he asked if I would at least allow him to write a screenplay. If I didn’t like it, then we would go no further.

It would be mean-spirited to refuse such a modest request, I thought. He had, after all, travelled to London from Africa, and we had drunk his very good wine.

In the event Richard couldn’t write the screenplay, and we began searching for a screenwriter.

FIVE YEARS AFTER Richard had turned up at the door of my flat in London, we still did not have a screenplay, though we had declined a few. By that time Robert Connolly and John Maynard had agreed to produce the film, but I had not yet signed a contract. I was not prepared to do so until I had reason to believe that I could trust the screenwriter. Then, on a trip to London, Robert discovered Nick Drake, an English poet born of Czech and English parents. Because I thought of the book as a tragic poem rather than a biography, I had always wanted the screenwriter to be a poet with a European sensibility. Nick had not written a screenplay before but was a ‘script doctor’ with a distinguished film company, working on, among others, the screenplay to Anthony Minghella’s The English Patient.

The circumstances of our early discussion made a difference to our friendship and therefore, I think, to the screenplay. Not long after I met Nick Drake severe back pain put me to bed for two weeks. Nick came twice to visit. As he was about to leave the second time, he nervously handed me a book of his poems, The Man in the
White Suit. ‘I hope you like these,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what we will do if you don’t.’

We had already agreed that he should write the screenplay.

Stoked up on anti-inflammatories and strong painkillers, I was suffering visual disturbances and could barely think, but I read the poems straightaway. Some moved me to tears. A week later I read them again and responded as I had before. I had been right to want a poet to write the screenplay, and Nick was that poet.

He wrote the screenplay that I trusted he would. It was courageous, understated but the more emotionally powerful for it, and poetic. Together with the cinematography of Geoffrey Simpson, it ensured that the film is visual and dramatic poetry. It enabled Richard to direct a film with the same qualities and gave its principal actors (Eric Bana, Franka Potente as Christina, Kodi Smit-McPhee as Rai) roles that have, I think, proved to be among their best.

It was not that Nick laid down tracks that Richard had merely to follow – Nick often told me that I had to imagine how the spaces between the sentences, sometimes just between the words, would be filled with images and sound. I had especially to understand how eloquent the silences could be. I tended, incorrigibly, to read it as though it was a play. It wasn’t until I saw the film that I realised just how little dialogue was in it and what a gift it was for a director.

Richard honoured it consummately. Not a word is spoken in the relatively long opening scene because, Richard said, he intended to alert the audience from the beginning that this was a film in which silence matters. And strange though it may seem, given that I had read every draft, I was shocked to realise that Rai occupies most of the screen time. The book is sometimes described as an autobiography. I resist that, in part because I had tried as much as possible to keep myself out of the story. But Rai is at the centre of the film – not alone there, but there nonetheless.

MY CONTRACT WAS of the usual sort that, justifiably, gives the writer of the book few rights. It permitted me to comment on every stage of the screenplay and to have those comments considered. But there was an understanding between Robert, John, Richard, Nick and me that my comments on each draft of the screenplay would be taken seriously. I commented in detail on four drafts and discussed two of them at length with Nick in London. Sometimes I commented on trivial details (that the ice creams should be Eskimo Pies); sometimes on structural matters (that Romulus should be involved with Lydia before Christina kills herself); and always on how the characters were drawn (only at the eleventh hour did we get Hora right).

When I look back to that time I realise that although I knew in my head that I had to let go of the story I had written, it took some time, if indeed it ever happened, for me to know it in my heart.
Richard was determined that when the audience saw the opening sequences of the film, they would not think ‘period film’. Bob Cousins, a genius at his job, oversaw the construction and furnishing of the Frogmore house in the film. The house in the film is almost exactly like the one in which my father and I lived. Some details were changed. The bedroom, for example, has an extra window to allow more light for filming. The original house had burned down, and the film house was built only fifty metres from where it had stood. It wasn’t built on the original site, because that was surrounded by trees and Richard wanted long shots of the house, unobscured. Only the small dam into which Rai throws the razor (the actual dam into which I threw my father’s razor) separated the film house from the remains of Frogmore. The wrought-iron furniture in the film was made by my father, loaned to the filmmakers by people in the area who had responded to advertisements in local papers.

Bob relied on photographs of Frogmore, and on my descriptions of it and its interior. He emailed me in London, asking whether I could remember more of the interior than I had described in the book and also the household objects that filled it. I sat down at nine o’clock one morning to jot down notes. I finished at three in the afternoon, astonished at what I could remember. I also sent Bob sketches of the egg-washing machine that my father built. When I had finished I went out. I was so emotionally drained that I could hardly put one foot in front of the other.

I was in London when the house was built. My daughter Katie saw it and described it to me on the phone. ‘You’ll cry when you see it,’ she said. A few weeks later, before shooting had started, I went there with Yael. Remembering Katie’s words, I steeled myself. I didn’t cry, but just as I congratulated myself on the achievement, I caught sight, through the corner of my right eye, of a white cockatoo perched in a tree in which Jack, our cockatoo, often sat. That undid me.

SEVEN YEARS HAD elapsed between the evening when Richard came to my flat in London and the first day of the shoot, on the Moolort Plains in March 2006.

The film was shot entirely on location; everyone lived there during the week. Arriving on set before dawn and leaving after dark can be gruelling, but it can have sublime compensations. Each day the cast and crew saw the sun rise and set over the harsh but beautiful landscape of Central Victoria, experienced its many moods, and grew to love it. Wonderful though his cinematography would anyhow have been, this must have helped Geoffrey Simpson to reveal the landscape as another character, as Richard had always wanted. And it makes a difference to know that you are filming where the story happened: Romulus walked through these paddocks to work; Christina along this desolate track after she tried to kill herself; and Rai threw his father’s beloved razor into this dam, just there, where it still lies rusting.
Virtually all the crew read my book. I was flattered, but more importantly I was moved and consoled by the knowledge that the film would be, in every detail, a work of love.

The last sentence of the screenplay reads, ‘Romulus, with a strong, confident cast of his hand, frees them [the bees], blurring and mixing, into the sunlight of a fine bush dawn.’ Not too confidently, I said to Eric before the shooting started, when we discussed my father, my mother, Mitru and the characters that bear their names in the film. I saw that he understood. The film ends, rightly, in the key of hope, but it offers no assurances that the hope will be fulfilled, that Romulus will become whole again. That is how it was with the real Romulus at that time. In the closing moments of the film Eric captures the weariness and the pain that almost extinguished this hope, and the uncertain future, with a poignancy that I doubt could be equalled. The film ends at the place where my father’s long journey to recovery began.

WHEN I FIRST saw the film, finished and on the big screen at a preview in Melbourne, I did so with a couple of hundred other people. Many of them came to me afterwards visibly moved and also anxious about how I felt. Many wondered how I bore to sit through it. It was indeed harrowing, even more so for my sister Susan who sat next to me.

Two things about the film have caused me pain.

The book covers the entire period of my father’s life. The film covers events that occurred over roughly seven years from 1956 onwards, but it represents them as occurring over three years. Richard thought, rightly, that there should be only one child actor and that the audience would not find it credible that he should age seven years.

Concentrating events that spanned seven years in the book into three years in the film generated a serious moral problem. My mother had two children with Mitru: Susan and Barbara. He killed himself while my mother was pregnant with Barbara. Because the film spans only three years, a second pregnancy could be depicted only if Christina were pregnant when she tried to kill herself at Frogmore or if she were pregnant with Susan much earlier in the film. The first option was morally impossible. The other alternative – for her to be pregnant earlier in the film – would have set the film’s dramatic structure askew. The exclusion of a second pregnancy was artistically inevitable. For a long time I resisted acknowledging its inevitability, but eventually I had to.

It was very painful for Barbara, who went with Susan to the Castlemaine premiere. One scene particularly so. After Christina has taken the tablets that will kill her, she looks at photos on her dressing table. One of them is of her with Susan and Mitru. Barbara told me that when she saw this she felt ‘written out of history’. I
replied that the film was not a documentary, that insofar as there is a history it is the book, *Romulus, My Father*. This did not console her.

The second thing is even more distressing.

From the time of my birth, when she was only seventeen, my mother showed signs of mental illness. The final draft of the screenplay had a scene early in the film, before Susan was born, in which Christina and Rai are alone in Froghmore. Christina hears voices, making it clear to the audience that she suffers even at that stage from a mental illness. Richard convinced Nick to cut the scene. He said that what mattered dramatically was not Christina’s madness but the nature of her sorrow. Later, when I asked him why he had cut the scene, he responded that the film would fall into melodrama if there was too much explicit madness. I don’t know if he was right, but it was the kind of judgement that he had to make.

When I saw the film for the first time, with that scene cut, I knew immediately that many people would judge her harshly for her neglect of her son, for her uncontrolled spending and for the promiscuity that drove Mitru to despair. The film makes clear that she is in the grip of a deep depression when she cannot look after Susan. But postnatal depression is clearly not the reason why she cannot look after Rai; why she is promiscuous; why she brings Mitru, her lover, to Froghmore.

As a child I was conscious of the disdain many people showed to my mother because of the way she treated my father and Mitru, and because she did not properly care for me or for Susan and Barbara. Now, as an adult, I read the same disdain for her in many reviews of the film, especially ones from America. This pains me deeply. Often the hostility presents as a concern for her victims, me primarily. The concern is sincere, I suppose, but it is pernicious because it suggests that my mother was such a bad mother and wife that she was not deserving of my father’s love and kindness or even the love of her son. Such concern is no kindness to a child – it can never be a kindness to a child to undermine their love for their parents by suggesting that their mother or father are not deserving of their love. No one is undeserving of love, not because everyone is really deserving of it but because, unlike admiration or esteem, real love, deeper than both, has nothing to do with merit or desert.

When I predicted to Richard that viewers would judge Christina harshly, he replied that they shouldn’t. Nick said the same. Nick especially was mortified when I told him of the reviews. I have not spoken to Richard about it since our original conversation, but I know that hostility to Christina was the last thing he wanted.

The film’s attitude to Christina is undoubtedly sympathetic. For some viewers, that is one of its main problems. Why, they ask, does the film show sympathy for a character whose destructive behaviour causes one man to kill himself, another to go mad, and suffering to her son of a kind and degree that prompts almost everyone who sees the film to ask how he survived it?
I SOMETIMES WONDER whether I would have refused Richard’s request to adapt the book to film, if I had been able to foresee the hostility shown to Christina. I don’t know. I do know, however, that I do not – cannot – regret the existence of such a fine film, the inspiring hard work that went into it, the friendships that developed when it was being made and the moving words that Eric spoke when, in his acceptance speech, he dedicated his AFI Award for best actor to my father.

And how could I regret the hundreds of emails I have received from people who have been profoundly moved by the film, who have responded with warm-hearted sorrow to Christina in just the way that Nick and Richard hoped they would? Who would be surprised when I say that Franka Potente’s Christina is, for me, the most moving character in the film, because in playing Christina she plays my mother?

---

This is an edited extract from *After Romulus*, which will be published by Text in September. Raimond Gaita’s essay ‘When politicians lie’ was published in *Griffith REVIEW 5: Addicted to Celebrity*. He is a professorial fellow in the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, and emeritus professor of moral philosophy at King’s College, London.
IN 1977, on a windy summer day, two thirteen-year-olds walked into a milk bar on Sydney’s Broadway and, as they often did, struck up a conversation with a complete stranger, sharing their love of Sherbet, the Australian pop phenomenon du jour, star act of an outdoor concert held that day across the road at Victoria Park. The stranger turned out to be Mike Meade, host of Flashez, an ABC TV music show. Captivated by the fans’ fervour, he asked if he could interview them. In the park, before the camera, the girls, poised between the wholesomeness of childhood and the waywardness of adolescence, poured their hearts out. This slice of film is now a time capsule testimony for a generation of Sherbet worshippers.

When I heard that Harvey James, the English-born guitarist of Sherbet, had died, I remembered those crazed and vivacious, bold and unspeakably vulnerable girls, and the young man who had been kind to them at the height of his fame. Harvey died of lung cancer, in Melbourne on 15 January 2011, aged just fifty-eight. Donna and I heard the news as women of forty-seven.

Following his death I found that six months earlier Harvey’s children, Gabriel, Alexandra and Josh, had set up a Facebook page when he was diagnosed. I joined ‘Send your love to Harvey James’, where hundreds of fans were paying homage, alongside Harvey’s family, friends and musical comrades. There were many photographs of Harvey, including some from Sherbet – photos I had mooned over when they covered my bedroom wall, photos that went everywhere I went, images burned deep in the still reverberating pubescent region of my psyche.

Though Harvey was the object of my fanatical affections, devotion to my best friend was the heart of my Sherbet passion. Donna and I had met when we were about six, after my mother and I moved into the house across from hers in Annandale and into the same class. It was the early 1970s and a quiet neighbourhood, made more interesting by the mysterious ‘Abbey’ around the corner, a fifty-room gothic mansion...
rumoured to be haunted. We bonded swiftly and fiercely, our friendship characterised by outrageous pranks. We packed our mothers’ bras with tissues, stuffed small pillows under our clothes and wandered around talking up the trials of faux-pregnancies. We plotted against my mother’s boyfriend, a childish alcoholic whom I despised. We stole flowers from gardens and planned to start a guerrilla florist business. We made up unflattering ditties about our nemesis, a rude, bespectacled bully who tortured animals. We choreographed elaborate routines to popular songs and performed them for our families and schoolmates. We devised escapades on family outings and shared beds during countless sleepovers. We were the daughters of mostly absent fathers and often troubled mothers, and we took refuge in our friendship. When we were grounded, as punishment for some especially dastardly transgression, life felt sunless and unbearable, and I watched, desperately, the front of her house for signs of Donna, living for the day I could see her again.

Time rolled on and brought with it changes: new homes and schools, first in the miserable Eastern Suburbs abode of the boyfriend I loathed and in a class with a teacher who took an instant dislike to me. I missed Donna and Annandale North Primary terribly, often crying before school. Then there were consuming years of fun, high drama and pseudo-sisterhood in Glebe with my mother’s new boyfriend and his daughter of the same age. During that time Donna’s family moved further west, out Concord way, and though we had few opportunities to meet, we stayed in contact and remained best friends.

I was twelve when, finally alone with my mother, I had enough impatient autonomy to pursue my own wishes. I was granted permission to travel by train to Donna’s on weekends, and we resumed regular contact as if the years between had never intervened. Recent years have revealed our different perceptions of who was the leader and who was the follower – I maintain I followed her lead and she is convinced she followed mine. Even so, I am certain it was Donna who instituted two key rites of passage: smoking and Sherbet. Donna’s influence on me is irrefutably captured: in the Flashez clip I mimic her speech, a manner of speaking so notable that Chris James, Harvey’s girlfriend in 1977, and later his wife and the mother of their children, asked on Facebook if I still had ‘that unique accent’. I replied no, I didn’t, because it was not mine.

Our fondness for Sherbet reached hysteria during a summer holiday at my grandparents’ Maroubra flat. Somewhere amid excursions to the beach in knit bikinis to work on our tans and flirt with surfers, and lusty binges on lollies and fast food, we got focused about Sherbet. Donna had already declared Daryl Braithwaite her true love and another friend, Fiona, had laid claim to Garth Porter; so – Alan (Sandow), the drummer, being too bare- and hairy-chested for my virginal liking and Tony (Mitchell), the bass player, being too dark and curly haired for my Anglo-child taste – I settled on Harvey, the replacement for founding member Clive Shakespeare.
Tall and lean, with intelligent blue eyes, feathery honey-brown hair and an impish grin, Harvey became mine the moment we launched our project of pop paradise. We enlisted my grandmother to make us satin jackets of the kind favoured by Sherbet, with ‘Daryl’ and ‘Harvey’ embroidered on them. We wore them constantly, pasted posters on our bedroom walls, and listened to Sherbet songs over and over again. And when school resumed we spent every weekend together pining.

It wasn’t just about the music – though we liked the songs. It wasn’t so much about Harvey himself, though he was a good musician who turned out to be a good man. It was the instigation of adult desire, a ritual in girls’ tribal life: the teen celebrity crush. Sherbet offered a thrilling escape.

The year after we started high school – suburbs apart – Donna and I ramped up our commitment. It was no longer enough to listen to records and gaze on Sherbet’s backlit, big-haired, semi-nude form in glossy pictures. We had to meet them.

Sherbet were huge. The band were not manufactured, as charged, expressly for teenyboppers, but they attracted a big pre-teen and teen following. Some assume a child audience devalues music as the kind fit only for undeveloped, indiscriminating tastes, but at their best, like the Beatles and the Jackson 5, Sherbet produced pop that defied age. They had eleven top-ten singles, were the first Australian band to break the million-dollar sales barrier, and they appeared on Countdown more than any other band in the show’s history.

Sherbet put out their share of forgettable fodder, but their finest stand up: heartfelt everyman anthems like their ’71 big-band, crowd-cheering cover of ‘Free the People’ (an early favourite); soft rock classics like ‘Slipstream’ and ‘Cassandra’; the delicately pretty ‘Only One You’; the bass-heavy ‘You’ve Got the Gun’; and the unapologetically sentimental ballad ‘If I Had My Way’.

In 1977, at the start of our all-out fandom, Sherbet were the biggest band in the country and you couldn’t get near them. Still, Donna and I were not average fans. We crossed the line to obsession. When Mike Meade interviewed us we were at the threshold:

Do you go to all their concerts?
Me: Yeah, most of them.
Donna: All that we can.

Do you follow them around?
Me: If we know where they’re going we do.

In what way do you try and catch up with them?
Donna: Find out where they live.

Do you know where they live?
Me: Yeah. We know where Harvey lives. We know where Garth lives. We know half of Garth’s phone number.

So, you know where they live. Have you been around there?

Me: No, not yet.

Toward the end of the interview, asked how we hoped to meet them, I reply with an earnest, ‘Any way we can. I’ve just got a feeling we’re going to meet them.’

Mike Meade replies wryly, ‘I still feel that way about the Beatles.’

Donna nudges me and whispers for me to tell him what Harvey said. I respond obediently: ‘Harvey says in this little book we’ve got – Sherbet or Harvey, I don’t know – your dreams can always come true if you believe your mind.’

‘And we believe our minds,’ concludes Donna.

WE BEGAN HANGING around EMI when we knew they were recording. We got autographs from most of them, but Daryl managed to evade us. Soon after we started spending every weekend staking out their houses. The weekends were crowded with other fans that had done their homework and had the moxie to loiter. Donna maintains that we were friendly to them and enjoyed a sense of camaraderie, but not without some bitchiness and jealousies. I recall a sense of competition, a drive to prove ourselves the biggest Sherbet fans ever.

Before long we were forging our mother’s signatures on sick notes and wagging school to stalk them unfettered by rivals. We’d meet at Central Station, then catch buses or hitchhike around Sydney in chase.

Our interest grew beyond tobacco, and there were various getting-high experiments in the nooks and crannies of Central – the Aspirin and Coke failure, and the smoking nutmeg disappointment. Eventually I managed to source a supply of joints. After smoking one we’d giggle irrespressibly for hours at everything and anything, up the back of buses, walking along the street, in people’s faces. We spent a lot of time at Garth’s in Watsons Bay, perhaps because it was in the nicest location. There was glass at the back of the house, and we’d watch Garth and his girlfriend, Mary, and sometimes the whole band, hoping they’d notice us – the biggest Sherbet fans ever – and reward us with their time and favour.

Harvey lived in Paddington, and we made personal contact with him several times from our many stakeouts. He was the sweetest to us, the one who seemed to see beyond the fan stereotype to the girls we were, the one who returned a little of our love.

‘The first time we knocked on his door and he opened it he knew who we were from the Flashez film clip. He was so happy to see us,’ Donna recalls. ‘He said something like “You’re the girls from the interview – that was fantastic!” and he had a big smile on his face.’
Another day he let me use his bathroom, my ploy to get a glimpse inside his life. But the best meeting took place at Garth’s. We were out front and the sun was beginning to set after a day of waiting. Harvey walked out, shook his head and said, ‘Are you girls still here?’ He asked where we were headed and we told him we had to get to the city. ‘Jump in, I’ll give you a lift,’ he said, opening the door of his Jaguar. ‘It was only because he knew us from the Flashez clip, and he liked us and we’d already met him,’ Donna says of the remarkable gesture. ‘That’s the only reason we got the lift. He wasn’t going to put just any Sherbet girls in his car.’

I distinctly remember that when ‘Don’t Cry for Me Argentina’ came on I said, ‘I hate this song,’ and Harvey said, ‘Me too,’ and I swooned. Donna insists that Harvey said he loved the song. ‘Whenever I hear it I think of Harvey. I love that song now,’ she says.

Donna’s quest was more arduous. Daryl was the hardest to pin down and took the longest to meet. In a photo of Donna with Daryl that I took on the day we finally cornered him, now battered and bent from decades in her wallet, Donna is crying. ‘We’d gone around there a few times and never met him, but that particular day he did come down and that’s why I was crying, because I finally got to meet Daryl in person,’ says Donna. ‘There was another time he came down with his German Shepherd, Sebastian, and got in his car. You and I ran down the street, jumped in a taxi and said, “Quick, follow that car!” We followed for a while but the taxi lost him.’

Then it came back to me, the way we’d flag a cab, forage with increasing alarm among our belongings before confessing that we had no money to pay the fare, coyly playing dumb as we conned our way through the days with bubbly, cheeky charm. Donna says people let us get away with it because we were nice and made their day interesting. We talked to anyone, preaching the Gospel of Sherbet. ‘We were always telling everybody how much we loved Sherbet. It’s all we spoke about,’ she says.

There was a dark side to this carefree rollicking. We both felt a chill recalling unsettling encounters and close shaves, when we accepted food, money or favours from sleazy benefactors before making speedy getaways, laughing with relief and bravado at the dark potential we had eluded. ‘We put ourselves in such danger didn’t we?’ Donna now says in hushed tones.

OUR YEAR OF ZEALOUS fandom ended gradually. I left school midway through the second year of high school, and by the time I left home at fifteen to commence my juvenile nomadic travels Donna and I had drifted apart. The next year I moved to London and Donna met Ian, the boy who lived five doors down; they went on to marry and have two children. In the three decades since, Donna and
Ian have lived not far from Concord, while I’ve lived eight of my nine lives in different states and countries, in six long-term relationships. ‘Our lives just took a different path, didn’t they?’ Donna observes.

Our lives also took a different path regarding Sherbet. Donna remained a staunch, lifelong fan, while I went on to disown my Sherbet roots in Sydney’s 1980s post-punk live music scene. Keeping company with indie musicians I forgot my soft-rock past, as my childhood best friend, Donna Rowlands, became Mrs Donna Shelton.

Donna and Ian regularly go see Daryl’s band play and she still listens to Sherbet. ‘That time of being thirteen was magic, but also I really love their music. I think they were so talented and their music was meaningful. I often come home and put Sherbet on and dance around the kitchen,’ she says.

She tells her family Daryl’s her boyfriend and asks her indulgent man if she can take Daryl home as they leave his shows. The kids roll their eyes and groan good-humoured complaints about her fascination with ‘Stale Braithwaite’. ‘I still love Daryl,’ she says. ‘And I love that I’ve got a husband who is kind and that has always let me have my Daryl fantasy.’

After Harvey’s death I wondered if Donna had heard the news. When I called I found her distraught that she had missed out on tickets to the ‘Gimme that Guitar’ Harvey James tribute show, a fundraiser Harvey helped organise but which became a musical memorial following his sooner-than-expected death.

I promised to see what I could do. I posted a YouTube link to the Flashez clip on the ‘Send Your Love’ page, with a plea for tickets. The clip had become a cultural icon. Donna discovered it in a Powerhouse Museum exhibit on the history of Australian rock years back and it aired recently on Rage. Debbie Kruger, the show’s publicist, responded: the event had sold out, so it had been moved to the Enmore Theatre and more tickets had been released. Many fans were delighted to hear from us, ‘the Flashez girls’. Donna and Ian shouted me a ticket, and the following week we met up for our first outing and Sherbet show in decades.

It was billed as the last Sherbet reunion ever, and part of every ticket sold was donated to the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and the rest to Harvey’s family. Libby Gore, the comedian and an unabashed Sherbet fan, was MC for a time-warp line-up that included Kevin Borich, Jon English, Leo Sayer, Ian Moss and Richard Clapton. But Sherbet stole the show. With Daryl’s voice in outstanding form, the old tunes received more than just nostalgic appreciation. Gabe James (Harvey’s eldest) joined on guitar for ‘I Have the Skill’, a favourite of his dad’s, and younger brother Josh added his weight to ‘Howzat’. The finale, a cover of the Beatles’ ‘With a Little Help from My Friends’, requested by Harvey and performed by a stage full of his friends, colleagues and family, was steeped in warm remembrance and grief.
As Donna danced I marvelled at the men present in AC/DC and Ramones T-shirts. I was surprised to bump into Steve Lorkin – ex-Psychotic Turnbuckles and chief of an indie label that hosted the likes of Johnny Dole and the Scabs, boasting a Radio Birdman T-shirt. When I said I wouldn’t have picked him for a Sherbet fan, he replied that he liked ‘more embarrassing stuff than Sherbet’.

It turned out that Harvey’s family loved the Flashez clip, and Donna and I were ushered past tight security to post-show VIP drinks. Understandably emotional, Chris James and Harvey’s kids nevertheless greeted us, and their entourage of friends and family members seemed as excited to meet us as we once were to meet Sherbet. Chris, who remembered us from our Underwood Street stalking, told us that she had ‘loved every minute’ of being a Sherbet guy’s babe and had never minded fans like us, and Alexandra explained that our clip was special to her and her brothers because, as they were born well after Harvey’s Sherbet superstardom, they hadn’t understood how big his band had been. Our clip, she said, made them feel like they could go back in time and be part of their father’s world. Watching the clip now I am amused and moved, awed by our innocence and excruciatingly embarrassed.

The Sherbet catalogue is undeniably significant in Australian music. It is the soundtrack to an era when the lucky country was still somewhat adolescent (as well as ignorant and awkward): a nation not yet on the world stage, not yet digitised and wired, isolated in its own summery postcolonial puberty.

Ultimately, my love of Sherbet, and all that I did in the name of that love, was about friendship. Donna was my solace, my partner in playful crime and the place where I could most be what I needed to be – a child. And so it is gratitude for Donna and her loyalty and companionship that I feel most keenly and tenderly when I watch those two besotted girls declaring their undying love of Sherbet.

Donna’s most vivid memory is of me looking at her and singing 10CC’s ‘The Things We Do for Love,’ the theme song for our misadventures. ‘If I hear it now,’ she says, ‘I think of you singing it to me.'
Future Editions of Griffith REVIEW

Griffith REVIEW’s highly anticipated *Third Annual Fiction Edition* explores islands, both geographical and personal. This assortment of new fiction from the best emerging and established writers from Australia and the region promises a unique summer journey into localities of exclusivity, escape and enchantment.

*Available late October 2011*

**Griffith REVIEW Edition 35: Surviving**
Exploring disaster and renewal

In an ever more populous, urbanised and media-saturated world, it can feel as if the rate and scale of disasters is straight out of a doomsday movie. Inured by daily reports and images of devastation, it’s easy to lapse into compassion fatigue and a pattern of short-term responses or quick technological ‘fixes’.

Yet behind the statistics, official inquiries and memorial ceremonies, there are complex stories of renewal and hope as survivors and the generations that follow respond to shock, grief and the prospect of constructing a new life or community.

Surviving will explore stories of our ability to adapt, survive and thrive in response to challenge.

*Available February 2012*
‘The depths of human suffering and perseverance are conveyed through memory and music, as Zable travels through hearts and landscapes scarred by war. A wonderfully complex, sad and beautiful read.’ Bookseller+Publisher ★★★★

‘Arnold Zable is a long-distance athlete among novelists, and his command of his material is superb.’ Canberra Times

‘Zable has a remarkable gift...He holds pain with unsettling gentleness. His prose is such good company that you accept its honesty.’ Age
‘Every Australian, both rural and urban, should read this book. Adrian Hyland pulls no punches in describing the harrowing consequences of living on the planet’s driest and most fire-prone continent, and his account of the disastrous Black Saturday fires is a story of courage, dread and fallibility that will never leave you.’

CATE KENNEDY
‘Style and substance sit easily together.’

*Weekend Herald*