State of Origin

David Kelly BA (Hons) MA

Doctor of Philosophy

September 2011

Faculty of Education and Arts

School of Humanities and Social Science

University of Newcastle

Statement of Originality:

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library**, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.
**Unless an Embargo has been approved for a determined period.

Signed.....

Acknowledgements:

I'd like to thank my supervisors: Dr. Keri Glastonbury and Dr. Brooke Collins-Gearing, staff of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences: Dr. Jean Harkins, Dr. Kim Cheng Boey, Dr. Ros Smith, Dr. Patricia Pender, and readers of drafts of this manuscript: Helen Garner, Michael Sala and Loma Bridge.

I also thank my family for letting me tell these stories.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my partner Jason.

Note: While this is an autobiographical narrative I have changed the names of my family members, and those people named in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody extract, beginning on page 9, to protect the identities of those involved.

Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Abstract	v
State of Origin: a memoir	1
Critical Exegesis: *Women in the Water*	182
Introduction	183
Essay One: *"Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people?"*	199
Essay Two: *a black metal tank*	219
Essay Three: *I subsume the girl's story into my own*	242
Conclusion	262
Works Cited	268

Abstract:

State of Origin is about my search for my Indigenous foster brothers, both of whom ran away from home on the same night in 1980. While all the children in this memoir are either fostered or adopted, the word 'foster' can here be read as a euphemism for 'Stolen'. This memoir explores our shared childhood where backyard games dealt with our sometimes frantic search for individual identities. The games described mainly focus on my fantasies, that being adopted, I was descended from the Russian Royal Family; the Romanovs, and how, bit by bit, I became disabused of this notion.

The idea of royal blood is further explored with the introduction of the actual blood sister of my two foster brothers, a girl who could have been fostered into our family but wasn't, and who went on a hunger strike to force the authorities to arrange a reunion with her siblings. I make connections and comparisons between this heroic moment in her short life and the supposedly tragic romance of Anastasia Romanov.

State of Origin is a belated coming of age story which re-considers the myths of my childhood, while instigating a reconnection to the place of my birth: Queensland.

A critical and reflective exegesis *Women in the Water* follows the creative component. This work explores the ethics of writing about the Indigenous people involved in this story.

Phone Calls

"Murgon…"

The woman's answer isn't expected and I'm thrown off-guard.

"Hello, this is a long shot, I'm looking for my foster brother Errol Rebato. His last known place of residence was in Cherbourg, Queensland."

"You should ring the Cherbourg Police Station."

"I did ring the Cherbourg Police Station. I was put straight through by Directory Assistance."

"If there's no one at that station the call comes through to Murgon Police Station." The woman sighs as if it's a daily mantra. "We're the next town."

Murgon. The name sounds like a brand of processed meat.

"Ring Cherbourg tomorrow at lunchtime. This is another number."

The woman gives me the time to locate a pen and all of a sudden I have the Cherbourg Police Station phone number in front of me, and I'm where I should have been at the beginning.

I thank her and say I'll ring back the next day. I hang up and my eyes meet those of two ornamental Aboriginal boys I have sitting on the bookshelf next to the photo of Jason and me on holidays. The plaster of Paris boys have been painted with a tan wash, their heads, arms and shoulders made to look as if they're emerging out of the same lump of ochre rock. The boys are modelled on the type of trouble-free kids photographed laughing and leaping into outback billabongs and reproduced in thousands of picture books to attract European migrants to Australia during the fifties and sixties. Both kids are fat cheeked, broad-nosed, with wide expressive mouths.

Apart from some photos this ornament is all I have left from our dead mother's estate. This ornament sat on every dressing table in every home our mother lived in since she stepped off the boat from Wales when she was seventeen.

Before she emigrated on the *Fairsky*, our mother worked part-time in a bookshop in Cardiff. She dealt personally with picture books showing off Australia. She told her parents she didn't want to leave Cardiff, but they insisted. She was too young to stay in Wales alone. She may have thought, when gazing at one of these pretty billabong pictures, that coming to such a happy land wouldn't be so bad.

There is no way she could have known that within twelve years of descending the gangplank over the mud-brown Brisbane River she would take ownership of six children, four white and two Aboriginal, but none from her own womb.

Except for a small chip to one of the curls of hair, Mum's plaster of Paris boys have stayed safe in the family. Mum's two real live Aboriginal boys, now men in their forties, are missing.

Murgon is named after a type of waterlily that used to grow in the town's dried-out waterhole. In my *Guide to Australian Places* it says Cherbourg was built on land set aside for an Aboriginal settlement in 1904. The inhabitants worked for rations until the 1960s, before becoming waged. The first emu farm in Queensland opened in Cherbourg in 1989 where carved emu eggs and other items of interest are for sale.

The guide is a watered-down history. Cherbourg is a name most Queenslanders would recognise but few would have visited the place. A place mired in white imaginations as a troubled place: a contentious zone, which the Aboriginal inhabitants once needed permits to leave. I can't imagine today's inhabitants looking kindly on whites walking in willy-nilly asking questions about one of their own.

I decide I'll visit the emu farm where visitors are encouraged and question the employees to see if they know someone called Errol. I'll go in under the cover of tourist. I wonder if Errol would be scared if he had to enter all the gay bars on Oxford Street looking for me. I think he would be. After this I don't feel so bad.

Half an hour later, after an eight minute bike ride into Newcastle's city centre, I'm plugged into a different phone wearing a Madonna-style headset answering questions people have about their health insurance.

"Welcome to Physician Health Funds. My name is David. How can I help you?"

Nine calls an hour is the target, but calls can range from simple address changes to helping members who have just discovered they need a major operation and want to know if they have the appropriate cover. These latter calls flip the targets out the window. My first question is to ask whether the member has a medical item number from which I can tell if the member is covered for that particular procedure or not. Due to privacy concerns I'm not supposed to be able to tell the nature of the operation though it's simply a matter of pulling up the Medicare website for the description. The worst part of the job is telling a member that their policy fails to cover the required operation, and if they change their cover to suit then they'll have a year to wait. People cry, rail, and wave figurative fists, but Physician Health has bulletproof glass doors in case they really mean it when they say they are coming to blow us all away.

If the member is thinking of terminating their membership it's my job to remind them of the public hospital waiting lists and the mayhem of an overcrowded public hospital system. Nine times out of ten the member opts to stay in Physician Health Funds and my job is done. My calls are sometimes taped by my supervisor and played back to highlight the areas where I can improve my customer service. I'm required to

hear my own voice – wheedling, adenoidal – building up scenarios of potential disaster, and I can never for the life of me imagine doing any better.

The only part I enjoy about working in a call centre is listening to all the background noise in people's homes. The most common noise is their television sets. I can pick the channels people are watching from the shows playing. Between six and six-thirty the majority watch *The Simpsons*. Then there's the sound of dinner being made, of china plates being balanced one-handed from cupboards to counter-tops, of the hunt for kitchen implements in the second drawer, and the sounds of hair and lips pressed too close to the receiver. I'm allowed in through a chink in these people's lives. I have their addresses on screen in front of me. I know who visits psychologists weekly. I know who has a bad back and who has had a vasectomy. I know who takes pills to perform sexually and who has lost a breast to cancer. I can tell who has been committed, who is looking to be, who is separated, and which one got the kids. I can stalk them. The screen in front of me is like an abridged version of their lives, and I find people tell me the most personal things about themselves as if I'm an actual doctor.

"Let's see…" I say, breathing gently into the black foam ball an inch from my mouth, applying my fingers to the buttons on the keyboard just as delicately and confidently as a doctor lifting bandages from a patient's wound. I earn twenty-two dollars fifty an hour before tax, and I receive a deduction of twenty-five percent off my own health insurance, which will increase to fifty percent once I've been employed five years.

The next day I fail to ring the Cherbourg police at lunchtime as the operator instructed because Errol, if he's alive, wouldn't want me to tell the police anything about him. But then it's only because of the police that I've gotten this far. It's only because of the police that I know my brother was ever in Cherbourg.

According to the statistics I'm running out of time. The average age of mortality for Aboriginal men in Australia is as low as forty-five. Errol will be forty-three in August and Lindsey will be forty-five in September. At 4:30pm, while getting ready for work, I change my mind and ring.

It's engaged. I finish dressing and I ring again.

"Hello, Murgon." It's the same woman from the previous day.

"Hello, I rang yesterday looking for my brother Errol Rebato and you gave me the phone number for Cherbourg?" I say it as a question in case she doesn't remember. "I've come through to you again."

"They must be out on patrol. You have to keep trying."

Her voice, unlike during our first contact, now has a smattering of kindness, and I flatter myself thinking it's because I'm trying to connect with a lost family member and not ringing for an ambulance or a police car.

"Thanks again." I decide not to ask the operator personally if she knows anyone called Errol. We both answer phones for a living and I imagine the woman has had the same training in privacy laws.

I should have left for work by now. I start at 5:00pm. Its 4:45 but I'm sure the clock is a little fast. I'll try one more time. The phone rings.

"Hello," a young man's voice, "Cherbourg Police."

"Hi." *Why did I say hi? I'm not American. I should have met his hello with another hello.* "Hello, my name's David. This is a shot in the dark, but I'm trying to find my foster brother Errol Rebato, who I haven't seen in twenty years."

Shot in the dark! Why did I say shot in the dark to a policeman?

"His last known place of residence was in Cherbourg. I don't know what you can tell me due to the privacy laws." *I'm babbling*. "When I search for Errol's name

online there's a connection between him and the Cherbourg Police Station from the late eighties."

"You're related?"

Are we related? I could show photographic evidence to this policeman if we were face to face. I could pull out a small blurry camera snap of Lindsey, Errol and me at Bullen's African Lion Safari where we'd been taken to see Australia's first liger cub in the mid-seventies. A liger is the offspring of a male lion and a female tiger. The animal itself was neither here nor there; the lion part cancelled out what made a tiger a tiger and vice versa. The information panel said the liger was sterile but it would grow much bigger than either of its parents. I remember asking Mum what the word sterile meant.

"Like your father," Mum said in a vague fashion, as if it wasn't rude.

We're arranged on top of a log castle in the photo. Errol sits between Lindsey and me, staring out, smiling slightly. Lindsey doesn't know what to do with his hands while I'm holding both out in front of me like I'm double gay.

"My! Weren't you the little queen of the castle!" is the response when I show friends. I wonder what the policeman would say.

Mum took this photo of the three of us in the first few months after she abandoned Dad for Ron. Lindsey was thirteen, Errol twelve and I was eleven when we started going on bonding excursions every weekend to 'get to know Ron'. This was before Ron started 'special bondings' with my sister Rayley.

"Yes, I'm his foster brother." I place the emphasis on the foster word so I can't be charged with misrepresentation. Without actually coming right out and saying it, I want this policeman to understand I'm not Errol's Aboriginal blood brother, that I'm white. I wonder if the policeman is Aboriginal, or if he's white. I've read there are two

different kinds in Cherbourg, but from his voice I can't pick his colour. I wonder what he thinks of my voice. I have a gay voice.

Neither Lindsey nor Errol knows that Mum, or even Rayley, is dead.

"Just a minute." The phone is jammed into the cotton chest of his blue shirt and it sounds like my head is resting against his chest. I hear him calling out to someone but not getting an answer. He raises the receiver back to his mouth and tells me the person he needs to ask is out front of the police station and he has to put the phone down. I tell him I'm happy to wait. The receiver clatters against a hard surface and settles. All of a sudden I'm listening to the guts of the Cherbourg Police Station and all I can hear is a distant crow.

If I'd rung twenty years ago at this same time in the afternoon and listened through a dropped receiver I could have heard Errol's voice call out asking for them to be kept separated or else they'd start fighting again. I could have heard my brother being led into one cell and his co-accused into another. If I'd stayed listening I could have heard the sound of one man sleeping and the other man dying. I would be able to hear the commotion of discovery. But that was twenty years ago when I was unable to hear anything beyond the disco beats of Oxford Street.

"Are you there?"

It's the policeman.

"Yes."

"Yeah, he just left Cherbourg to travel down to Brisbane."

He states it matter-of-factly, as if he's just glimpsed Errol idling by the police station, as if had he bothered he could have yelled out "Stop! Stop! There's a man on the phone. He says he's your brother. He's gotta gay voice."

A movie moment of sunlight splintering off the windscreen of a red Monaro growling past, making it impossible for me to discern the driver, seizes my imagination. He's got black hair and a big silver ring on his right hand and his fingers are tapping out a good-natured drumbeat along the top of the door panel. It's Errol. He was always tapping his fingers. He hits the accelerator and fishtails out of there. My brother is alive and speeding to Brisbane.

"Thank-you," I say robotically, lost in time.

Errol must be fit to travel. He must be well.

I hang up.

Then it strikes me that to be able to supply such an up-to-date record of Errol's movements, even for a small town, feels strange and invasive, but I shake off the feeling because after twenty years I can't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Everything now looks two-dimensional as if I'm suffering sunstroke. The ornamental boys look small and unnecessary.

"My brother is alive," I whisper to them.

I close the window and whisper into the curtains. "My brother is alive."

I close the back door and hear the click. "My brother is alive."

I unlock my bike and wheel it to the footpath, saying it, tasting the words.

In time with my feet pumping the bike pedals down the street, I yell over and over again, the wind tossing the words over my shoulder for luck. "My brother is alive. My brother is alive."

Online extract from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Andrew Mitchell Pringle

In mid-June 1987 Andy returned to Cherbourg to attend a funeral for Frank Newbury, a friend of Andy's who had died of a heart attack in Brisbane Prison a few days before.

Andy's cousin, Chloe, and her boyfriend, Errol Rebato, also travelled to Cherbourg for the funeral and remained there. Andy and Errol had first met some three years earlier through mutual acquaintances who frequented Musgrave Park. Although they were not close friends they saw each other occasionally when Errol began courting Andy's cousin…

On 9 July 1987... Andy and (his) group called on his cousin, Chloe, and invited her to come drinking. Errol was opposed to this, as he did not want her to drink. Despite Errol's protestations, Chloe went with Andy. Errol remained behind at the house where they were staying.

The group all became very intoxicated.

Ultimately they decided to go to the canteen. On the way they passed Errol Rebato who had also been drinking and by this time was intoxicated. When Errol saw Chloe he again tried to persuade her not to go drinking with Andy… Soon a fight broke out between the two men.

At about 3.00 pm, Senior Sergeant Miles and Constable Best

of the Cherbourg Aboriginal police were on a routine patrol in the police van when they saw the two fighting in Jerome Street. Miles alighted and approached the two young men. According to the police, Andy appeared to be the more intoxicated of the two. Miles warned them to stop fighting and to go home. Errol, according to Miles “'just took it, but the other fellow Andy, kept on wanting to fight, and was raving on as he walked away.”' Following the warning Andy and Errol parted and walked away in opposite directions. Andy shouted that Errol had started the fight and that he would 'get him' the next day. Once the situation was apparently defused, the police left and resumed their patrol.

The changeover in police shifts occurred at 4.00 pm. Best drove Miles to the police station then continued on to pick up Constable Parsons and Constable Fielding. Fielding was Andy's cousin and had been an Aboriginal policeman for 11 years. Best told Parsons and Fielding about the altercations between the two young men. Best then returned to his home which was next door to the watch-house.

Parsons and Fielding began patrolling the Cherbourg area and at about 4.20 pm they saw Andy and Errol shaping up to each other in the back yard of a house between Broadway and Barber Streets.

The police stopped their vehicle, alighted and walked over to them. Fielding considered that Andy was the more intoxicated and aggressive of the two. The police saw that Andy had a cut

and swollen lip which was bleeding a little.

Both of the young men were arrested for disorderly conduct, which is an offence under the Cherbourg Council's by-laws. Fielding took hold of Andy while Parsons took hold of Errol. Both went quietly and got into the van without incident.

The police drove their two prisoners to the watch-house, which was a short distance away, and about 100 metres from the police station. Across the road and about 50 metres away was the home of the watch-house keeper, who at the time was Best.

Andy and Errol alighted from the van and walked quietly to the charge counter in the watch-house.

The police instructed the two prisoners to remove their belts, shoes, socks and shirts.

At 4.45 pm Errol was placed in cell No. 1 by Fielding, and Andy was placed in cell No. 3 by Parsons. The two were separated by cell No. 2 and were out of reach and sight of each other.

A crucial exchange occurred between Andy and Best. Best asked Andy to remove his socks, Andy complained that it was cold and said, 'What, do you think I'll hang myself with them?' Errol had difficulty recalling but thought that Andy may have been complaining about the cold and talking about his socks. It was a cold afternoon in Cherbourg and Andy was allowed to keep his socks. Both were given blankets.

Despite some evidence that Andy never wore socks and did

not have any on that afternoon, I find that he was wearing socks when he was locked in the cell. His cousin, Chloe, recalled that Andy was wearing socks that afternoon.

Parsons said that when he locked Andy in his cell 'he seemed alright' apart from being drunk. Once Errol was locked into his cell he went to sleep. Fielding and Parsons then drove the short distance to the police station. Parsons recorded the charge in the watch-house charge book. They then resumed their patrol of Cherbourg.

Errol and Andy were the only two people at the watch-house. There were no other prisoners and no watch-house keeper or other officer stationed on duty at the watch-house at the time.

At about 5.00 pm Best walked from his residence to the watch-house in order to see how many meals would be required for prisoners. He approached the outside enclosure of the watch-house. He noticed Andy seated on the edge of the bunk with his feet on the floor and was alarmed to see that there was a football sock around his neck. The other end of the sock had been passed through the bars of the door of the cells and was tied to the wire grille ceiling just outside the cell. Andy's hands were hanging limply. Best looked in at Errol and could see he was sleeping two cells away.

Best ran back to his residence immediately and called Fielding and Parsons on the two-way radio asking them to hurry back to the watch-house. Best did not go into the cell because he

was frightened and concerned to have witnesses with him. He was unable to ring the hospital, as there was no telephone at his house.

As soon as Fielding and Parsons received the radio message they returned to the watch-house where they saw Best waiting at the front. Best told them that Andy was hanging in the cell.

The police entered the watch-house and rushed to Andy's cell. Fielding held him under his arms while Parsons lifted his feet and undid the socks from the wire grille and from around his neck. Fielding and Parsons then laid the body on the bed. Parsons checked for a pulse and other signs of life, but was unable to detect any. Fielding said that the body felt warm but that the deceased was not breathing and he could not feel any pulse. As the Aboriginal police had no training in resuscitation techniques, none were undertaken. Instead, Best rushed to the hospital and returned with Dr Aaron Allbright. The doctor examined the deceased, found no signs of life and pronounced life extinct.

Parsons and Best then went to the home of Sergeant Barry Nolan of the Queensland police to report the death. Fielding, who was a cousin of Andy, became very distraught and was sent home.

On My Eighth Birthday

There are four types of trips we take north across the Brisbane River:

• pick up a baby for adoption

• take delivery of a child for fostering

• visit the Queensland museum

• go to the Brisbane exhibition grounds for the annual show called the EKKA.

Beyond these four types of visits we stay south-side.

For Karen, Beth and me, the three adopted, there is no remembered 'before' our north side pick-ups. No memories of mothers' smiling faces leaning down and tucking us in – because this didn't happen. The three of us who were adopted draw blanks when we try to remember who our real parents are. The upshot of this is we can while away hours and hours imagining the true identities of our real mothers and fathers. But this has to be done in secret so our adopted Mum and Dad won't get upset and think we don't love them.

The fostered on the other hand have real memories. Lindsey, if he can be bribed, tells a story of holding onto his mother's hand and being chased through the bush by something that catches them and pulls him from her and he never sees his mother again. Until he saw the police, he says he thought the things chasing them were lions.

On my eighth birthday, after the hip hip hoorays, and the traditional birthday story of how as a newborn I had hair the colour of pumpkin, Mum's hand stops mid-slice through my birthday cake and she says she has something important to tell me.

"About the woman who gave you that pumpkin coloured mop." Mum's eyes are filled with gifts. "Your birth mother."

My body turns to fizz.

“Molly?” Dad warns. “Are you sure he’s not too young?”

Mum regards Dad for two seconds and then he’s dismissed. Thank God.

“I know her real name and one other thing.”

My mind turns to fizz.

“Now don’t get too excited,” Mum warns, sliding the first slice of cake in front of me, “because I will tell you all the details when you turn eighteen. When you’re old enough.”

The fizz is gone.

It takes all of my concentration to reach out and lever up a spoonful of cake.

“What if you forget?” I ask, pretending not to care.

“I won’t forget,” she replies, plating cake slices for my spellbound brothers and sisters. “I’ve written it down.”

I can’t maintain the act. She is telling me to wait ten years. The cake in my mouth turns to grit.

I once saw a movie about a beautiful, evil queen who chokes to death on sand that’s filling up her dead husband’s pyramid. So awful was her death that I went to the library and borrowed books on ancient Egypt to find out if the story was true. I still don’t exactly know, but all of a sudden I can’t breathe and know how she would have felt.

“That’s not fair!” I yell, shucking off my chair.

“Molly,” Dad throws his hands up and leaves the table, “now see what you’ve done!”

“And this is why I’m not going to tell you,” Mum says, ignoring him, “you’re not old enough and you’ve become hysterical.”

“But why did you say anything?”

“I wish I hadn’t, but it would have been her job to cut your birthday cake and she must be feeling terrible right now.”

“Please tell me a little bit more. Please? Please?”

“One thing. That’s all. Just one thing and then you must not ask me until you’re eighteen. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“The nurses, when they handed you over, said that there was something interesting, something out of the ordinary about your birth.”

Without Mum having to say another word, it’s obvious.

I’m the son of a movie star.

I can’t wait ten years. I need to know now. While Mum does the dishes and Dad relaxes on the couch, I stretch up my arms and fake a yawn. Trying my best to look aimless I amble out of Mum’s field of vision and wander down the carpet runner. Lindsey is the only one watching.

Two bedside cabinets stand like sentries on either side of the double bed. Mum’s side is closest to the door.

Like a trainer putting his arm into the mouth of a circus lion, I carefully slip my forearm into the open bottom drawer and start to tentatively feel for paper objects, expecting at any moment for my hand to scrape against rough tongue.

“What do you think you are doing?” Mum’s cold hard voice freezes the room.

“Looking for…” *I am a tortoise shrinking in its shell* “…my birth mother.”

“I’m your mother!” The muscles in her face twitch. “She gave you up!” She grabs my arm and pulls me from the floor. “Do you hear me? (WHACK) If I ever find you going through my things again you’ll get a thrashing you won’t forget. Now get to your room.”

She pushes me out through her bedroom doorway, slams the door and storms to the kitchen. Despite the humiliation of being smacked on my birthday I still can't stop thinking the information is mine.

I realise I will have to discover the information another way, a secret way.

It takes me a while to realise that if I'm the child of a movie star, a movie star had to have come to Australia.

I'll have to find someone to ask, an adult who won't get suspicious and alert Mum to the fact that I'm hunting for something.

I remember two days circled on the kitchen calendar for the month of September: my birthday, and a barbecue day for Mum and Dad's co-volunteers in the State Emergency Service where, if it's anything like last time, the guests all get drunk and, after the kids fall asleep, go skinny-dipping in the pool.

Arranging my face to look sorry, I leave the bedroom and re-enter the kitchen.

"Mum?"

She's putting food away in the fridge and I wrap my arms about her middle.

"I'm sorry."

"I know you're curious about where you came from," Mum says gently, twisting her body round in my arms and holding my face in her hands, "but never forget she gave you up."

"You're the best mother in the whole world," I say, waiting for the fridge door to close so I can check the calendar "and I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"That's alright," she says, pulling me into a hug.

Fertility

There is a ritual we perform in the call centre when the call volume is low: one of the supervisors takes off her wedding band and ties string around it, and all the new employees who haven't been tested line up in a row. I am a plant in the crowd acting like the innocent bystander. The aim of the ritual is to see how many children a person will end up with. Other call centre employees also join the queue - the newly married, the single girls whose only pictures above their workstations are of dogs, cats and horses, and the women who spend a fortune on IVF. All line up to have their fortunes read. Men from middle management warily watch us from the sidelines and scoff at all this mumbo jumbo, until I'm called forward to demonstrate. Everyone gathers round. If it's a girl the ring is supposed to go round and round in a circle over the palm. If it's a boy it swings straight across in a line. The ring hangs dead over my open hand and everyone is impressed. So good is the effect that some of the middle management men join the queue and joke about the beauty of budgeting forecasts.

I've never wanted kids but this still doesn't excuse why I let myself be used like this. I could stomp off declaring gays are more than capable of having children, and many do. I think I act like this to set people up. Something in me has a habit of looking for the worst. I use homophobia to set a trap for homophobia: the reverse of the Queensland police who once upon a time sent undercover officers into public toilets to entrap homosexuals. Unlike them I don't make any arrests. I keep the findings to myself as if compiling dossiers.

Who is Your Favourite Movie Star?

Most of the State Emergency Service women are chatting together in herds, making it hard for me to separate them. I can hear Mum laughing her tinkling laugh with Dad's best friend Ron. I make myself indispensable carrying platters of food and getting people drinks from the esky. My hand is a frozen claw. Everybody has been drinking a lot when I take an order from a newly arrived man. One I've never seen before. I consider my options. Mum's number one rule is we're not to talk to strangers, never to forget what happened to the Beaumont children who were snatched off the beach by a stranger. But I've already taken his drink order, which means we've already spoken.

Making loud PHEW noises I hand him his beer and pretend to be exhausted.

"Thanks mate," he says kindly, "have a seat. What's your name?"

"David," I reply, deciding someone so nice couldn't possibly steal kids.

"Tell me Dave, when you're not carrying food and drinks what do you get up to?"

"Not much," I say, ignoring the name Dave. I hate Dave.

"Okay then. Hmmm. Tell me, what's your favourite sport?"

"I don't like sport."

"Don't like sport?" he says, throwing his hands up. "What sort of kid are you?"

Like Mum does when a man tells a joke, I let loose a peal of tinkling laughter, but kill it when I see his eyes widen alarmingly.

"Who is your favourite movie star?" I ask, going shy, not being bold enough to ask if he knows of any who had come to Australia.

“That’s a strange question for a boy,” he says quietly and stands. When he’s up he pretends to see someone in the distance and walks off. He’s not a very good actor.

I ask two more men at the barbecue, and despite being careful not to laugh like Mum again I discover men don’t have favourite movie stars, or know of any who had visited Australia.

I go upstairs and watch through the chinks in the back louvres as the adults get more and more drunk and everyone starts squealing and laughing and taking off their clothes to go skinny-dipping.

One week later Mr Saunders, the widower next door, is out back raking leaves up from his garden.

He must be feeling well again.

Mr Saunders had hurt himself falling over the fence to save me when he saw me choking on sand in the doorway of a pyramid made out of old bed-sheets and cardboard boxes. I’d been in the middle of my death scene and hadn’t heard him ask if I was okay. I’m a really good actor: a skill I must have got from my real mum.

“Excuse me Mr Saunders,” embarrassment curls the edges of my voice, “are you feeling better?”

“Yes, thank-you young man.”

After his fall Mum made me explain that I’d been acting out a movie and Mr Saunders kindly said he’d seen the same midday picture and called the actress a little minx. Hearing this, I realise Mr Saunders must know all about movie stars.

“Do you know any movie stars who visited Australia?”

“Hmmm? Let me see,” he says, stretching his arm out along the top of the rake handle to think, “oh yes, an A-grade movie star. One of the most beautiful of all time.”

“What’s her name?” I ask quietly, but firmly. I can’t believe my answer will come from a man living next door all along, or that I nearly killed him before I found my mother.

“Hmmm. Yes, what was her name?”

“Please try and remember, *it’s very important*.” I snip these last three words off in case they cause him to repeat them to Mum.

“Ava Gardner! That’s it. Ava Gardner, and the movie she was in was *On the Beach*.”

“Ava.” I whisper her name like it’s a spell that will swirl me up in a whirlwind of leaves and deposit me at her beautiful feet. “Gardner.”

“Ava Gardner.”

Nothing. Perhaps it’s like polishing my black leather shoes for Sunday school and the shine takes time. Or maybe Mr Saunders is wrong.

“Was it 1965?” I demand.

“It could have been,” he says in a hurt tone, “since my accident my memory for things like that isn’t very good.”

All I hear him say was it could have been and this is enough.

On our family library visit, as well as Enid Blyton books I put in as diversions, I start shoving big picture books of movie stars into my library bag. I hide them under the mattress of my bunk bed in the room I share with Lindsey.

The pictures are all in colour. Beautiful women in tight clothes lie like cats on rugs, or hug red satin cushions to their chests. The men slump in armchairs smoking, or lean against doorways in bad moods. I recognise the woman who choked to death on sand but her name is Joan Collins. Some of the women look lovely, soft and warm, and I’m surprised none of them are turning out to be Ava Gardner. Stopping on each page,

reading each name, I realise I also have a vacancy for a father, and I'm sure all the men and women pictured would see each other all the time at barbecues and skinny-dips.

It is hard to choose a real father. Clark Gable looks a lot like Dad's best friend Ron. I like William Holden the best because he looks a lot like the father I've already got. I daydream getting drinks from the esky for these male stars, asking as they reach out their hands: "Who is your favourite woman movie star?"

"Why, your mother of course!"

"But where is she?" I implore. "I can't find her!"

And then there… there she is.

Ava Gardner – beautiful and strong looking, with a cleft in her chin like a man's, jet-black hair that must be dyed, and eyes that dare. Ava Gardner scares me. She doesn't look like my mother at all. She doesn't look like she'd have natural pumpkin coloured hair. She looks like she has claws and no patience. I panic. I smuggle the book into the bathroom and lock the door.

Positioning the book open behind the knobs of the tap handles I stare into the mirrored cabinet and try to find similarities. I have freckles, Ava Gardner doesn't. I have green eyes. Hers are black. I make the same sooky shape with my mouth, and try to raise the same dare in my eyes. I pretend there's something similar with our cheekbones but I know I'm tricking myself. Deep down I know nothing is the same.

Nothing.

Maybe it's not my decision. Maybe if the others were convinced I could convince myself and make it true. I call an emergency tree meeting.

Each one of us kids has our own designated tree in the backyard, and when we have important announcements, invitations must be hand delivered by Beth whose job it is to deliver the post. Before sending off my invites I decorate my tree by hanging old

bed-sheets from the branches in elegant swathes for a movie star feel. As the invitees arrive and before Karen starts roll call, I try my best to look mysterious in the upper branches.

"Lindsey?"

"Here."

"David?"

"Yes, I am here. But I'll be leaving soon!"

Ignoring my mysterious statement Karen calls her own name. "That's me, and I am here."

"Beth?"

"Here!"

The rule is, the host or hostess has to pass round plates of imaginary nibbles and drinks and everyone has to chew and swallow imaginary mouthfuls. Then the host, or hostess, has to offer to pass on the recipes. Then once everyone is settled the true reason for the meeting can be revealed.

"I know who my real mother is."

"But how?" Karen whispers in surprise. "Mum wasn't going to tell you until you were older."

"I found out," I respond. "Her name is Ava Gardner and she is a movie star."

Scraping the remains off against the branch and removing the towel, I reveal the tray I've used for the hors-d'oeuvres is actually a big picture book of movie stars. The girls look impressed. I open the book to the photo of Ava Gardner.

"This is my mother," I say, turning the book to show them all. "In real life her hair is a lot more orangey than that – sort of my colour."

The three of them all look at her for the longest moment but no one says anything.

“She came to Australia and made a movie but had to give me up because she was so busy.” Even to my ears it sounds unbelievable.

“You’re a liar,” Lindsey says quietly, climbing down out of the tree. “You look nothing like her.”

Blushing, I shut the book and the three of us watch Lindsey walk down to his end of the yard and disappear up through the foliage of his own tree. Karen and Beth help me pull down all the curtain material and put it back up under the house.

A little while later Mr Saunders motions me to the side fence and tells me he’s been all muddled up since his fall. That *On the Beach* was made a few years earlier. But by now I’ve realised – instead of being the child of a movie star, I must be Royal.

I am Royal

“Mum,” I ask, making my voice sound as sick as possible, “can I watch television?”

The only time we are allowed to watch daytime television is if we are ill, or on weekends if it’s raining. By family law if one of us is sick on a wet weekend this attracts the additional privilege of being in charge of the television channels.

This day is Sunday, and I’m in control.

“Don’t cough over the food!” Mum exclaims, rolling out the pastry for dinner. “Yes, you can, but not too loud!”

“Mum says I can watch television.” Shuffling back into the lounge room I plonk myself down on the white shag pile mat in my cocoon of sick blankets and turn on the T.V. Karen and Beth are playing snap on the coffee table. While the television warms up and before the picture opens like an eye, I consider my reflection. I’m nearly ten, I’ve got buckteeth, freckles and orangey hair, and I think being sick makes me even more interesting looking.

Behind my reflection in the glass I can see Lindsey staring; his finger aiming the barrel of his model WW2 Panzer tank from his knee.

“SNAP!” Beth’s voice.

“You love yourself!” Lindsey lobs.

Before I can deny this most terrible charge, other words, not from Lindsey or the girls, come swimming up out of the television.

Did anyone survive the terrible murder of the Russian Royal family?

Slowly out of the struggling moving lines, images of olden time people in a carriage being pulled by horses break free of the static, and then the picture changes to jerky images of four laughing girls running across lawns in front of a palace. The reflection of Lindsey disappears, swamped by the people onscreen.

Like old thunder, heavy music deep from the throats of men rolls out over the onscreen appearance of the names of four girls and one boy.

Olga Tatiana Maria Anastasia Alexei

One after another their faces are introduced to the remains of my reflection still visible in the glass. Our pictures kiss, even the boy's. Despite the pictures being black and white I recognise they all must have orangey hair colour like me.

Did any of the Princesses survive that day in the cellar of Ipatiev House?

"SNAP!" Karen's voice.

A prickling sensation takes hold of my scalp and spine. None of the others are interested in the television program. Lindsey's attention is buried back in the guts and glue of his plastic vehicle, and Beth and Karen both have raised hands ready. It dawns on me that God made the day rainy and me sick so I could be in control.

Through the kitchen doorway Mum is preoccupied with rolling out pie pastry. Everyone is completely unaware of the revelations unfolding before me. Straightening my posture I place my blanket wrapped body between the images on the television and Mum's potential view. I turn the volume down so she can't hear.

Anastasia was seventeen when the soldiers of the Russian Revolution ushered the Royal family into the cellar with the intent of murdering them all. Rumours persist that a fortune in diamonds and other precious gems, sewn into the hems of their

clothes, and hidden in their corsets, helped deflect the bullets, and somehow one of the Royal Princesses survived. That Princess Anastasia escaped.

One of them did. I know one did.

“SNAP.”

I watch images of a boy my age wrapped in blankets being held delicately by strong-looking men and being patted because he is sickly. Prince Alexei in sick blankets. Like me in front of the T.V.

SNAP. SNAP. SNAP.

After the program finishes, with glittering triumph flashing from my eyes and my Royal sick cloak trailing behind me, I enter the kitchen. It was foolish of Mum to attempt to keep secrets of such magnitude from me. Even God wants me to know. The one thing stopping me from revealing my discovery is the lesson I learnt from the Queen who drowned in sand. Cruel people get punished.

Washing the flour off, Mum comes and feels my forehead.

“You’re burning up. Go and lie down on your bed and I’ll bring a washer in. For goodness sakes, pick that blanket up from the kitchen floor!”

Without a word I walk a victory lap about the table and then exit to my bed where I wait for Mum to bring in the cool, damp cloth.

At the library I swap books of movie stars for ones about the Russian Royal family and smuggle them home in my library bag.

I make a private room out of my bottom bunk by tucking towels under Lindsey’s mattress and, inside this tent, pore over the photos printed protectively in the middle of each book. The faces of my family stare back at me. Unlike the photos in the movie star book the photos in these books are all black and white. There is one photo of the five

children with just their shaved heads showing from behind a screen. I can't tell who's who. I'm surprised because the picture can only mean head lice.

If I didn't have hair I could stand alongside them and no one could tell I wasn't one of them. Not even Lindsey.

This book is my family's photo album. Photos of them on holidays. On the steps of their palaces. Anastasia as a baby. Further in are photos from the cellar where they were shot. I try to imagine the moment the soldiers raised their rifles and shot my Great Grandparents, Great Aunts and Uncle dead.

I lock the bathroom door and position the open book behind the taps. Their shaved heads stare back at me saying, *what are you waiting for*. On autopilot I pull my hair back away from my face revealing the same delicate skull. My hand drops to the scissors kept in the bathroom drawer. Soldiers are knocking on the door. Raising the open blades to the side of my head I cut off uneven clumps of hair and let them fall. My relatives in the book explain who I am.

Princess Anastasia escaped the murder of our family and met a nice soldier from the White army who knew enemies from the Red army would never stop looking to kill her. Running and hiding, running and hiding, Anastasia later gave birth to this man's daughter, and then, always running and hiding, Anastasia's daughter grew up and met a nice man, another supporter who helped them to run and hide; finally to Brisbane, where she gave birth to you, but had to give you up and keep running because the assassins knew where Anastasia and her daughter were hiding and were coming.

The beating on the door becomes louder.

"Open this door at once! Do you hear me? We do not lock doors in this house!"

Anastasia's daughter had to leave you behind because Anastasia was very old and so your birth mother couldn't look after both of you and run from the assassins that had been sent to kill them.

It makes sense. Even if it took many years and the crossing of many oceans, the killers of my Grandmother's family wouldn't rest until they hunted Anastasia down. I squirrel the book right down to the bottom of the dirty clothes-basket and turn the key. Stepping back I imagine the hammering people at the door recognising my princely form, falling to their knees and begging for my forgiveness.

Mum shoves the door open and Lindsey, Karen and Beth are straining on tippy-toes behind Mum to get a good look.

"What have you done?" Mum yells.

"None of your business," I say imperiously.

"What?" Mum demands, advancing into the room. "What did you say?"

"I just wanted to see what it would look like," I say, cringing.

"You stupid boy!" Mum's voice ricochets off the tiles. "You've got school tomorrow!"

Mum snatches Dad's hair clippers from the sink cupboard and busies herself with unwinding the troublesome cord. I have to ask. I can't wait.

"Can sixty-four-year-olds be grandmothers?"

"Yes, of course," Mum says, preoccupied with clipper combs.

"No, I mean, can a sixty-four-year-old become a grandmother for the first time?"

"Yes!" Mum yells, exasperated. "Why?"

"No reason," I counter, "I'm just interested."

"Boy," Mum says, eyeing me suspiciously, "you are getting sillier by the day!"

When she is finished shaving my head she pulls me out of the bathroom and leads me to the top of the back stairs.

“Go play downstairs,” she says, with more worry in her voice than anger. “You’re spending far too much time looking in the mirror.”

Blood

I put off more sensitive questions until I see Mr Saunders working in his yard. Leaning against the side fence I pretend to read my library book while making interesting noises.

“What’s got you hooked?” he asks.

“Oh hi, Mr Saunders!” acting like I didn’t see him. “What’s this word?”

Mr Saunders comes over and leans down to look.

“Haemophilia?” Taking the book from my hands he turns it over and reads out the title: “*The Romanovs*. Shouldn’t you be asking your mother these sorts of questions?”

“She’s too busy.” I shrug noncommittally, watching as he flicks through to the photos in the middle.

‘Wow,” he presents the photo of five shaved heads to me, “these kids look like you with your new haircut!”

“I think they had nits.” I realise Mr Saunders must think I have the same affliction. “I don’t have nits. I cut my own hair to see what it would look like and Mum had to fix it!”

“Really?” Mr Saunders looks dubiously over his glasses. He returns his eyes to the book and moves the picture up and down like he’s adjusting a microscope. “It says

here that two of the five lost their hair due to measles and the other three shaved their heads in sympathy. Isn't that delightful."

"They're all really nice," I say, stroking my own stubble like I've had the pleasure of their company. "What does that word mean?"

"Haemophilia? Oh, the Romanovs were cursed by it. It's a horrible disease that if you hurt yourself, even just a tiny bit, you can bleed to death just like that!" Mr Saunders clicks his fingers. "Down through the generations it's passed, from the mother to the boy child if I remember correctly. Girls don't get it."

"I could die?" I shriek, remembering the scissor blades against my skull.

Grabbing the book I wheel away from the fence. I find Beth and blabber instructions to get everyone, that I don't have time to write invitations, that I'm in mortal danger, that having even a paper cut...

I strip an old sheet into ribbons, which I wrap about each limb.

Once again Lindsey, Karen and Beth assemble in the lower branches, but this time, because of the importance of the occasion, because death could be arriving any minute, I ignore the usual opening formalities and announce I've found my true family at a terrible price.

"Not again," Beth whispers under her breath and raises her shoulders at Lindsey, who rolls his eyes. Karen stifles a laugh.

"This is true," I insist, daring any of them to contradict me, "and I've got the pictures to prove it."

Lowering the book towards Lindsey I wait until he takes it. Then I put both my hands against my shaved head.

“Look at me,” I demand, turning my head left and right, “and then look at them. I’m Royal, but if I hurt myself I might die. It’s a disease that has cursed my entire family.”

Lindsey looks at me and then looks at the line of four bald Princesses and one bald Prince.

“They look like they had the nits!” He turns the book and shows the girls. They all snort.

“You idiots!” I declare. “If you care to read, you will see they had the measles.”

Lindsey flicks through the pages looking at each photograph. I can tell he is trying to find reasons why it’s not true, but with all the evidence piling up, he’s finding it very hard.

“My family were all supposed to be killed by soldiers, but Princess Anastasia escaped and met a nice man who helped her and they had a daughter who grew up and looked after her. Then that daughter met a nice man and had a baby and that baby was me.”

“But why did they give you away?” There is now a hint of triumph in Lindsey’s voice.

The answer materialises, fully formed and perfect.

“Because the princess who escaped is now very old and my real mother had to carry her and run from the assassins sent to kill them at the same time. She couldn’t carry me too.”

I can see Lindsey calculating my story and reliving his one memory of being chased through the bush in his mother’s arms, of being caught and ripped away. I can see the figures adding up. He can’t deny what happened to my family because of what happened to him.

“I guess it could be true,” he says grudgingly, lowering himself to the ground with his eyes hidden, “but that doesn’t mean you’re king of me!”

Grave

I don’t have a designated workspace so at the start of each shift I have to scour the call centre for an empty desk. I steer clear of the desks with photos of fat, smiling children stuffed into the seams of the partitions used to separate the phone agents. I learnt my lesson after a photo of a child went missing from a desk where I’d sat after the last ring swinging ritual. The mother, a woman who I remember nodding enthusiastically at the sight of the ring hanging dead over my palm, asked me accusingly, three times, in a voice that rose up above the partitions, if I’d taken it – as if, because I can’t have any, I’d want her fat brat. I said no once, twice, and gave up, feeling that my red face was implying more than any word. Now I sit at the vacated desks of the childless, those decorated with laminated cards heralding sayings like ‘If you want the rainbow you’ve got to put up with the rain.’

My favourite saying is cradled in ornate curlicues: *Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.*

I can’t imagine any of these cards ever going missing.

The biggest mass grave in Australia is located in the grounds of Newcastle’s Christchurch Cathedral. The grave should be listed on the East Coast tourist trail, up there with the Big Pineapple and the Big Prawn, except no one exactly knows where it is because there’s been a mass forgetting. The city itself is complicit with putting all

those people underground in the first place, and this is the reason why I think it has forgotten the location. The city watched them die and didn't do anything about it until it was too late. Council workers repairing the retaining wall unearthed some bodies in the nineteen eighties. Bones spilled out onto the footpath, but the workers shoved the bones back into the holes and moved on.

I can see the cathedral grounds from the roof of the health fund when I go up to have a cigarette. In 1866, during a particularly violent July storm, the SS Cawarra tried to enter the harbour mouth. The citizens of Newcastle, alerted by alarms set off at the lighthouse, lined up to see if she would make it. The ship had her back broken on the oyster bank and was soon awash in huge waves. The townspeople were terribly slow in organising a rescue. The majority of the men whose job it was to row the rescue craft were drunk. It was mid-morning. All but one of sixty-two people perished. The bodies they found were all buried in one grave.

It's a perverse thing, but if you walk out along the northern break-wall and stop at the exact point, you gain the same view as the doomed people who clambered up into the rigging to wait for rescue.

Bad things have happened everywhere, and I know it is irrational, but I can't shake the feeling that Queensland, the earth and air of the place, is to blame for the rotten things that happened in my family.

Queensland

On the trip to get Errol we were also supposed to take possession of a girl called Sasha, Lindsey and Errol's blood sister. But the journey to get them has been delayed because Dad has to finish enclosing the side veranda and converting the space into two new bedrooms. One of these bedrooms is to be allotted to one of the girls, and the other new room is for a second paying boarder we are taking in to help feed and clothe us all. We already have one boarder, a farm girl needing to be close to town to attend high school. Her name is Alison and she boards in the bedroom closest to the bathroom for sixteen dollars a week.

According to Mum, Dad was too slow renovating the old verandah, and in the meantime another family came and took Sasha. Mum was really upset because she wanted to keep the three siblings together. She accused Dad of dragging with his tools because she thought he didn't want to get two at once.

If you're to believe Mum, the reason for all Mum and Dad's adopting and fostering was because Dad married Mum without telling her he couldn't have children. Instead of divorce Mum punished him with a nearly instant brood of six, and no government agency was there to say 'Whoa, hold your horses. Perhaps try counselling.'

I'm an old hand at those journeys north-side and by the time we went to get Errol I had long since discovered that being the keeper of family history was an important role, and one that could be turned to my own advantage.

"Here it comes!" I say. "It's over the next hill!"

And as soon as the collection of small, pale green migrant houses appears, angled down the side of a wooded hill, the words spill out.

“Look Mum! Your first proper home in Australia!” And then in tandem, because we both know she will say it:

“The size of a shoebox!”

And then both of us laughing at the memory of it, laughing as if we were both glad to be out of there, and Lindsey’s eyes narrowing as if he’s tallying up numbers, and Karen and Beth’s look of bewilderment, not realising the power I am taking by inserting myself in my mother’s story and leaving them all out.

Lindsey is silent for the bulk of these trips. It is only when he can see the police horses stamping and shaking their manes in the grounds of the Queensland Police Academy that he states quietly how when he is older he is going to arrest people who lie and do bad things. He doesn’t say it to anyone in particular, but I take it as a personal threat he wants to arrest me for taking more than my share.

The signal for Mum to start rolling Dad’s first cigarette on the journey occurs when the car drives past the tobacco farm.

“Mum,” I remind her, leaning eagerly forward, “Dad’s cigarette?”

Mum clicks her tongue and whacks her own forehead to make us all laugh, and removes the tobacco pouch from the glove box. She opens the pouch and retrieves the envelope of papers. Pulling two free, she licks one and sticks the wet edge to the dry edge of the other, making a miniature white double bed like hers and Dad’s. Dipping her fingers back into the pouch Mum lifts out clumps and hanging tendrils of tobacco, deposits them down the middle of the white paper bed, and presses them together into one long thin tobacco figure.

Dad watches her from the corner of his eye. I love the way he watches her, and the way she knows she is being watched. Once she is finished with the figure in the bed she lets it lie there for a moment and then starts to roll him backwards and forwards

between her forefingers and thumbs, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, like a see-saw, like a rocking chair. Watching these actions makes me want to be the one who is being watched. Mum raises the cocoon of tobacco to her lips as if it's a tiny harmonica and licks along the edge. Then she runs it up and down between her fingers checking for bumps. Mum doesn't smoke but she always puts it in her mouth and lights it using Dad's heavy cigarette lighter. After two drags she leans over and places the cigarette between his lips.

Lindsey only went on one less trip than me, but instead of trying to bolster his position in the family as I did, he let circumstances wash over him. I think when we went to get Beth, Lindsey stopped holding his breath and started to drown under the tidal wave of siblings. I think I fought for proximity to our mother because, despite the fact I fantasised about my birth mother, I couldn't bear the thought of losing the only one I'd ever known. Lindsey had already lived through the experience of being taken from his real mother and because he is a foster child he knows he can't rely on it never happening again. Unlike the process of adoption, which is permanent, fostering can be temporary.

Royal Visit

Thirty minutes after crossing the Brisbane River, Dad's Holden passes through the orphanage gates and pulls to a stop. Everyone tumbles out, glad to be stretching their legs. Karen and Beth start a game of chase round a collection of tall trees stirring up a cloud of insects. I stumble out and throw up onto the gravel.

"He's carsick," my mother calls apologetically and I look up to see a nun standing watching from the top of the main building's stairs. Beside her is a boy with wavy black hair and pale brown skin. He looks uncertain.

"Bees!" Karen and Beth yell, running back, slapping their arms and jumping into the car. I don't know how a bee sting would affect my haemophilia and I don't want to die in a place full of potential replacements so I fling myself back inside. I scream to wind up the windows, and as the glass rises in front of our eyes I see the boy at the top of the stairs break into laughter.

"Don't panic," the nun calls, before I've finished winding, "they don't sting. They're harmless. They're native bees."

I am embarrassed by my panic, and amazed I've never heard of bees that don't sting. The boy at the top of the steps is still smiling, at my expense, and I realise I'm not car sick, I'm sick because of him.

The nun is reaching out her hands and beckoning us.

The three of us quietly get out of the car. Mum and Dad strike out across the gravel towards the nun but Lindsey turns in the other direction. Veering sideways with his arms stretched right out Lindsey lets the moving cloud roll right over him. He looks like something trapped in the static of a cold television screen. The bees don't attack. The nun isn't lying and the girls and I run to catch up with Mum.

Dad greets the nun at the top of the stone stairs and everyone is introduced to Errol.

“Where’s Lindsey?” Mum asks, turning left and right.

“In the bees,” Beth says, and everyone turns to see Lindsey standing with his eyes closed concentrating on the feeling of insects bunting into his skin.

“Lindsey!” Dad calls out, “get out of those insects and come and meet your new brother.”

“I’m not new,” Errol says lightly.

“Of course not, darling!” Mum bends down to him. “Lindsey’s already your brother, and I hope it doesn’t take too long for you to feel like we’re your real family as well.”

“Amen,” the Nun says, with a slight bow.

Lindsey moves slowly across the ground and, like a crippled robot, levers each leg up the stone stairs. Dad makes an exasperated noise and pulls him the rest of the way up by the arm and lines him up face to face with Errol.

“He’s shy,” Mum says to the nun.

“Errol, this is Lindsey.” Dad has a hold of both their arms as if he’s staging a conversation between sock puppets. “Lindsey, this is Errol.”

Lindsey inclines his head and Errol nods quickly back.

“There’s a bee in your hair,” Errol says, pointing to the curls above Lindsey’s right eyebrow.

“Where?” Dad says, angling Lindsey round and scanning his head. Lindsey tries to twist away before Dad can cuff the insect but he is too late. Karen lets fly a squeal and we all jump back.

“It’s not dead but it doesn’t look very well,” Beth states, with her hands on her hips.

“Come inside, come inside,” the nun says, fluttering her arms like a cormorant drying her wings.

We move forward through the doorway and I glance back and witness Lindsey drop down in a protective huddle over the bee. His hands shuffle in an effort to get the insect up and away before Dad tries to stop him. I watch Lindsey turn and run down the stairs towards the trees where the bees have their hive. He is whispering into his cupped hand.

The room we’ve entered doesn’t have much furniture. In the hope that our Mum and Dad will have a change of heart, silent children wearing small uncertain smiles stand about in groups of loose threes and fours like figures in a children’s clothing catalogue. We walk through them into a dormitory, with all the identically made up beds aligned down each wall. It’s like a fun-house mirror where the narrow, thin looking beds go on forever, but there’s no fun, and there’re no toys anywhere.

Errol goes to one of the beds and lifts a little case from the floor, and with his head held high hurries through the door without looking back.

“Looks like the little blighter can’t get away quick enough!” Dad says, and Mum shakes her head at Dad in case he’s hurt the nun’s feelings.

“We do what we can,” the nun says simply, and this time I know she is lying.

As we leave the building with Errol leading the way, all the other orphans, not lucky enough to be coming into our family, stand at the windows waving and watching us walk back to the car.

“Careful, Errol!” Beth warns, as we get to the car, placing her small hand flat against his chest. “Don’t stand in David’s spew.”

Some of the children start to wave coloured items of clothing at us through the orphanage windows and I imagine they're flags and we're the Romanovs and we are so pleased with what we've seen on our orphanage inspection we are taking one of them with us. I raise my hand and wave graciously back. I am Alexei Romanov and Dad is the Tsar Nicholas and Mum the Tsarina.

"Goodbye, Errol! Have a nice trip!"

As we climb into the car the voices of the children who were left behind take on a desperate edge, and they start to cast them out like dragnets, trying to ensnare Mum and Dad's hearts with ragged entreaties to enjoy the drive home, the day, the year and our lives: anything to stop our car turning out onto the road and driving away without them.

"COME BACK SOON!"

Dad hits the accelerator as soon as we are through the gates. The windows are rolled down and hot air buffets all our heads. Mum looks exhausted. Halfway home, after resisting the desire, I give in and sneak a peek at Errol. He catches me looking and smiles. The smile isn't too shy and isn't a grin. I try to smile back the same sort of smile.

Lindsey is sitting with his eyes closed feeling the wind on his face.

Exterminate

Several days after Errol's arrival I announce a tree meeting, and after indulging in a round of hors-d'oeuvres, rule number one is explained to Errol: neither Mum nor Dad must hear us talking about finding our real parents as this would upset them greatly. Then, after Errol promises never to say a word, I reveal he is living with a real prince and tell my terrible story. Then I introduce Errol to the only game that Lindsey is ever enthusiastic about playing.

"It's unfortunate," I say sympathetically, "the best role is to play one of the Romanovs, but you have to be one of the soldiers; Lindsey needs help with the killing."

Errol doesn't seem to mind.

Perching in the tree, surrounded by draped curtain material, the two girls and I hurriedly sew jewels into the hems of all our clothes. Karen plays the Queen and Tatiana, and I am the King and the Prince, and sometimes, if Beth isn't playing her properly, Anastasia.

We watch Errol and Lindsey march towards the castle armed with old fence palings for rifles held up against their shoulders.

"Attention!" Lindsey calls and the two boys stand stock-still.

The three of us act despairing and outraged.

"What are we going to do?"

"Call the police?" Beth says seriously.

"No, there are no police. It's just us against them."

"You," Lindsey fiercely points at each one of us in turn, "are all under arrest!"

"You can't arrest us, you've got no right!"

"Prove it! Come down and fight."

“My sweets,” I declare, bowing to the princesses, “I will protect you.”

The sceptres and the fence palings become swords and there is a short disabling fight. I always have to lose for the game to proceed.

Lindsey demands Tatiana and Anastasia vacate the palace, and then pushes the three of us up under the house, through the forest of stumps and into the furthest corner. On the way past the stumps we have to try and grab hold of them.

“Resistance is futile.” Lindsey speaks in a robotic voice and systematically pulls each of our hands from the supports.

“Exterminate, exterminate!” Forgetting whose side she is on, Beth mimics a Dalek from *Dr Who.*

When we are finally corralled in the darkest corner Lindsey directs Errol to keep his gun trained on us while he reads the charges.

“By order of us you will be put to death for taking more than your share and trying to be King!”

“How dare you threaten us.” I act outraged, puffing out my chest. “This is treason.”

“Silence!” Lindsey raises his rifle. “You will die and I will enjoy killing you!”

Lindsey slowly turns his head and nods to Errol.

“NhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNhNh!” Saliva bullets spray everywhere from the backs of their throats.

“Run, Ana!”

I watch Anastasia stumble away into freedom. Then I die.

Tree Giving

At a private tree meeting in my tree, attended by everyone except Errol, the need for a ceremony is agreed upon to not only mark the arrival of our new brother, but of any future kid, and also to impress upon these newcomers that they just can't walk in and take what they want. Instead of leaving it up to Errol to choose which tree he'll make his, we decide we'll hold a tree giving ceremony, where, after careful consideration, ownership of one of the remaining backyard trees will be bestowed and presented with a carefully handwritten certificate.

Everyone shakes hands and then we go through the list of remaining trees and decide on the one to be Errol's. I race upstairs and draw a map of everyone's trees and surround the words TREE GIVING CERTIFICATE with scrolls and curlicues.

Downstairs Lindsey stands waiting with stiff cranked arms pretending he's a steam engine.

"All aboard!" he calls.

With Errol as the coal wagon, the girls as carriages, and me as the caboose, we weave about the yard, slowing down, then speeding up, first in front of one tree then in front of another like they're potential stations. Pulling in almost to a halt at the unclimbable Pawpaw.

"Is this the one?" I yell over Errol's groans.

"No!" yell the others. "Yay!" yells Errol.

We accelerate past Beth's nest under the Coffee tree, past Lindsey's Loquat – a fortress of dark green serrated leaves – and slow alongside the ownerless Thorny Lemon where Errol starts groaning again.

"Is *this* the one?" I ask jokingly over the rush of steam out of Lindsey's mouth.

“No!” the girls roar.

The train picks up speed and barrels past Karen’s Umbrella tree, past my tree of Unknown Name, its airy branches twisting into convenient elbow turns for seats and brackets for shelving. Lindsey keeps us going and round and round till finally he applies his brakes outside the tall Macadamia tree growing in the spider beloved corner of the yard, with water views into the rear neighbour’s in-ground swimming pool.

“Is this the one?”

“Yeahhh!”

“Your new home!” I declare. Applause breaks out and I step out from the line like a conductor stepping out of a carriage and present Errol with the certificate.

A certain amount of the afternoon is let pass, then a letter is written reminding Errol he is expected to call his first tree meeting and tell us his stories. But when Errol sends out his invitation Beth returns with a message saying that Lindsey’s not coming, and hasn’t given a reason.

No one has ever refused to attend a tree meeting before, and there is a lot of hushed whispering in the foyer at the base of Errol’s tree where we’re kept waiting in case Lindsey changes his mind. I am annoyed at Lindsey. His refusal to attend weakens the power of the tree giving ceremony. Finally, tired of waiting, Errol invites us up into the branches, and after we pretend to eat folded-up leaves from a cardboard platter, and after I’ve taught Errol the proper way to say hors-d’oeuvres, we settle down so Errol can tell his story.

I don’t know what I have come expecting. Something more comprehensive than we ever got from Lindsey, that’s for sure. Lindsey rarely tells his story, and never at a tree meeting, because he has never thrown one. In fact, I’ve never even been allowed into his tree.

The only thing Lindsey can remember hearing is his mother saying, ‘Shush now! They’ll hear.’

When Lindsey tells his story his voice is flat and he doesn’t do anything to make it sound better. No siren sounds or screaming, just flat telling. And the chasing story through the bush is all he can remember. For Lindsey, nothing exists of either parent beforehand. It was as if being chased trampled over all his earlier memories making them too muddy to remember.

Errol’s stories aren’t turning out to be much better. They’re just bits and pieces of images made up of flashing teeth and laughing eyes, shouts of song and laughter. I can get the same effect from turning the knob of the television set quickly from one channel to the other. As Errol re-enacts what he remembers he is rocking backwards and forwards, making the tree sway dangerously, and I have to hang on for my dear life. Karen has wedged herself into the lowest, safest fork and is smiling benignly; but Beth, with a face-splitter smile, is riding her branch like it’s a bucking bronco. This, I remind myself, is why I never wanted this tree in the first place; the view into the neighbour’s pool is pleasant but the branches are too flimsy.

Through the waving foliage of Errol’s tree I can see Lindsey climbing down out of his tree as if he’s a zombie being pulled by an invisible lead. His eyes are closed and his face is angled in Errol’s direction. Lindsey comes to a halt at the periphery of Errol’s tree. His mouth is open to the sky. It’s as if Errol is feeding him something. Errol is making the sounds of all the birds he can remember flying above him, and making fish swimming movements with his hands and feet for all the fish that used to swim round him. It is interesting in a crazy sort of way but definitely not in the way my stories are interesting.

“Lindsey!” A woman’s voice comes out of Errol’s mouth and his eyes widen alarmingly but it’s as if he’s realised they don’t belong to him anymore. His arms turn out in sharp handles like a sugar bowl. There is a woman in the tree where Errol was sitting. A dog, not from our neighbourhood, starts barking in the distance. “Come here you little rascal, where have you been?”

“There, there.” Errol starts uttering words of comfort in the same woman’s voice and staring down at an imaginary baby being held in her arms. “Don’t cry. You’re all right. You’re here now. There, there.”

Errol is hugging himself, rocking himself saying ‘there there’ in a voice not his own. I’m embarrassed for him, and disappointed. From the platters of food and polite conversation Errol had almost gotten everything right, but his stories are crazy. I glance at the others expecting everyone else to be embarrassed. Karen can’t take her eyes off him, and Beth is trying to copy Errol’s hand movements. I roll my eyes. The girls have no idea.

I’m startled to see thick cords of water running down each side of Lindsey’s face. His shirt is soaking wet. His eyes suddenly open wide. His hands and jaw start working woodenly like a puppet’s, as if he’s trying to mimic the words and movements of the woman coming out of his brother’s body.

Reflections of our backyard return to his eyes and he senses me staring. Lindsey shakes his head and snarls. He rakes the tears with his knuckles and launches himself into the tree, climbing desperately past the three of us, like a drowning man trying to reach the surface. He grabs Errol’s throat.

“No, Lindsey, no!”

I can’t tell if the high voice is the woman’s or if it’s because Errol is being strangled.

“STOP IT!” Lindsey’s voice explodes. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

Later, back at my tree, after things have calmed down, I whisper to the girls that I think Lindsey is jealous because Errol can remember and he can’t.

Rayley

After we miss out on Sasha, Mum is determined to get a foster girl and that’s when we travel north side to get Rayley. Rayley is older than Karen by one year and, with her arrival, she becomes the oldest girl in the family.

The reason Rayley had been put into a children’s home is her real mother didn’t want her anymore. Rayley had been minding her little brother and he’d fallen out of a front-yard tree and died impaled on a fence spike. Rayley’s mother blamed her. Or so Rayley kept saying.

In a quiet tree giving ceremony, minus the train journey, the unclimbable Pawpaw is given to Rayley and we neglect to inform her of the symbolic first tree meeting, because we already know her stories off by heart.

Rayley’s stories never stop and have become real rivals to mine. Karen and Beth are enthralled. I can hear them oohhing and aahhing on the blanket Rayley spreads out at the foot of her Pawpaw. Before our family Rayley has been in four others, or so she says, and she has seen lots of things. She has a story about a little dog dying after protecting her from a brown snake.

Since Rayley started telling her stories Karen and Beth fail to show any interest in playing the Romanovs. From my position in my tree I can see the three girls start to make up a game called Brown Snake.

I have to do something.

“Don’t listen,” I say, swinging down from my tree, “her stories can’t be true.”

And when she keeps speaking…

“Liar, liar, liar, liar.”

Before long my sisters start to believe *me* and my wish comes true. Rayley’s stories are dismissed before they are out of her mouth and I get my sisters back.

I even have Rayley begging to play.

The situation with Lindsey, Errol, and Sasha, the girl we nearly got, is different to Rayley’s. I can understand Rayley’s mother not wanting her. I don’t want her. But three unwanted from the same family – how is it possible? Did they each kill a sibling like Rayley did? Should I be scared for my life? Or did their real mother and father breed like rabbits? Is that what that saying meant? Were they born with soft downy ears that shrank to delicate brown shells as they got older? Did they live in holes in the ground? Was it because of a special disease set free by the government to kill them; or had there been a natural disaster?

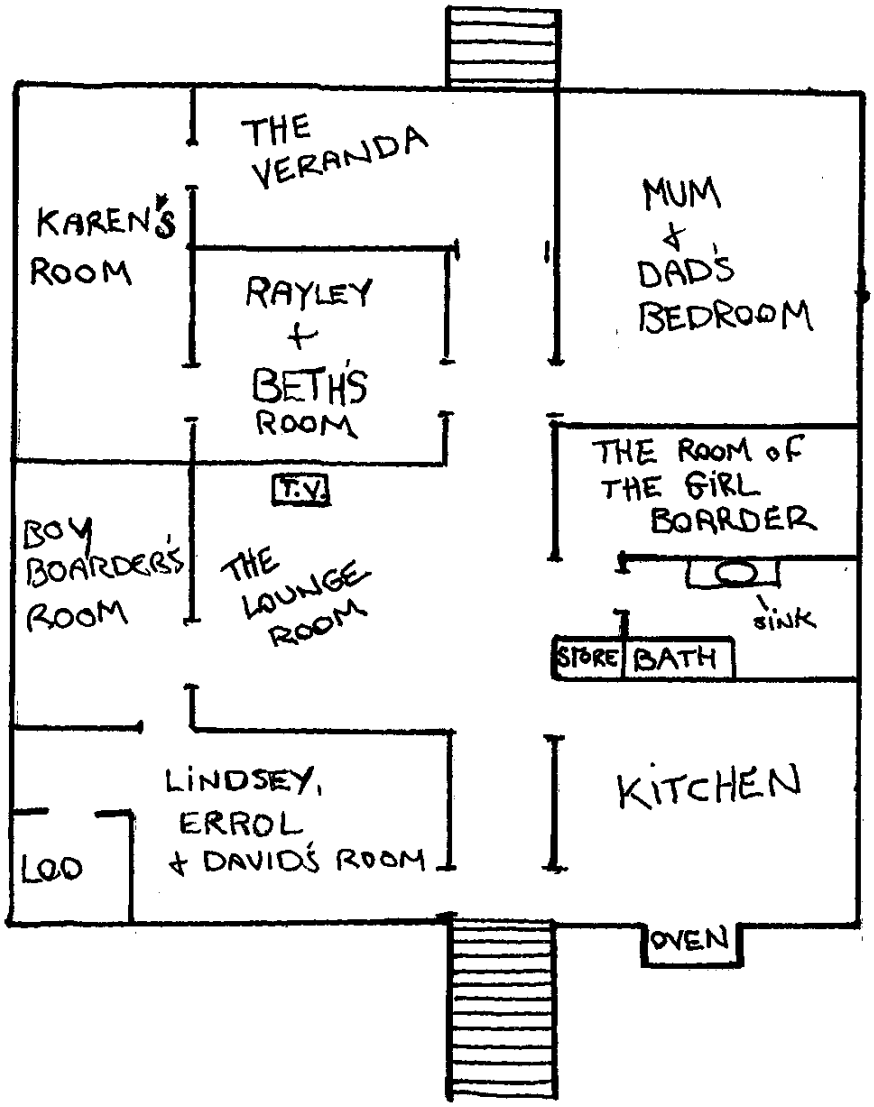
When I ask Mum she explains the government has decided that Lindsey and Errol’s parents couldn’t look after them properly; but, Mum says, this is rubbish, and the government is wrong.

*

The three of us boys sleep in the back sleep-out. Lindsey and Errol have bunk beds and I’ve been moved to a single. Rayley and Beth have the front room and Karen is given one of the new rooms all to herself. In any other family the new room would have been given to the oldest girl but Rayley is only new and this wouldn’t be fair. Alan, the new boarder, has the other new bedroom and Mum and Dad sleep in the main

bedroom. Mum finally announces her decision that the house is full. No more kids. We all breathe a sigh of relief.

1st diagram of sleeping arrangements:



A Room of One's Own

Errol is sickly and every morning and night, on doctor's advice, Mum has to beat his back with cupped hands till he spits phlegm from his lungs into a bucket. He has bronchiolitis and is asthmatic and has a red plastic puffer. This implement is like a fancy cigarette in the movies. I love the fierce shaking, the deep inhalation, and the moment before letting the remaining fog come out when he stares off, sightlessly, as if he goes somewhere the rest of us don't exist. I wish I had a similar tool for my haemophilia.

At night the girls and I sit on the floor in front of the couch, our heads tilting in differing angles of concern as Errol lies over Mum's knees like a travel blanket. Errol cries at the beginning of each back beating, and Mum, without missing a beat, cries softly along with him.

The beating of Errol's back is the nightly attraction. It doesn't take Errol long to master his tears or for Mum to start calling him her brave little soldier.

Lindsey stands looking over from behind the couch, witnessing the side effects of Mum's ministrations. He watches Mum fall in love with Errol because Errol is being so brave.

I see-saw between two thoughts: Errol is a dud who isn't going to last very long, and he's the goose laying the golden egg each time he spits up a golden glob.

I think the act of hitting Errol's back bonds Mum to him much more quickly than if Errol had been healthy. Under different circumstances I would have been as alarmed as Lindsey, but unlike Lindsey I'm reasonably sure where I stand in the scheme of Mum's heart. I am the first child picked up and have had more time to make an

imprint. I am also white in the way she is white and no one can tell I'm not her real son. No one asks Mum at the shops, 'Where did you get him?'

Not like they do with the other two.

In order of appearance we descend like this:

• David (me): adopted

• Lindsey: fostered

• Karen: adopted

• Beth: adopted

• Errol: fostered

• Rayley: fostered.

In order of age, we descend like this:

• Lindsey

• Errol

• David (me)

• Rayley

• Karen

• Beth.

These lists are important for what happens next. Alan, the male boarder, finishes high school and moves out, and Mum and Dad decide the family can financially survive without a replacement boarder so one of us boys is going to be allocated the empty bedroom. As if embarking on military campaigns Lindsey and I assail Mum and Dad from all sides. Errol isn't in the race because he just got here. The bin never needs emptying or the animals feeding. Floors are swept and the garden weeded and watered. While Lindsey washes the cocker spaniel I pick flowers and pop them in jars and place them throughout the house. I spy Lindsey washing the car so I wash out Errol's spit

bucket. Then one morning I wake up knowing the answer. I get up and make Mum and Dad a breakfast tray of cereal and coffee as if it's Mothers Day and Fathers Day combined. Walking backwards and forwards at the end of their bed I make my argument while they eat their food in amusement.

"I have been in the family the longest, and like Karen being the longest serving girl, I am the longest serving boy and have first rights." Through the bedroom door I can see Lindsey listening from the hallway. "Even though Rayley is the eldest girl, Karen got her own room, so why can't I?"

Mum and Dad convene a special meeting to announce the winner. Mum and Dad decide because Lindsey and Errol are blood brothers, it will be better to keep them in the same room so they can bond better. I win the room.

Invitation

The following weekend Beth goes from tree to tree delivering envelopes. I imagine they're announcements for one of her concerts where Beth performs songs we have to choose from her big nursery rhyme songbook.

"Knock, knock," I hear her say at the pretend doorway to Karen's Umbrella tree.

"Who is it please?" Karen asks politely, as if she doesn't recognise her.

"It's the postman."

Karen opens her letter and squeals in excitement and flaps the invite.

"Sshhh," I hear Beth direct. "Don't say anything until everyone gets theirs."

Beth arrives at my tree and hands up the folded paper. The word ***Invitation*** is boldly printed across the front in a careful hand. If it were Beth's it would be a stupid pretend word, and if from Rayley it would be dripping with awful perfume. It's not

Errol because I can't imagine him having another tree meeting so soon, and it's obviously not Karen's because she's already been invited. I unfold the paper.

> *Please come to my tree house at three o'clock for a meeting.*
>
> *Signed, Lindsey*

Two things about this invitation that make it absolutely amazing: Lindsey has never called a tree meeting before and I've never been inside his tree. No one can enter a person's tree without his or her permission and I've never been invited.

(A closed and whispered inquiry was held in my tree as to whether Lindsey broke this rule when he climbed up and strangled Errol. The Inquiry found in Lindsey's favour because despite the fact he had refused to attend, technically he had still been invited, and he didn't kill Errol.)

The backyard is in an uproar, and for the rest of the morning, with invitations in hand we drop in on each other's trees trying to decipher Lindsey's motives. I share my suspicions with the others that this meeting has something to do with my winning the room. Errol pats my shoulder like a mate and tells me not to worry; he thinks Lindsey has remembered something important about their mother and father and wants to tell us.

"Lunch," Mum calls.

We all gather about the kitchen table as if we've not a care in the world. Lindsey keeps his head down studying his yellow melamine plate and refuses to fall for any of

our conversational traps that might reveal his reasons for having a tree meeting. We eat quickly.

The three girls are so excited after lunch that they run into their rooms and change into clothes from the dress-up box. There's now a carnival atmosphere in the backyard. I even see Errol tying a strip of curtain material into a headband, but I feel strange. I drape some old curtain material about my shoulders in case I need something to hide under. In case, and I'm sure of it, the meeting is about me.

Three o'clock finally arrives and we head over to Lindsey's place. Whispering and jostling, the five of us wait against the back fence for Lindsey to invite us up. I can see Lindsey through the chinks in the boards testing his weight against different sections, pulling things down and setting things up. Lindsey has always said he will know if I've been in his tree without permission because he sets booby-traps. When he is satisfied he surveys his domain, nods once, and looks down over the edge.

"Come on up."

The five of us move forward and in an orderly fashion climb the ladder. I'm amazed to find Lindsey has created a room in the middle of the tree with an old door and other bits of old wood. He even has real furnishings.

"Please sit down."

Karen and Beth snag the two cushions, Rayley plonks down right in the middle and Errol and me sit on either side of the ladder opening.

Lindsey removes six picnic cups from their fake leather container and places them one at a time along a little shelf he has made.

"A hors-d'oeuvre?" Lindsey offers, carefully lifting away a tea towel revealing a tray of apple slices, each one individually topped with a sultana and held together with a toothpick wearing a red cellophane hat.

Despite my apprehension I'm amazed. From the furnishings to the shelf, the cordial and food, nothing is pretend. This is real.

"Ladies," Lindsey says, turning with a shiny cup in one hand and a bottle in the other, "drink?"

"Thank-you," Karen says elegantly. "That would be very lovely."

"Yippee," Beth says, clapping her hands.

"Oh, yes please," Rayley exclaims, over-exaggerating. "I'm dying of thirst."

"Today is a celebration," Lindsey says, in a voice that doesn't sound like a party voice, "and now I'm going to tell you why."

Here it comes.

"Because of you I didn't get my own room," Lindsey states coldly, mid-pour. I drop my head and cross my arms drawing my cape about myself.

I hear him turn and hand the drinks out to the three girls. I hear the three girls say thank-you.

"David," he asks politely, "red drink?"

I look up to see Lindsey standing in the green gloom like the picture of the man in the movie star book with the ice tongs and the cocktail glass. But Lindsey isn't acting.

If I say 'Yes please' Lindsey might put a dead caterpillar in my drink and grab me by the throat, the way he did to Errol in his tree, and make me swallow it. If I say 'No thanks' it could lead to something worse. He might throw me over the edge. It's a trick.

"I'm sorry about the room," I say quietly.

“No. We had a competition and you won.” He turns from me, puts the cup down and faces Errol. “No, this is Errol’s fault. Errol, you are not my blood brother. You will never be my brother. Get out of my tree.”

Errol, still wearing the headband he put on to attend Lindsey’s first ever tree meeting, falls half way down the ladder in shock. He reaches the ground and a sob comes out of him as if he fell a long way. He stumbles into a run and our view of him is cut off by the serrated edges of the foliage.

*

I fashion a **Do Not Disturb** sign to hang from my bedroom doorknob. The room has a cupboard that I never have to share and a full-length mirror embedded in the door. I can stand in front of it and practice bowing and curtseying in private.

“What are you doing?” Mum asks, bringing folded washing in, concern etching her brow.

“Just playing,” I say airily, not wanting to hurt her with the fact that I know where I came from.

Pus

When it comes time for murder Lindsey and Errol call a truce.

It's when they're pushing us between the house stumps with their rifles that I catch a dagger of black wood under the skin of my hand. There is no blood because the splinter acts like a plug. I know if the splinter is removed the curse of the Romanov's will be activated and I will bleed to death.

I fold protective fingers over it and tell no one. Over the next week I watch white stuff dome over the splinter as if I'm building the futuristic city from *Logan's Run*. I can only see the faintest outline of the splinter buried in all the white. I think the white means clean. That everything must be alright.

The following week Mum notices my use of only one hand and demands I unfurl my fingers. Mum tries to grab me but I am too quick, and flick past her. I ignore all her bribes. Mum directs Lindsey to catch me. Lindsey watches me moving. He is a lion. He tricks me into thinking he is going one way so I run the other. Lindsey is quick as lightning. How could I be so stupid? He captures me and wrestles me down onto the hallway runner. He telegraphs an 'I'm such a good boy' smile to Mum and I'm happy she ignores it with her concern for me.

No matter how hard I eel twist I can't break free. Mum bends down and snatches my hand. Levering up each finger she reveals the white city embedded in my palm.

She gasps.

"It's white," I yell, not wanting to believe what I know is the truth. "It must be clean."

"It's pus! You could die from blood poisoning."

"I'm going to die anyway!" I screech, turning my head to the wall.

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s got a disease,” Lindsey states quietly, like a doctor.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mum says. “What disease?” She shakes my shoulder. “Come on, tell me! What disease?”

Turning back I bravely face my mother. My Mum.

“Haemo…?” I’m not sure how to pronounce it.

“No!” Mum shrieks. “Don’t say it.”

For a long time we lock eyes. She knows that I know.

“Lindsey. Hold him while I get a needle.” Mum’s voice takes on a strange dead tone. “We will get it out.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no!” But it’s no use, Lindsey has both my wrists pinioned to the carpet, and his bottom and folded legs corral my lower half.

I can hear the bathroom tap running while Mum sterilises the needle. These are my last sounds. I will die with dignity. I am a Romanov. My body goes limp and annoyance flits across Lindsey’s face because I’ve stopped struggling. At least he can no longer show off his strength to Mum. Mum kneels at my head and takes my floppy hand and places it in her lap.

Mum is surprised at my lack of resistance. “That’s my big boy. Now don’t worry this won’t hurt a bit. Lindsey, get off him!”

I imagine her lap filling up with blood and spilling over the carpet and her crying, ‘Why? Why didn’t I listen?’

“Out, out, out.” Mum bends over my hand and starts pressing down very hard on either side. She is sniffing and rubbing her eyes on her shoulder. “Get out of my son.”

It is over and Mum holds the black splinter up like Excalibur.

“Ta da!”

I smile weakly and summon what remaining strength I have and look at my hand. I expect to see all my blood draining out of my body.

No blood. The curse is broken.

“It’s gone,” I say in wonder.

The week following, Mum says we are to spend a special day together in the city. I imagine the trip is Mum making amends for having treated me like any other kid, and not as one of the Romanovs. This is how life is supposed to be.

Halfway into the journey (to show I’ll allow some things to stay the same) I hop up and down in excitement having recognised the rooftops of the immigration houses that Mum and her family moved into after arriving from Wales.

“Look Mum, look!” I wait patiently as she slowly swings her head to where I’m pointing. “Your first house!”

“As big as a shoebox!” I sing-song, expecting to hear her voice accompanying mine.

Silence.

I turn in surprise.

“You didn’t say it.”

“You are too close to me,” she whispers with a line of tears in her eyes, and for a split second I know she is going to abandon me.

“What do you mean? I love you.”

“The reason we’re going into town is for you to see a doctor.”

This is a good idea so I nod solemnly. I can confirm with the doctor that the curse is broken. We disembark at Central and walk down the hill into the guts of the city. We catch a lift up into a skyscraper and wait in a thin brown waiting room. I’ve

never been in a skyscraper building before and I'm surprised the interior of the doctor's office is so boring.

A bald man wearing glasses and a tan suit ushers us into his office. Through the slats of the window blind I can see other offices in other tall buildings.

"Now what can I do for you?"

Mum perches up on the very edge of her chair.

"My son is a homosexual," she states quietly, trickling tears down her face.

Did she say haemophilia? It sounded similar, but it also sounded like it had something to do with the sex word. I'm confused. I wonder if it is related to haemophilia. Maybe the curse isn't broken but has turned into something else.

"He hides picture books of movie stars under his mattress and curtseys and blows kisses to himself in the mirror. He's afraid of everything and turns hysterical at having a splinter removed."

The doctor clicks his pen, and standing, removes his jacket and comes round his side of the table. He lowers himself down onto his haunches in front of me. His tan covered knees stretch out towards me like sphinx paws.

"I'm going to ask some questions," he says with breath straight from a grave, "and I don't want you to be scared and I want you to answer me truthfully. Is that okay?"

I nod.

"Do you think about boys' penises?" he asks gently.

"What?"

"Willies," he says, as if he's describing a type of car, "do you think about boys' willies?"

Nowhere have I imagined a doctor asking me this. I feel like I'm cemented in shock. The man is waiting with a patient, clear look in his eye. He isn't embarrassed. All of a sudden I'm fearful. His question is the type we've continually been warned about.

Remember the Beaumont children. If anybody ever asks you about your private parts or anything to do with theirs you're to run and run and run and not look back. Do you hear me?

Mum is sitting quietly crying, as if I'm already a ghost.

I remember all the men's willies at the State Emergency Service barbecue, when the members start to skinny-dip, and the giddy feeling looking at them gave me.

"No, that's disgusting. Never."

The doctor tells my mother that it's too early to be worried about such things, and before he gets up, he ruffles my hair.

Scheduled Fee

“Am I covered for a D&C?” a woman’s voice devoid of emotion asks in my earpiece.

I ask her if she has a medical item number for this procedure. Every inpatient procedure has a medical item number prescribed by the government. I don’t know what a D&C is. Health funds rely on medical item numbers, and not names of procedures, to ascertain cover. I say the word *ascertain,* like I imagine a medical professional would.

“No I haven’t got a number,” she says impatiently.

I tell her I can’t review her coverage for a procedure unless she has a medical item number. I explain that I can only give basic information at this stage, that the government and the health fund will combine to pay the scheduled fee, but no more than the scheduled fee if you are covered, but first we need to *ascertain* whether you are covered or not, and for that I need a medical item number.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

I ask whether there is someone behind a desk nearby, a nurse perhaps, who she can ask for the medical item number.

“No there isn’t.” The woman sobs.

I tell her again that without an item number I can’t tell if she has the appropriate level of cover.

“I’m standing inside a phone box with a dead baby inside me,” she says, her tone rising, “and you can’t tell me if I’m covered for the removal? I shouldn’t have to do this. I shouldn’t have to do this.”

Saliva floods my mouth. I'm not a doctor. I'm a call centre worker. A D&C is the removal of a dead foetus. Once upon a time a woman with a dead baby inside her didn't have to ring up health funds and talk to idiots to find out if she is covered.

Medical Item Number 35639

Uterus, Curettage of, with or without dilation (including curettage for incomplete miscarriage) under general anaesthesia, or under epidural or spinal (intrathecal) nerve block where undertaken in a hospital.

(Anaes.)

Schedule Fee: $121.85

Bullet Holes

Early one morning after Dad has left for work, Mum comes in and whispers for me to meet with her in her room. I hear her going from room to room waking the others and I think it's like a tree meeting where a person doesn't have time to send out proper invitations. I wonder what could be so important. Mum is sitting on her bed brushing her hair. A surf sound accompanies every stroke. I can see our reflections in the dressing table mirror. *Snow White and the Six Dwarves*. I'm about to say that if Dad was there we would be seven, but Mum speaks first.

"I'm leaving your father. I don't love him. I'm in love with Ron. The choice you have to make is if you want to come to the new house with me, or stay. You have to choose."

My head is full of bullet holes. I watch the words that hit my head penetrate the people in the glass:

• new house

• leaving your father

• in love with Ron

• stay

• you have to choose.

Mum resumes making the dragging sound. It's the sound of bodies being moved.

"Before you give your answer, you each have one question."

My eyes return to this world and I watch Mum lower her brush to the bed and release it, bristle side up.

"Starting with you because you are closest." Mum places her hand gently along Errol's arm.

Closest? Does she mean closest as in standing to her, or closest to her heart?

"Is the dog coming?" Errol asks.

"Of course the dog is coming, silly," Mum says, "as if I would leave the dog!"

But you're leaving Dad.

"Should we pack all of our school things if we are going to go to a new school?" Rayley asks sensibly. "Different schools teach things in different order."

Rayley is calm and I realise, after having had four other families, she's the most prepared of all of us.

"I think you should bring all your school things," Mum says, pretending serious thought.

"Will I still have my own room?" I blurt.

"You'll have to wait till you get there to find that out," Mum says with a soft smile.

“Is the dog coming?” Beth asks innocently, giving us room to laugh.

“Oh, Beth!” Rayley says. “Haven’t you been listening?”

‘Whatever happens we’ll still be able to laugh,” Mum says, looking at us all like she’s proud.

“Is Dad coming?” Karen asks.

We all look at Mum.

“No Darling, but you’ll be able to see him on weekends and school holidays.” Lindsey doesn’t have a question.

“Put up your hands those of you that are coming, and let me tell you right now I expect to count six hands.”

Slowly at first, but then spurred on by not wanting to be seen choosing Dad over Mum we all raise our hands, and then some of us, including me, raise up both.

Mum breathes a huge sigh then bursts into tears.

“Thank God, I didn’t know what I was going to do if any of you said no.”

We are told to pack our things and to be brave. A noise outside draws us to the window. I want to scream. A giant orange and black wasp is manoeuvring its abdomen backwards down our drive. No one seems surprised. I look again. It’s Ron reversing an orange and black painted hire trailer. Our leaving is true.

What with all the luggage and furniture there will be too many of us to travel to the new house. It has previously been decided that Mum and the three girls will travel by train, and us boys will travel with Ron to help unload when we get there.

Wherever ‘there’ is. I try to convince myself this is an adventure but all I succeed in doing is make myself numb.

“You’ll feel better soon,” Rayley says confidentially.

When Ron drives Mum and the girls to the train station, Lindsey purposely re-enters the house and stands waiting by the little cast iron telephone table with the furry seat that Mum decided to leave.

"Your father will need somewhere to sit when he rings you."

The table reminds me of a little tethered goat villagers use to attract and kill a man-eating tiger. I saw it in a movie set in a jungle. I can't imagine Dad sitting on it. Then I notice Lindsey's finger resting against the plastic arrow on the address book. Lindsey's finger slowly and deliberately moves the arrow down to W.

Dad's work.

In submarine movies, when the actors don't know whether it's the right time to fire torpedoes, the rule of thumb is don't.

"Stop. You'll get into trouble."

As these words leave my mouth I can't tell where this trouble will come from. Nearly everyone, bar Dad, is doing something they shouldn't.

The three of us disengage from the telephone table and float through the house. Bits from the exploded laundry cupboard are strewn across the floor. The kitchen floor is a mess of abandoned Tupperware and buckled cooking trays. All the big pieces of furniture are gone. It's as if the house has lost its mind. We open the back door and look out over the backyard. All our trees look the same. I wish I could fold up the view as if it were a picnic blanket. We descend the stairs to say goodbye.

"I'm leaving you, my beautiful tree," I whisper, with my head against the trunk. "Thank-you for being my friend. I will never forget you."

I don't want to leave Dad, or my tree, or my room. Part of me wants to run and hide and only come out when the others have gone, but the thought of crawling out into

a house without Mum being there is a thought too terrible to contemplate. It's Dad I have to lose.

I am going.

Ron's car and hire trailer slide to a stop out the front and he beeps the horn. The three of us race back upstairs.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," I call in a panic, running from room to room.

In the car I sit closest to Ron. Almost touching. Lindsey and Errol have the dog straddling their laps. We are driving along the highway towards Mum's first home in the migrant houses. Mum and Ron are originally from Great Britain and Ron may also have lived in the migrant houses, but driving past he doesn't turn his head and I don't ask.

Ron asks if I would get him a cigarette from the glove box. I lean across Errol and Lindsey's legs, press open the little door and remove his cigarettes. Ron's hands remain clamped to the wheel and he motions with his head for me to put one in his mouth. His eyes watch me. I lift the cardboard lid and lever one out by its caramel tip and put it in his mouth. My hand is shaking. Ron laughs and pushes the lighter button in with a fat, dirty finger.

Oprah

"Welcome to Physician Health. My name is David. How can I help you?"

"I'd like to know how much dental benefit my kids have got left."

"Can I have your membership number?"

"Get down! No, outside. Sorry about this but my dog is in the house. I have to put the phone down."

"Of course," I laugh, "it sounds like you've got a handful there."

"You can say that again!" she says in pretend exasperation.

The woman sounds nice and relaxed, like someone I could be friendly with.

The receiver clatters to the counter top and I hear the woman try to round up her dog. These are the type of calls I like, the ones that act as a window on other people's everyday lives. I hear a screen door open.

"Oprah, outside!"

I hear the door slam and footsteps as she moves back towards the phone.

"You know why we call her Oprah?" she says, like she's known me forever. "She's a black bitch!"

I want to hang-up but if she complains I'll get a warning for not servicing the call. All I can do is remove any suggestion of friendliness from my voice. That is my answer.

Wellington Point

Our new house is on a hill with a yard full of fruit trees. Except for a frangipani, none are large enough to climb. The house had once been divided into flats and the three girls are to sleep in one of the old kitchens. Their three beds are placed over the footprints of the oven, the fridge and the sink. Lindsey and Errol share the middle room that can only be reached through the lounge room and I'm allocated the little front room with louvered windows that catch the breeze from the sea.

Ron fixes his C.B. radio equipment above a recliner chair placed dead centre in the house, and erects aerials on the roof so he can monitor all the emergency channels. From his seated position nothing goes on, inside or out, that Ron isn't aware of. Walking home from school, the house with its waving antennas looks like the carapace of some gigantic awful insect, and it feels strange knowing Mum is going to bed with a man who isn't Dad.

*

A couple of months later Mum meets us at the front door with a grim set to her lips and announces she wants to speak to us in her bedroom. Shucking off my school bag I'm happy; meeting in the bedroom must mean she has changed her mind about Ron and we're going home. From all the shy smiles us kids secretly exchange I can tell we're all thinking the same thing.

Mum is sitting on the bed waiting for us all to enter and then she jumps up. "Just joking! I'm not sad! I'm the happiest I've been in my whole life. I'm having twins."

*

To contend with the expansion Ron trades his car in for a small bus that once belonged to a local orphanage, and on weekends Mum arranges bonding excursions between Ron and us. We're the only kids who need a bus to be driven round in. We slouch down and hide our faces behind hands or books until we are suburbs away from being seen by anyone from our new schools.

The first trip is to Bullen's African Lion Park. We spent more time in the children's playground than on safari trying to differentiate what was a scrawny lion, and what was a discarded, hessian sack. The only interesting thing was the liger.

Our usual destination is a finger of land called Wellington Point that spears out into Moreton Bay. When the tide is low a red sand pathway a kilometre long opens up to a small island called King Island.

"The first one to the island will be King," Mum says, readying a tea towel for a starter's flag.

At first I imagined my Romanov ghosts would respond like bulls to red flags to this challenge and buoy me across the red sand pathway on invisible arms, but each time I'm left floundering in the wake of Lindsey and Errol.

On our fourth visit, Ron, who has been sitting watching the competition, seizes Lindsey and Errol by their arms and holds them back.

"GO!" he yells to me like we're team mates in a running relay.

I don't want the Romanovs to use Ron, but I know this is my only chance.

I make it halfway across the sand bridge before Ron lets Lindsey and Errol go, but neither attempts to catch me. When I make it to the top of the island's first small dune I perform a half-hearted Indian dance.

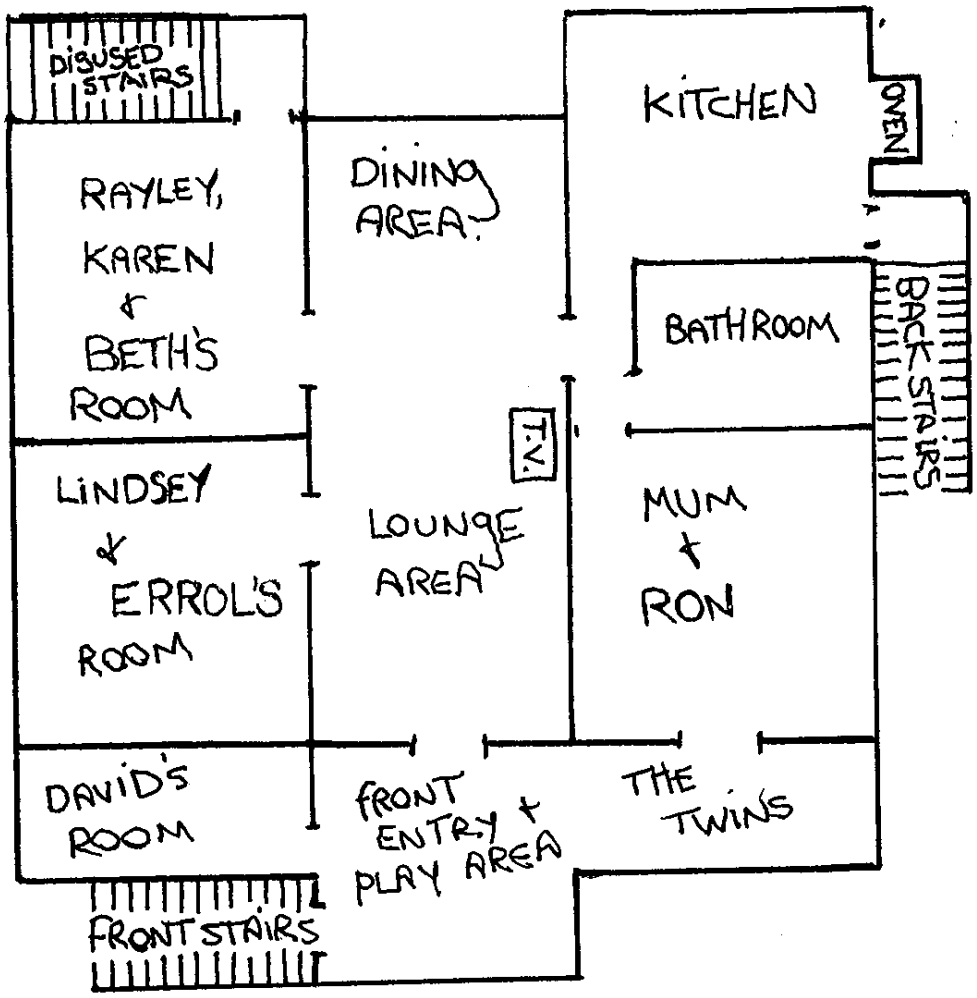
On the way home Mum tells Ron he shouldn't have held the boys back. That I have to win on my own merits, or not at all. Even though it's about me, it feels good to

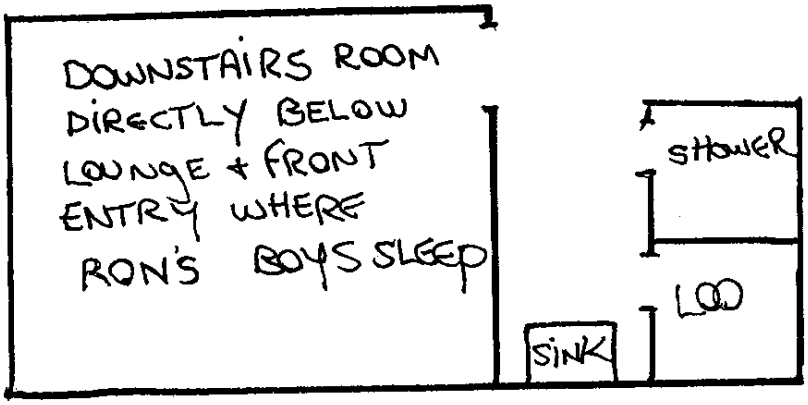
hear Ron getting into trouble. He keeps telling her to stop telling him what to do, but Mum keeps on at him like she used to do at Dad. Ron veers the bus off the road towards a eucalyptus tree when he has had enough. He skids to a halt at the very last second. After the dust settles, and in the stillness of the gently rocking vehicle, everyone can see Ron has lined the tree up exactly with Mum's pregnant belly.

Then Ron's wife says Ron can look after their three sons for a while.

*

2nd diagram of the sleeping arrangements once Ron's three boys and the twins arrive:


DISUSED STAIRS
RAYLEY, KAREN & BETH'S ROOM
DINING AREA
KITCHEN
OVEN
BATHROOM
BACK STAIRS
T.V.
LINDSEY & ERROL'S ROOM
LOUNGE AREA
MUM & RON
DAVID'S ROOM
FRONT ENTRY & PLAY AREA
THE TWINS
FRONT STAIRS


DOWNSTAIRS ROOM DIRECTLY BELOW LOUNGE & FRONT ENTRY WHERE RON'S BOYS SLEEP
SHOWER
LOO
SINK

By age the kids descend like this:

- Stepbrother 1
- Lindsey
- Errol
- Stepbrother 2
- David (me)
- Stepbrother 3
- Rayley
- Karen
- Beth
- Newborn twin 1
- Newborn twin 2.

But keeping a list of who's who is now pointless. There is no sibling hierarchy; there is only Ron, who has started to use his fists and feet to keep us boys in line, and for the girls, I find out later, he uses something else.

*

Sasha

I always assumed I would be the first to be sought out by a blood relative, but when the authorities contact Mum, it's to arrange a meeting between Lindsey, Errol, and their blood sister Sasha.

According to the authorities Sasha has been refusing to eat until she sees her brothers again, and her foster parents are at their wits end.

On the chosen Saturday we mill about the yard so as not to miss Sasha's arrival. Lindsey is down along the back fence pulling out a small, dead tree, and Errol is sitting at the bottom of the steps playing with the dog. Karen and Beth are stretched out in the branches of the frangipani, and Rayley is sitting on the fence closest to the gate. I position myself in the stand of banana trees with the machete and rake so I can look busy clearing out the dead foliage, and feign disinterest.

I'm jealous it's them and not me.

I've barely made a dint when a car turns into our corner and slides to a halt opposite the side gate. Lindsey and Errol disappear under the house in embarrassment, and Ron's sons come out to replace them like unconvincing decoys.

Three people, two big and one small, stay sitting in the car looking at the nine of us through their rolled-up windows as if they're visitors at a safari park. The woman in the front has a dubious look on her face and she is trying to make it look like she isn't saying the things that she is to the small one in the back. The girl has a determined set to her head suggesting she stopped listening to the woman a long time ago and is just being polite. If they drive off I decide I won't be surprised, but then the back passenger door swings open and two sandals pop out over the ledge of the back seat.

Sasha, because it must be Sasha, stays standing on the grassy verge looking down and straightening her dress. A purple satin headband dotted with diamonds restrains her hair and catches sunlight. Her lilac dress has white flowers on it. Everything is matching. Karen, Beth and Rayley look agog. The people must be rich. Only princesses in fairy stories wear all matching. Sasha lifts her head like she's finished saying a prayer before dinner. Her eyes quickly sample each of us in turn. She looks calm and very pretty, but I notice her fingers stay clamping the edges of the dress material.

She finds me standing stock-still among the banana trees but her eyes don't stay for very long. Her eyes start to skip, going back over the same faces to check she hasn't missed anyone. I wonder whether she is holding up an internal picture of Errol's face against each of ours like a snapshot.

None of us call out to tell her that the boys are hiding under the house, and her eyes plummet to the ends of her dress as if her fingers have suddenly found a kink in the material she can't quite believe.

I picture a perfect diamond hidden in the hem.

"Sasha!" Mum's voice calls out from the stairs mid-descent, shattering the spell. "Welcome."

At the sight of a living adult the two people in the car crank open their doors and step out as if it's now safe. Mum registers the look on Sasha's face and grabs her in a fierce hug in what must be a private communication that Mum had wanted to keep the three of them together but things hadn't worked out as planned. Mum still has Sasha in her arms when she calls out "Where are those two fool boys? Lindsey, Errol, your sister's here!"

Sasha shoots Mum a hungry smile.

Lindsey and Errol edge out from under the house, but neither moves towards their sister.

“Come here,” Mum demands, making gathering motions with her hands, “she won’t bite! Will you Sasha?”

Sasha shakes her head and tries to cover her smile but it spreads out happily on either side of her thumb and little finger. Her eyes are dancing.

Mum takes hold of both boys’ shoulders and positions the three of them into the shape of a three-leaf clover. Lindsey and Errol drop their heads as if they’re wilting. Satisfied, Mum steps back surveying her handiwork, nods and then walks towards the gate where Sasha’s foster parents are waiting.

“Karen and Beth, stop being heathens and get down out of that tree,” Mum directs, giving the impression she runs a tight ship, “and Rayley, ladies don’t sit on fences, and if they did they wouldn’t sit like that!”

While Mum invites the two adults upstairs my sisters jump down from their perches and run embarrassed into the banana grove. Before ascending Mum waves an arm indicating the real siblings, standing like three bronze figures in a dry fountain, and tells us to leave them alone to get to know each other better.

“Yes, Mum,” we sing out sweetly.

Ron’s three boys shrug as if they couldn’t care less and wander back under the house.

Lindsey and Errol stay cast in the shape Mum has put them into for only as long as it takes for the adults to disappear inside, and then they crack apart leaving Sasha standing alone. Her head droops.

It is obvious neither Lindsey nor Errol knows the protocols of long lost reunions. I’m ashamed. It’s a complete waste. Neither knows to grab Sasha in a joyous hug and

swing her round and round, laughing heartily at the sky. Neither knows to take her by the arm, one each, and squire her about the yard pointing out non-consequential things as if they are novelties while trying, without success, to ignore the special feeling of being arm in arm. Neither knows to swear undying devotion and promise never to be apart again.

I know from the look on Sasha's face that Sasha plays the same sorts of games I play. I want to ask Sasha what she remembers about her real mother and father and I bet I wouldn't be disappointed. I bet all her stories have beginnings, middles and ends.

Laughter floats down from upstairs as the adults compare notes on what it's like raising kids not your own. Mum comes down with sandwiches and drinks for us all, but Sasha picks up a sandwich like it's a folded leaf and only pretends to eat. I guess it's because she still hasn't spoken to her brothers. Thinking Sasha has been taking real mouthfuls Mum nods, satisfied, and returns to the adults. Lindsey and Errol are shadows under the house and only come out to get food.

"Sasha," I offer from the banana glade, "do you want to come and play?"

Sasha shakes her head.

The afternoon moves on.

The three of us grow bored in the banana grove. But at least we are in the shade. Sasha is sitting in full sun twiddling a stick.

"She must be getting awfully hot," Beth says, her chin resting in her hand.

"She must be getting awfully bored."

"But what can we do?"

"Let's put on a show for her," Rayley says, in a marvelling tone, as if a better idea has never dawned before. "Let's play Brown Snake!"

“Good idea Rayley,” I say, “but I don’t know how to play Brown Snake. Let’s do the Romanovs because we all know the characters. Let’s start under the frangipani tree where we can all pretend to be sewing jewels in our clothes.”

Rayley shrugs.

“Who’ll play the soldiers?” Karen whispers. “You know none of the boys won’t – they think our games are for babies.”

I look round at the human size of the banana trees.

“We can die here in the grove, and pretend the banana trees are the soldiers.”

We break cover and run to the frangipani tree where the girls arrange themselves beneath the branches.

“Ladies and…” I look to both sides of Sasha and throw my hands up in pretend shock, “…and no gentlemen. But that doesn’t matter because you dear lady are about to witness the greatest story ever told.”

Sasha shows no interest.

“Introducing Rayley as Grand Princess Olga.”

Rayley gets quickly to her feet and curtsies.

I pretend to be on the verge of clapping but change my mind.

“Please,” I dampen down the empty air with my hands, “save your applause until the introductions are over. In…tro…ducing Karen as Grand Princess Tatiana, and Beth as Grand Princess Anastasia.”

The four of us clap and cheer.

“Alas, there are four sisters in this drama but we are missing a person to play Grand Princess Maria – is there a lovely lady in the audience who would be so kind as to join us?”

Sasha keeps her eyes focused on teasing an insect with her stick.

“No? Oh well.”

“And last but not least I shall be playing the dual role of soldier, and Crown Prince Alexei. Oh yeah, and introducing the banana trees who will be playing the soldiers whose only desire is to kill us.”

Sasha looks up.

“Let the play begin!” I cross my legs and lower myself to the ground as if I’m descending through a trapdoor.

We huddle in the ante-chamber beneath the frangipani tree and make jerky weaving movements with our fingers, declaring in loud whispers our intention to hurriedly sew as many of our many varied and beautiful jewels into our clothes. Anastasia pricks her finger and sobs.

Grand Duchess Tatiana leaps to her feet and rages at the brutality of the soldiers who would just love to thieve our jewels off us.

Olga starts to get up to add her piece but I pull her back down as she is ruining the pace. I push my weary thirteen-year-old body to its feet.

“Oh, woe is us!” I exclaim. “We are being held prisoner in this huge strange house and I’m afraid we will be killed by the soldiers of the revolution.” Behind me the three grand Duchesses nod sagely and then break out sobbing.

Grabbing the rake I transform into a soldier.

“Now I’m a soldier.”

Yelling rude words I usher the girls across the yard and into the space in the middle of the banana trees. Balancing the rake in the floppy fibrous arm of a banana plant I revert back into Alexei.

“Now I’m the Prince and that’s a gun!”

“Please don’t kill us, please don’t kill us.” Rayley is on her hands and knees, beseeching the banana trees.

“It’s no use.” I turn to my sisters for one last look. “Goodbye cruel world!”

The three of us simultaneously start making loud machine gun noises at the backs of our throats and writhe about tossing our bodies into and against the trunks. Then the gunfire stops and we start moaning and screaming in pretend agony.

For the first time in history the story takes a different turn.

“Fight back!” Beth cries, in a voice not her own, and we galvanise.

It’s as if the diamonds and other precious stones we’ve sewn into our clothes crystallise into impenetrable shells that cover our bodies from head to toe giving us the strength to rise up.

Taking hold of the machete and other tools left lying among the dead leaves we rise up. We are super-human. Our hair transforms into shiny helmets and our eyes and teeth glitter. We attack the trees, slicing through their uniforms and into crisp flesh. Clear liquid runs down the trunks and banana leaves fall like real human arms but still we don’t stop. We are screaming with rage at the soldiers for the years of getting away with killing us. We are hysterical. Sasha is laughing and clapping her hands.

All the boys reappear from under the house. Lindsey and Errol laugh alongside Sasha. Our screaming draws the adults out onto the back landing, but instead of everyone melting into one big, happy party, Sasha’s foster parents hurry downstairs and without a word or a backward glance lead Sasha through the side gate to the car.

This was the first and last time I ever saw Sasha, the girl who was supposed to be our sister.

After they’ve gone Mum yells I’ve embarrassed the whole family and that I’m too old to be playing pretend games.

“For God’s sake, grow up!”

All right, I’ll grow up.

I wait until she goes shopping. I enter her and Ron’s room and riffle through her papers in her bedside drawer looking for the information about my real family. I find a small diary buried at the bottom.

There on the very last page are two sentences.

‘The nurse said David’s birth mother was 13 when she gave birth,’ says the first sentence.

‘David’s hospital bracelet has him named as Mark Fields,’ says the second sentence.

Mark Fields.

My real name is Mark Fields, and my birth mother was thirteen years old.

*

As Lindsey and Errol grow taller and stronger, Ron evolves from using his fists and feet to using a plank of wood. He also designates a special area to enact his disciplinary measures. Because of the low lintel Ron can’t use the garage for parking the bus so he turns it into his boxing ring. He flings one or both boys over the ancient oil mark coagulating in the centre of the cement floor and then closes the garage doors behind him. After the bolt is driven home, the rest of us listen from the stand of recuperating banana trees to the dull thuds, grunts and words of the boy’s screamed apologies cut short. Our eyes and ears are drawn from the garage to the kitchen doorway where we know Mum is standing. But she never comes down. She never tries to stop him.

Ron never uses the wood on me, just his fists and feet, and I never see the insides of the garage the way Lindsey and Errol do. I do see the deep purple bruises on their skin, and I do see them try to walk tall and straight without surrendering to their injuries.

Lindsey and Errol walk stiffly away from home on the same night but in opposite directions. Before leaving, Errol comes into my room and asks if I want to run away with him.

"No," I say, "I'll tough it out."

While everyone else in the house sleeps, I watch through the cracked open louvres of my bedroom as my brothers slip away.

State of Origin

In the last half hour of my shift a woman rings the health fund and asks if she's covered for psychiatric care. Her voice is frantic and I have to request her to slow down. The woman says she needs to commit herself.

"Before we go any further I need your details. What is your name and membership number?"

"Josephine Allard. 4593268."

People hate reciting their personal details at the beginning of these phone calls, but I don't think they realise these details tether them to the operator. It's like if you're kidnapped by a serial killer who thinks of you as an 'it'. The best thing to do is make the murderer realise you're a human being with a name and a birthday.

One look at the policy onscreen and I inwardly groan. Josephine isn't covered for psychiatric care. I tell her psychiatric conditions are one of her restrictions and she has to rely on the public hospital system. Between sobs and gasps for air Jo tells me her doctor told her that the public system doesn't have any room in its wards. She tells me she has just confronted the man who abused her throughout her childhood and now she wants to kill herself. My voice chases after hers, repeating she doesn't have health cover for private inpatient psychiatric care and if she increases her cover then she'll have to wait two months for pre-existing conditions. She is crying a hopeless sound. There is nothing I can do. I fall silent and listen to her cry. I slide my eyes from her details to the details on the laminated card crammed into a gap in the side of the monitor, 'Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.' I wonder if this situation qualifies.

I want to take the card and rip it into a million pieces, but I can't because it's not mine. The desk's official inhabitant will note the loss and I'll be asked in an accusatory tone if I took it. I would like to punch the person in the throat who dreamt up this self-satisfied saying. Each one of Josephine's sobs is now a crank of a rusty reel and I feel myself returning to the job at hand. I lower my voice to a half-whisper so my co-workers can't hear and I congratulate her on her bravery. I have to focus on keeping my voice even or I'll break down too. I tell her she should be proud of herself. I tell her about Ron and how scared I was of him and how I never had the guts to confront him. That if she goes ahead and hurts herself it proves he still has power over her. That she needs to stand up and fight, that she already has taken the hardest step by confronting him. I can't say anything else.

Josephine sniffles, says goodbye and lowers the phone. In the space of time it takes to get the receiver from her ear to the cradle I can hear nothing. No noise in the background of any kind. That and the sound of the receiver's unsteady landing and unhurried readjustment, makes me wonder if I should call the police, but I'm unsure whether I'd be breaking privacy laws.

After particularly disturbing calls we are allowed by management to take a maximum of ten minutes off the phones to calm down. There's even a room with a bed where we can lie down, but it's better to just ascend to the call-centre roof and breathe the night air.

After my shift I arrive home to a dark and empty house. Jason is still at work. I move from room to room. The surface of my skin starts to itch and my breath catches. I haven't had a panic attack for years. In my early thirties they crippled me. I remember the breathing exercises my psychologist taught me to keep the attacks at bay. I remember going to her because I was scared I was going to hurt myself. She said I must

be strong to have survived the violence of my childhood. I remember laughing and saying my strength was in my ability to divorce myself from reality. How creating worlds where I am more than I really am kept me sane. How for years I'd fantasised about being a Romanov. Telling her this, I thought I was being charming.

From the opposite side of the desk I saw her write on her pad the words, *delusions of grandeur?*

I turn on the television to try and take my mind off the woman with no cover and the psychologist who thought I was delusional. Mindless football. The State of Origin competition. The first game. This battle is between the State of Queensland where all the bad things happened to my family and the State of New South Wales where I now live. Focusing on the television I lose track of my place in the breathing exercise, and I give up. I never thought they worked much for me anyway. What works is standing in front of the panic attack and screaming COME ON, and punching the air like Lleyton Hewitt. Dare it to come and it usually backs down.

I'm involved in the football. GO THE BLUES! I want the blue-wearing New South Welshmen to slaughter the maroon-wearing team from Queensland. I am a traitor to my home state.

The camera pans over a huddle of Maroon players and catches the quadruple capital Xs – the cartoon sign for poison and the trademark of the famous Queensland beer worn across the bicep of each Queensland player.

I should have stabbed Ron. I should have killed him when I had the chance, but unlike the under-insured woman on the phone I'm a coward. I could never have confronted him. Not then, not now.

The walls of the Queensland stadium are covered in human supporters all wearing maroon clothes. A commentator refers to the stadium as 'The Cauldron', and

with all the flashbulbs going off it does look like the insides of a barbecue. From the throats of thousands of Maroon supporters comes the three-part scream, *Queens-lan-der*, *Queens-lan-der*. The sound roils across one wall of the stadium to the other and back again like a gigantic wave. A few pockets of Blues supporters can be spotted struggling in the maroon flood, waving plastic blow-up blue hands as if they're drowning. My hair is standing on end.

At half time it's 18/6 and the Blues are winning. The Blues are setting themselves up to romp home and I'm embarrassed for Queensland having ever believed they could win. I settle back into the cushions to watch Queensland get crushed.

During the break one of the commentators warns there's a history of Queensland comebacks. I know nothing about Queensland football's glorious past, but even I have to scoff. Even I know Queensland can't come back from 18/6.

In the fiftieth minute Inglis scores for Queensland and Thurston converts taking the score to 18/12. Both are Aboriginal players and I wonder whether they are torn playing for the State where so many bad things happened to their race. They're ecstatic. In the fifty-eighth minute Queensland and New South Wales are tied. The commentators are raving about the Queensland spirit and one of them is screaming hysterically.

"If you invite a Queenslander in he never leaves!"

At the sixty-minute mark a New South Wales player throws a wobbly pass straight into the arms of an opposition player who immediately scores. The score is Queensland 22 to New South Wales 18. The crowd is roaring. The commentator is having some sort of heart attack.

"You invite a Queenslander in, he'll set up camp, he'll eat you out of house and home, he'll drink your beer and eat everything in your cupboards. He'll never go!"

With 11 minutes left Thurston kicks a field goal taking the score to 25/18. The number of patrons in the cauldron has been calculated and flashes across the screen: 52,498. There is nothing New South Wales can do.

My adopted state has lost. The roar of QUEENS-LAN-DER sounds throughout the house.

There are three games in the series and New South Wales can still come back and win it. I count on it, and curse Queensland.

*

An embossed card arrives in the mail inviting us both to a wedding in Noosa, Queensland. The bride-to-be is a distant relative of Jason's. On the map Cherbourg looks to be about two and a half hours away from Noosa in a north-westerly direction. This is the chance I've been waiting for. Errol may only have left Cherbourg temporarily. Once I've attended the wedding I can head inland and try to find my brother.

I could ring the police station again and ask if Errol is a permanent Cherbourg resident but I don't think Errol would appreciate me ringing the cops. The trial of Sergeant Chris Hurley over the death of Mulrunji Doomadgee is in full swing and I have to limit myself to one side of the coin. After an altercation with Sergeant Hurley on Palm Island turned violent, Doomadgee was discovered dead in the holding cell.

I ring Beth at the Brisbane pub where she is the gaming manager in charge of all the poker machines and ask if she wants to come to Noosa for a few days and help me find Errol. My sister and Jason get on. Both smoke dope and love reality television

programs. Dope makes me think people are out to kill me and I have to hurt them first, and, unless the participants are naked, reality T.V. bores me.

I tell Beth I'd like her to drive me to Cherbourg.

Beth is dating a guy called Jeff who works in the same pub. I hear her tell him over the ding, ding, ding of the poker machines that I want her to drive me to Cherbourg. Jeff is Aboriginal and I hear him laugh and warn her off. He says he's been to Cherbourg and knows what he's talking about.

"Tell Jeff," I yell into the handpiece, "that there's an emu farm in Cherbourg that's a tourist attraction. We could just go there and ask questions!"

Beth relays this to Jeff and he yells so I can hear him. "The emu farm isn't open anymore. It got closed down."

Damn.

I'd had it all worked out in my head: 'Isn't the carving on this egg beautiful and intricate! Oh, by the way, do you know a guy called Errol? He's my brother I haven't seen in twenty years.'

Beth takes back the call, "Jeff doesn't think it's a good idea to just rock up in Cherbourg asking questions."

"They'll rush the car!" Jeff's laughing voice interrupts from the background. "A reconnaissance team will be sent in and they'll find one of your car doors on a different car and one of your wheels on another, and they'll see people wearing your clothes but you'll never be seen again."

I decide to limit my research to Brisbane. Maybe Errol is still in the city.

*

Friends of the bride have donated a house on one of Noosa's man-made canals for us to stay in, a house whose owner is only in Australia a couple of times a year. Directly across the water is a high-arched walk-bridge Dean Martin types could happily scale singing *That's Amore*.

Because canal developments are brand new land where nothing bad has ever happened beyond the destruction of fish spawning grounds, I wonder if people living here are absolved from worrying about Australia's original inhabitants. Then I think of all the run-off from the surrounding mountains and the bodies of all the original inhabitants who would have disintegrated into the water and washed down to the river mouth where the canal development has been built and I realise nothing's new. It's all ancient.

The wedding is in the hilltop grounds of a beautiful sprawling ranch house that overlooks wetlands. The owner, a friend of the bride and groom, is a music industry bigwig and an avid art collector. A painting of a life-sized rodeo rider on a thrashing horse dominates one wall of a breezeway. Another huge piece in the living room is of a life-sized wave crashing over a ship's deck.

People mill about drinking and smoking pot.

So as not to become paranoid on the second-hand smoke, I walk round the side of one of the main buildings and come face to face with a traditional Aboriginal man in a loincloth aiming his spear at an abandoned shopping trolley. It's a wall stencil. The owner must have had it commissioned.

A shopping trolley would never have fooled Errol.

I walk to the edge of the lawn and look out over the wetlands to the mountains. I'm facing northwest towards Cherbourg. I'm a coward for not going all the way.

Solidarity

The reason I left Queensland and moved to New South Wales was the introduction of the 1985 Queensland Liquor Act. This law made it illegal to serve alcohol to sexual deviants (homosexuals) and was the final straw, so to speak.

The reason I came back was to see Ron sentenced and put away for child molestation. He'd finally been caught. My only dilemma seemed to be finding a pub where I could celebrate with my deviant friends. It was on this visit that I last saw Errol.

I was sauntering through King George Square, all eyeliner and bleached hair, trying to look beautiful and poisonous at the same time. It was 1987. It had taken two years for Ron's case to reach the courts, and I thought he'd be going away for a long, long time.

As I walked through the square, all the oncoming pedestrians started to veer away from me. I thought it was because they couldn't abide sharing the pathway with such a proud fag.

God, I remember thinking. *Nothing ever changes in Queensland – they're still terrified of poofters*.

As if performing a magician's trick I turned dramatically to yell 'POOF!' at their scurrying backsides and came face to face with the real reason for the evacuation. Coming up from behind, casting all before them like a grader shovel, was a moving wall of ten Aboriginal men.

I decided on the spot I wasn't going to respond like the other pedestrians. I would stand my ground. Maybe even teach the scaredy-cats a lesson. Maybe die trying. Some of the evacuees stopped in premonition of watching the silly poof be beaten to death.

“Hello David,” the biggest Aboriginal man said, smiling.

Not too shy and not a grin. Errol. My brother.

He didn’t look embarrassed or alarmed at what I was wearing, and none of his mates did either. Solidarity. We walked to the centre of King George Square, and while Errol and I stood talking, his gang encircled us. Pedestrians almost broke their own necks doing double takes at the biggest queen in the square talking to the biggest Aboriginal man they’d ever seen. *Gawk. Go on, gawk you racist homophobes*.

Errol said he was just out of prison and on his way to Musgrave Park. I asked what he’d done, and Errol said there’d been a fight where a man died, but he didn’t elaborate. I asked him if he ever saw Lindsey, or knew what happened to him.

“I was cornered by a gang of skinheads in a back alley, and Lindsey came out of nowhere, knocked them down and disappeared before I could thank him. That was the only time.”

I told Errol about Ron and what he’d done.

Errol swallowed and looked momentarily away.

I assured him Ron would be put away for sure.

“I’m going to get him for all of us that bastard ever hurt,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of brothers inside who’ll do it.”

I imagined Ron kicked and hit in the same way he used to beat Lindsey and Errol. I imagined men visiting his cell in the way he used to visit the girls’ beds. I imagined Ron as frightened as he used to make me.

Errol made me memorise the phone number of the hostel where he was staying and told me to contact him as soon as I heard of Ron’s sentence.

Errol’s phone number was my mantra.

Ron missed out on jail time because of all his work with the emergency service, tying down roofs after high winds and pulling animals out of storm water drains. Errol's phone number evaporated. I returned to New South Wales with my tail between my legs.

The only other time I heard anything of Errol was years later when I was working in a bar on Sydney's Oxford Street (where I drank and drank and drank). Corey, an Aboriginal guy who used to play school football with Errol, walked in. Corey told me he used to hang out with Errol in Musgrave Park and how they both ended up living in the same Aboriginal hostel. Corey told me Errol found his real family but the car that was headed to Cherbourg for the reunion was in an accident and three of Errol's brothers were killed. Corey said the rest of the reunion was cancelled and Errol had crawled under his hostel bed and didn't come out for days.

Corey is part of the AIDS quilt now, panel number 103007.

*

Another list is needed, a list of the dead:

• Andrew Pringle (The young man who hung himself in the cell)

• Brother 1

• Brother 2

• Brother 3

• Corey.

Rhino

After the wedding Beth speeds and tailgates down the Bruce Highway waving her fist at anybody who gets in the way of delivering Jason to the airport on time. She's on a mission. In or out of the car Beth isn't scared of anything or anyone anymore. Beth is yelling over the noise of the radio about how Mum continued to harbour feelings for Ron right up until the day she died and how she could never forgive Mum for not hating him.

"Remember Mum saying how when we were kids she'd be like a lioness if anybody hurt us?" Beth asks, looking back through the rear vision mirror.

"Yeah," I say, "she said it all the time."

"Funny how she ended up like a rhinoceros with its horn cut off standing behind a tree." Beth snorts and returns her gaze to the road.

"Good luck finding your brother," Jason says gently. "I wish I could stay."

I feel ashamed but I'm secretly glad Jason is leaving. If I find Errol I don't want to scare him with my same-sex partner.

I tell him I'll be home in one week. We hug and he disappears into the terminal.

"Do you have a street directory?" I ask, returning to the car.

"Yeah, there's an ancient one under your seat," Beth says, twisting her head over her shoulder, getting ready to reverse down a one-way street.

While Beth negotiates our way out of the airport I flick through the maps and locate, ten minutes away from our current position, the little black square marked ORPHANAGE.

"I want to see the children's home where we got Errol. Do you mind a detour?"

One block away from our destination the car passes a cemetery and I remember how sick Errol was when we got him.

"I wonder how many orphanage kids buried there died of grief?"

"Kids are resilient things," Beth replies.

"The ones that survive."

"God," Beth says, "this is like an episode of *The X-Files*."

"Keep going straight."

The car comes to a T-junction and the orphanage buildings are directly across the road. The tree with the native beehive is gone. Beth parks the car on the gravel verge and switches off the engine. Silence. There is no one about. A sign at the front gate announces the buildings are an aged care facility. Across the road from the buildings that used to be the orphanage is a huge empty block of land lined with the old fence posts and gates. The houses that stood there once look to have been obliterated.

"Speaking of the *X-Files*," I say, pointing, "nice old-fashioned fences, gates and driveways, but no nice old-fashioned houses."

"Hun,un,un,un,nun," Beth sprays the decimated area with an invisible machine gun and pretends to blow smoke out of the barrel. "Imagine all the orphanage kids looking across at real happy families all day! Their stares would've been like flame throwers."

"Hmmm, you wish kids had such power."

"You betcha," Beth replies quietly.

I feel strange looking down the sweeping driveway we drove into over thirty years ago. It feels as if I'm invading part of Errol's story where I'm not meant to – as surely as if I'm trespassing.

"Let's go," I say, getting back into the car, "we don't belong here."

I'm staying with Beth on the south side within walking distance of the river. Her one bedroom fibro flat is one of five held up on a forest of stumps and looks to be about a hundred years old. Beth gives me her room and says she'll be happy on the couch. She says she won't take no for an answer.

I decide to visit Musgrave Park on the off-chance Errol might be there. I don't know if I'm being insulting thinking Errol might still be hanging round the park but I can't risk leaving this avenue unexplored. Beth drops me at the station and I scan the ticket machine for Vulture Street train station. The station isn't listed. I approach the stationmaster's window and I'm told through the gap that the city fathers changed the name to South Bank when Brisbane hosted EXPO. Vulture Street sounded too ugly.

"That's a shame," I say, handing through money for the ticket. "When I was a kid Vulture Street always made me look twice for birds of prey waiting to swoop."

"Every kid did," the stationmaster says.

Two stations later I disembark at South Bank and walk up the street ramp. I lean against a fence and scan all the people on both platforms for anybody who might be Errol, or Lindsey.

After the station I walk through the park and spot two Aboriginal men and one woman sitting beneath a tree. From his size and the way he's sitting I think one of the men might be Errol. I feel like the new vulture. I try not to gawk. As I get closer I realise they're both too young. The men ignore me and I keep my mouth closed. I don't have the guts to ask 'Do any of you know a bloke called Errol?'

I sit waiting on a park bench and scan each new arrival but when none are my brothers I give up and walk towards the river and Brisbane's Cultural Precinct.

A life-size pregnant Southern-Wright whale and her juvenile calf hang moaning in the passageway outside the entrance to the Queensland Museum. The actual whale

recordings of moans, clicks and grunts fill the passageway and could be the animals calling out to their brethren for rescue. Like sea anemones, a class of young primary school children in maroon uniforms stretch up their arms in a futile effort to reach the whales' undersides.

"Line up. Line up!" a young teacher commands in a frazzle.

This is the museum that used to be located north side but was moved when the south bank became Brisbane's cultural marshalling yard. Just in from the museum's front doors small animal footprints lead me to words stencilled on a wall.

DISCOVER QUEENSLAND

THE INSIDE GUIDE TO THE STATE OUTSIDE

VISIT AMAZING PLACES!

MEET WONDERFUL PEOPLE!

HEAR FASCINATING STORIES!

BEGIN A LIFETIME'S JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY!

ROUGH ROAD

And there, past the gibbers and the shingle-back lizards, locked behind glass, is the object I remember most from childhood visits: a riveted black metal container, warped and empty, with holes in its bottom and sides.

The tank was originally a ship's water tank used by the Watsons as a cauldron in which to boil sea cucumbers to produce trepang. The oars were paddles used to stir the trepang during cooking. Holes were chopped in its sides and bottom to drain out the water before Mrs Watson's body was removed.

"Stay in your groups," the panicking young teacher calls leading her charges into the exhibit. "Stay in your groups."

I remember as a child being introduced to Mrs Watson's tank on a museum visit from my own primary school. Errol was in my grade but in a different class. He was shy when we first got him and before the bus trip Mum took me aside and asked me to keep him company. Mum needn't have worried because I could see Errol talking and laughing, making fish swimming movements with his hands as he described where he came from to the boy sitting next to him.

"Stay in your groups."

Moving in two lines between shelves full of dusty old insects, clothes and rocks, none of us paid too much attention to the things about us until we happened upon a strange dull black metal container and the teacher standing waiting beside it.

The teacher clapped her hands.

"This lady is Mrs Watson," the teacher said pointing to a photo of a lady in old-fashioned clothes, one hand raised to her face as if she was thinking something important and the other in her lap showing off four big buttons on the sleeve.

"And this is Mrs Watson's tank," she said, indicating the black metal container, "a terrible story."

"Nearly a hundred years ago Mrs Watson moved to Queensland from Scotland." The teacher sent out her words in a tone designed to extinguish smaller voices.

The photo of the woman reminds me of pictures of the Tsarina.

"This lady married Mr Watson and they had a baby boy. They lived on Lizard Island with their two faithful Chinese servants."

She stopped speaking to listen for complete silence.

"Mr Watson went away to work," making sure she was getting the story right, the teacher stopped and peered at the plaque, "to collect sea cucumbers."

I imagined the cucumber sandwiches that royal people like to eat morning, noon and night and I realised the importance of knowing as much about them as I could in case I was ever quizzed at a fancy ball or State occasion: ‘These are delicious David, what are they? You must give me the recipe!’

‘Cucumber sandwiches,’ I imagined myself saying, confidently. ‘They grow in the sea.’

The teacher’s voice broke through my reverie.

“Aborigines attacked the house and one of the two servants vanished.”

“What happened to the servant who disappeared?” Errol’s friend asked quietly.

The teacher, delighted with everyone’s attention, widened her eyes theatrically and drew a line across her throat making a dead engine noise at the back of her throat.

“The Aborigines scared poor Mrs Watson so much that she and the remaining servant pushed this black cauldron into the water, got in with the baby, and floated away.”

Thirty pairs of eyes now focus on the interior of the black tank imagining a lady, her baby and a Chinese man floating out upon an empty sea.

“They floated for days and days before beaching on a deserted and waterless island. Just imagine the poor baby’s desperate cries.”

“The Chinese man went and lay down under a tree. We know this because Mrs Watson wrote down everything in her diary.” The teacher pointed at an open book lined in old black leather. “Rain finally fell after the three of them had died and the men who found them had to chop holes in the bottoms and sides,” the teacher indicated with a finger the slices and holes in the black metal, “to drain out the water before removing the bodies of Mrs Watson and her baby.”

The open black maw in front of us held the dead bodies of a mother and child. The black box is an open coffin. A girl from my class burst into tears and her sobs set off a few of the others.

On the way home in the bus Errol and his friend weren't talking.

I realise the reason; Errol, Lindsey and their sister were taken off their parents as punishment for Mrs Watson and her baby.

But now, here in the 21st century, there is no mention of the most gruesome bit, the dead baby. I reread the tagline. The baby boy has been removed from the story of Mrs Watson's tank. But even without the child the weight of the tank is immense. It was from this cauldron, different to the football stadium called the Cauldron, that lots of kids got ladled out their first taste of white/black relations.

Looking round I can't locate anything to counterbalance the weight of this black tank. Nothing to correspond. There's space given over to giant cockroaches, the Queensland Lungfish, and the butterfly man of Kuranda. There's an explanation of what happened to Aboriginal pathways: *Most modern towns and settlements are built on important Aboriginal sites and many roads follow the traditional trade routes*. The closest approximation is the taking of sugar slaves from the South Pacific.

There is no corresponding Aboriginal Mrs Watson and her tank and her baby – nothing of that immediacy and power to put viewers in a black mother's shoes. There still isn't any context. The tank needs to be accompanied at all times by a warden to explain the danger, or at least a corresponding installation, a hologram, reversing the colours: a white tank and a black Mrs Watson.

The display right next to Mrs Watson's tank is on trepang processing, and a withered sea cucumber is tethered to the wall. The sea cucumber is animal, not vegetable, and I can't imagine its flesh in a sandwich.

Are You My Mother?

"Good morning 9C."

"Good morning Mr Benson."

"I want to introduce you to your new physical education teacher."

The woman standing with the Head of the P.E. Department is stocky like a shot-put champion. The introduction is taking place in the shadow of the dark red brick biology building at the edge of the school oval. P.E. equipment is kept in the storage rooms beneath biology and this is where the class meets every Thursday.

"Miss Fields comes to us well prepared, having taught at several different high schools, so don't think you'll be able to put anything over her. Am I right Miss Fields?"

"Right you are Mr Benson. Now I want the class on the ground and each of you showing me twenty push-ups."

School bags are shucked to the earth and groans and dust fill the air as the students of 9C fall to their knees in front of Miss Fields.

Miss Fields. My mother.

I read about this phenomenon in *Women's Weekly* where adopted people's real parents often live on the periphery of their children's lives without either party knowing until much later. The article supplied two examples: a girl who used to borrow books from the library where her mother was a librarian, and a woman who for years had her groceries packed by the teenage boy she'd given up long ago. After reading this article I had no intention of being like either stupid example. I would always remain aware of the people on my periphery.

Each lunch hour now finds me loitering at the sporting equipment sheds trying to engage Miss Fields in conversation as to her movements since 1965. To be my mother she needs to be twenty-seven years old.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how long does it take to be a P.E. teacher?”

“Three years.”

“Did you go straight into university after school?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look very old to be a teacher.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m twenty-seven.”

“Ahhhhh.”

“You’re hanging about because you know what I am.”

This is developing too quickly... I’m not ready. This woman is my birth mother. I can’t speak. I just nod my head.

“Look, it’s not really my place but you’re obviously here for a reason that has nothing to do with physical education. Am I right?”

I am teetering on the edge of something momentous. If I talk I will fall in a heap. I can only nod again.

“I know it’s horrible and lonely, but it’s a different world once you’ve left school. You’ll find acceptance and friends who will understand and love you.”

I’m getting the feeling we are talking about two different things. I’m waiting for her to open her arms but instead she is talking about the world outside. Maybe this is a speech she has been rehearsing for years, overblown by time, and it’s my duty as her son to listen.

“I remember being your age and too frightened to tell anyone about how I was feeling.”

Oh, she must be talking about how scared she was being young and pregnant, but I'm male and it doesn't have any bearing unless she is trying to say sorry for giving me up.

"Being a homosexual is nothing to be ashamed of."

My mother is a homosexual?

No. She thinks I am. She can tell just by looking at me. And she's not my mother.

I flee from the sport sheds and drop physical education classes for community service where I go to old people's homes and listen to their stories about the good old days.

Meat and Three Veg

I accompany Beth to the pub she works at in Fortitude Valley. The car radio is tuned to a local station and the rant is about the second match of the State of Origin series, and how New South Wales doesn't stand a chance.

"God, I hope they lose!"

"You should support Queensland at State of Origin," Beth says, looking sideways at me. "It's the only time Queensland seriously supports its black fellas!"

"Jesus, Beth, I don't know how you can live up here after everything that happened."

"I love Queensland," she says simply. "Bloody hell, David, even the Jews moved back to Germany! What's your problem? All you got was a few clips about the ear."

“No, that’s not all!” I exclaim, twisting about in my seat, “and it’s not all about Ron. I moved away because Queensland passed a law where gays, deviants and perverts in those days – thank-you – couldn’t even have a drink together in a pub. I was strip searched on the side of the road for Christ’s sake. Twice!”

“Well, yeah, that’s horrible – but Nelson Mandela still lives in South Africa doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, but I bet he doesn’t go so far as to barrack for their football team.”

“Yeah he does,” Beth replies simply, knowing all about the world of football.

“Well, I’m not,” I declare.

After parking in the spaces assigned to staff, Beth shows me round the faux Ye Olde English pub. She tells me the pub has always had a large Aboriginal clientele. I’m surprised anyone, let alone Aboriginal people, would want to hang about in a Ye Olde English pub but I’m still smarting from our conversation in the car so I keep my criticisms to myself.

The tour ends out the back in the staff smoking area where Beth leaves me with a beer while she changes a patron’s money for the poker machines. There’s a wall of photographs in the staff section of all the people barred from entering the hotel for one reason or another. Someone has written WALL OF SHAME in black felt tip pen above the images. Half of the pictures are of Aboriginal people caught by security cameras in the act of begging, stealing or soliciting. The other half are either hungry European backpackers or old, tantrum-throwing white men.

Beth comes up behind me and stabs the tip of her index fingernail firmly into the photographed face of a fifty-year-old white man.

“That guy there is a convicted rapist,” she whispers so there’s no chance of any other staff hearing. “I told management I caught him stealing so I don’t ever have to serve him.”

“What? He wasn’t caught stealing?”

“Nope, I’m not serving rapists. The ones I know about anyway.”

“Beth’s Liquor Act 2007,” I say in pretend awe.

My sister has to go and balance the tills so I give her a kiss and walk up into the Valley Mall. There’s an Aboriginal man fronting a Country and Western band in the rotunda. As he sings he sticks out his tongue between the words. I watch for a while remembering how Errol used to drum his fingers on any hard surface available. I continue walking, looking for other Aboriginal men – looking at them for too long when I find them.

The City of Brisbane now has a Tiffany’s store with a huge African American security guard at the front door.

How sophisticated, I say to myself, but the sarcasm is hollow. Things have changed. The city is rich and looks good. I’m grudging in my admiration of the place. Brisbane has moved on but I’m stuck in the past.

Moving through the throng I’m overtaken by the sensation that something mystical is about to happen. It’s twenty years since I last saw Errol. This is it. I hurry towards King George Square. Rounding the corner onto Adelaide Street I’m dismayed to see the Square is being rebuilt. Barricades have been erected to create a pedestrian pathway through all the construction. Entering the route created between walls of plywood panels, I feel that if I focus all my mental energy and send out his name with my mind then he will sense me, and he will come.

I close my eyes and silently chant Errol's name. All I can hear is the scuff of pedestrians following the designated pathway. I anticipate a touch to my arm and opening my eyes and seeing Errol, or maybe even Lindsey, who once before tuned into Errol's frequency and saved him from the skinheads.

Here in the Square I imagine we are three points of an unnamed star-sign. The Brothers. With closed eyes, and internally chanting, I stand like this for twenty minutes. Nothing happens. I change tack and switch to chanting, *Lindsey, Lindsey, Lindsey*. For another five minutes I stand with my back to the plywood resisting the urge to peek. I urge Lindsey to sense me the same way he sensed Errol in that back alley. We are brothers. *You must come*. I sense a body come to stand beside me. I wait for a touch of a hand on my arm.

I open my eyes when I'm bumped.

I turn and look. An old woman with bright orange hair stands waving her arms about, staring at the sky. *Great, I've conjured up a mad woman*.

"A long time ago there used to be a traffic island over there in the middle of all this and statues of lions like they have in Trafalgar Square in London, and King George on a horse overseeing everything."

"Yes," I say, not willing to be rude, "they've rebuilt a couple of times since then. Nothing ever stays the same."

I push off from the wall and re-enter the stream of pedestrian traffic. The woman pleads something but I can't hear what it is above the onslaught of fresh jackhammers. I don't have time for crazies. I have my own delusions to contend with.

Imagine thinking my thoughts have the power of a dog whistle.

I turn up the Queen Street Mall and walk to the beginning of the Victoria Bridge. Stopping at the river I look across to the Cultural Precinct. The colour of the

stone makes the buildings look like a continuation of the Kangaroo Point cliffs downriver. The architecture looks just as immovable, as if it could exist for thousands of years. The style is reminiscent of another building, one I can't quite recall.

On my side, caught up in the green and white coils of the riverside expressway, the profile of the tall parliamentary building stands squinting into the distance like a character out of one of Albert Tucker's tracker paintings, but this time it looks as if he's met his match in a giant snake. *Strangle snake, strangle*. *Strangle till it pops*. This is the building where the law that sent me packing had been made. It's a strange comfort to know I can't let go of old hurts.

I fall into line with students from all over the world and walk across the bridge.

Up close the library looks like the shorn-off trunk of a Moreton Bay Fig tree. People move like insects between moss-coloured buttresses. It is cool and beautiful.

In the foyer a notice advertises an exhibition on the third level about Queensland's stolen generations. It's an omen. Below the standard numbers on the lift buttons are raised dots, nearly invisible, like insect eggs, and it takes a second to realise its Braille.

Wow, I sneer to myself, *Queensland has really turned considerate in its old age*.

Upstairs I walk in on a short silent film running on a loop containing images of early Cherbourg. The film shows footage of a school building looking similar in style to any suburban school building. There are images of two white nurses staffing a hospital, and admiring footage of Aboriginal children being taught woodcraft and home economics. There is a team of Aboriginal men in the 1930s building a bridge and driving a car over it.

This is what I have to do. Build a bridge and get over it or I'll be trapped in my self-indulgent whinging forever.

Once the film loops the loop, I go to a computer and punch in the words, Cherbourg, Queensland.

A couple of books are listed. I locate the most recent book on the shelves. I scan the index for any mention of my brother's last name. Nothing. I start at the beginning and read the foreword where the author thanks the elders of Cherbourg for the trust they've shown in him. The author thanks the Rabato family. A instead of an E: one letter difference. Is she a relative of Errol's but time has changed the spelling? I wonder, if I contact the author, if he'll put me in touch.

Waiting for takeaway coffee in the library café and bookshop, I flick through coffee table books and read that the Brisbane River is older than the Nile.

The Brisbane River is older than the Nile. How can that be?

I know the names of ancient Egyptian rulers – male and female. I know of Ra, and sun worship, and Tutankhamen and Nefertiti. I know more about Ancient Egyptians who lived along the Nile than I know about the people who walked the earth buried beneath the bookshop café.

And then I remember the building whose style the cultural centre reminded me of from when I stood looking from the other side of the river. The Temple of Hatshepsut. Pictures from the library books my eyes searched as a child looking for the place where I imagined the evil queen drowned in sand. The same flat roof and same colour stone, similar terraces and colonnades, as if the Temple of Hatshepsut had been picked up out of the Valley of Kings and plonked down here, as if the brown Brisbane River were the new River Nile. I remember my mother reading out the story of Hatshepsut to me from one of the books too old for my age group – how Hatshepsut co-ruled with her brother-in-law for over twenty years until he had her removed and then obliterated all reference of her from the monuments.

A small group of Aboriginal people is gathered round a bonfire in Musgrave Park. It's the biggest group I've seen so far but none of the men are my brothers. Some of their children are playing on the swings and a line of private school kids are trudging single file with their heads down through the park like wildebeest on the Kalahari. Soft rain starts to fall as I head back towards Vulture St.

After a few drinks that night I lift my hand in Beth's direction for the cigarette lighter and she pretends to flinch. It's supposed to be a joke about the time I hit her when I was twelve. I still remember it. SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP seven times: three times on each side of her face, and one for good measure, just because she wasn't playing a game the way I wanted it played. I remember the obscene rush. Beth says she couldn't believe her brother she loved so much was hitting her. Our relationship changed. She was eight.

But that's not all.

"Can't you make any white friends?" I asked casually, when she wouldn't come back to revering me the old way. Her best friend in those days was a girl with an Afro who'd moved here from the Solomon Islands.

Beth has never mentioned this, so I don't think she remembers. I put her memory failure down to all the pot she smokes. Marijuana does have fringe benefits for me after all.

But she remembers the hitting.

When Beth flinches I'm supposed to laugh. It's a joke. Then I apologise all over again. I beg her to hit my face as hard as she can, ten times, three more for luck, and never mention it again, but she won't – she says she likes to see me squirm. This is my cue to arrange to stay somewhere else. We're getting on each other's nerves.

“Tomorrow, after I’ve done a bit more searching, I’ll go and stay somewhere else for the night. Give you a break.”

The next morning I ring my aunt and ask if I can stay. I give her my arrival details and offer to make dinner as a thank-you.

Thirty minutes later I again disembark at the old Vulture Street train station and head towards Musgrave Park. Except for a schoolgirl in uniform sitting against a wall of the swimming centre there’s no one else about. It dawns on me that Errol could be at work like everybody else. I’m suddenly embarrassed that I’ve subscribed to this stereotype of Errol still being footloose and fancy-free.

I promised to make dinner but I’m suddenly worried about the availability of ingredients. I leave the park and cross the river into the city. I find an inner-city supermarket and ask the girl attending to the meat slicer whether the chorizo sausage on display is available in all suburban Queensland outlets.

“Chorizo is available everywhere sir,” she answers, keeping her eyes on the meat curls falling onto her plastic gloved hand, “it’s a pretty standard product.”

Of course it is. What am I thinking? Why do I still think Brisbane is stuck in a past of meat and three veg? Watching the meat drop from the machine I recognise I’ve been sliced in three. The first slice is the little kid in the tree; the middle is me from the eighties; and the last is me now, and they alternate who’s in control. Eighties me is the version doing the food shopping, unaware it’s no longer 1985.

My aunt is out front of the train station in her car and we head towards her place. I tell her I’m looking for Errol. She asks, “How do you know he’s still alive?”

I tell her the story of ringing the Cherbourg police and the how the officer knew Errol had just left town to travel back to Brisbane.

“Maybe he’s on parole and that’s why they know so much about him.”

I hadn’t thought of this and I wonder what he could have done. I hope it wasn’t violent. I hope it wasn’t rape.

My aunt stops to negotiate a roundabout where a gang of council workers are digging up a bed of small burgundy-coloured hedges.

“They’re digging up all that prissy, exotic nandina and replacing them with xanthorrhea.” She motions to a freshly laid bed of Australian natives, “I refuse to call them blackboys.”

My aunt tells me how, over the years, they’ve searched the electoral rolls and rung the few listings under Rebato but never found anything. My aunt asks me why I’m not looking for Lindsey first as he was my brother for the longest.

I say my feelings about Lindsey are more complicated.

I recount the article I found in the newspaper and read to Mum on her deathbed. How a man called Lindsey Rebato had been arrested impersonating a police officer and extorting money from men frequenting toilet blocks.

My aunt raises an eyebrow and gives me an appraising look.

“I don’t hang around toilet blocks,” I say, in a bored voice. “Lindsey’s behaviour suggests he has a problem with men who have sex with men. That he’s the moral police with benefits.”

“Well,” she says, “I’ve got a problem with men who have sex in toilet blocks!”

“Yes, but you’re not going to pretend to be a policeman and blackmail money off them are you.”

Just at that moment the car passes parkland and a squat toilet block comes into view.

“Shall I pull over?” my Aunt asks.

“Ha, ha,” I say, with a flick of my hand. “When we were teenagers Lindsey told me to turn to Christ when he heard I was gay. Dad did too.”

“What did your mother do?”

“She burst into tears.”

“Well I guess it must have come as a shock.”

“Oh, yeah, a shock. She took me to a psychiatrist when I was ten. Anyway, I read the article about Lindsey to Mum, and we had a discussion about contacting the police station for information about him but we both knew I wouldn’t. It was the wrong time.”

My aunt keeps driving but stays silent.

“What if he’d been completely crazy?” I cry. “Mum was dying and we were all bloody exhausted.”

“But now you feel you had the chance to take him to her for his sake, like a real brother would,” she indicates, turning into her street, “so he could say goodbye, and you didn’t.”

“Yeah.”

Looking resolutely out the window I’m ashamed all over again. I remember magpie season, being six years old, and walking to school wearing an ice-cream container over my head. I looked like a little robot. From under the plastic rim I could just see enough of Lindsey’s legs and feet to keep on track. Lindsey wasn’t wearing a helmet of any kind but was carrying a stick to ward the attacking birds away. I can still remember the smell of vanilla and the pale light emanating through the plastic walls, and I remember knowing I could follow Lindsey anywhere because he would never lead me into trouble.

The supermarket a kilometre from my aunt's place has more chorizo sausages than I've seen in all Newcastle shops combined. That night I make my thank-you dinner: pasta combined with chorizo, Spanish onion, roast pumpkin and baby rocket, but no one seems too impressed.

Spelling

The following morning I ring the author of the Cherbourg book and rush through my spiel.

"My name is David and I'm trying to locate my Aboriginal foster brother whose last known address was in Cherbourg."

"So what can I do?"

"In the foreword you thank the elders for their stories and go on to say that without their help you wouldn't have gotten anywhere. I'm hoping you can put me in touch with the same people."

"Ring Bev Johnson. She's a community officer in Cherbourg and knows everyone." I can hear him turning pages of an address book: "Got a pen?"

I copy down the number, thank him, and hang up the phone. My heart is beating fast. I feel ten steps closer to finding Errol. I dial the number.

"Welfare, how can I help?"

"Is Bev Johnson there please?"

"No, Bev's off at a council meeting. She'll be back later on."

After an hour spent pacing, I ring again, and I'm about to be transferred to the Council department when a woman picks up and says, "You want to speak with Aunty Bev?"

“Yes.”

I am forwarded to another area.

“Hello, can I help you?” A no-nonsense voice.

“Bev Johnson?”

“Yes.”

I explain my contact with the author, and my search for my foster brother.

“He used to live in Cherbourg and maybe still does.”

“You’re his brother?”

“Yeah, I’m his brother. I haven’t seen him for twenty years.” I wonder if she heard the word foster and discarded it as unimportant.

I wait for Bev Johnson to ask ‘Brother? How can you prove you’re his brother? What sort of brother waits all this time? Are you white?’

‘Yes,’ I would have to say, ‘Yes I am white.’

“Does he have blue eyes?” she asks.

The question throws me. Blue eyes in an Aboriginal face. Surely I would remember, but no matter how hard I squint into memory I can’t distinguish Errol’s eye colouring. I want to say green, but I’m scared of giving the wrong answer.

“No, I think greenie brown.”

“Where are you ringing from?” her voice is kind.

“Brisbane, but I live in Newcastle. I’m only in town a little while.”

“Wait one minute.”

I hear her put the phone down and ask other people who must be in the same room whether anyone knows Errol. I hear a woman say ‘Yes’ but her tone is non-committal, flat. I can’t pick from this woman’s voice whether knowing him is a good

thing or a bad thing. Other words, murmured words, flit through the holes of the receiver unrecognised.

Bev returns to the phone.

"No one's seen him for a long time. (*But the police said he'd just left. Someone must be wrong*.) He lives round the Aspley area, but that's a while ago now and he might have moved. Have you tried Musgrave Park and asking there?"

"I've been to the park, but I didn't find anything." I'm silently thrilled this has been a valid option all along. "I thought that might be rude to just front up asking questions."

"Everyone's looking for someone," she says.

I'm confused. I can't tell whether she thinks all whites are looking for someone or if she thinks I'm an Aboriginal person trying to locate lost family members. I don't want to deceive this woman. Then I wonder why I'm thinking like this. I am white and I am looking for someone. And maybe Bev is right. Maybe everyone, black and white, is looking for someone.

"I'm going to put you through to Roberta in rehab. She'll know more about him, okay?"

"Thank-you very much." The word rehab rings in my ear. Does this mean Errol was committed?

Somewhere in Cherbourg the phone rings.

"Rehab, Roberta speaking."

I tell Roberta the story I told Bev – that I'm Errol's foster brother looking for him after twenty years.

"Have you been to Musgrave Park?"

Roberta sounds younger than Bev.

“Yes, but I couldn’t find him and I thought it was rude to ask.”

“Everyone’s looking for someone,” she sighs, and I wonder if this is Cherbourg’s motto. “Errol has a sister living in Brisbane called Yvonne.”

“I didn’t know about Yvonne,” I reply, surprised, remembering the little girl who came to our house. “I knew about Sasha. I met her.”

I feel stupid that I haven’t allowed for the existence of other sisters. Roberta and Bev must have deduced I’m white or else how does it explain why Errol has a sister called Yvonne that I don’t know about? Unless the stealing was like a production line: give birth - taken/give birth - taken/give birth - taken.

“Look in the phone book. Yvonne spells her last name differently. Yvonne’s is spelt Rabato and she lives in Woodridge.”

I thank Roberta, hang up, and flump open the phone book.

Rabato, Y 43 Spencer St, Wdrg 36549786

Lindsey and Errol’s sister. So this is it. So simple.

My heart is beating fast and steady.

“Hello,” a soft voice, “Yvonne speaking.”

I introduce myself and tell her that I’m looking for Errol Rebato – my foster brother. I explain I’ve already rung Cherbourg and spoken with Bev Johnson and Roberta in rehab.

“I know Errol.”

Her voice is air-conditioner air coming through the receiver and the skin along my arms prickles into a forest of tiny igloos. Present tense. Errol is alive.

“Where did you grow up?” Her voice remains soft but now has a business-like tone.

“Ipswich, then after Mum left Dad, Bayside, where Errol and Lindsey ran away.”

I can sense Yvonne ticking off my story with what she knows of Errol’s upbringing. I can tell I add up. I ask her if she knows anything of Lindsey.

“Last I heard he was in a psych ward on the Gold Coast.”

I tell Yvonne that I had no idea she existed. I say I knew a girl called Sasha, but I’d never heard of an Yvonne. I prattle on and on. I ask if she is in touch with Sasha and recount the story of meeting her in the backyard of our house years before.

“She’s dead.” She waits a heartbeat. “I’ll get you Errol’s number and address.”

Sasha, the little girl who went on a hunger strike to meet her brothers is dead. Sasha, the little girl who could have ended up in our family. If Sasha had come into our family she would have met Ron. I can’t wish that on anyone. Rayley, the girl who took Sasha’s place in our family, is also dead. She died of heart disease at thirty.

“Are you there?” Yvonne asks into the phone. “This is Errol’s mobile number.”

It never occurred to me Errol would have a mobile phone. The *Crocodile Dundee* movie springs to mind where an Aboriginal man wearing a loincloth and covered in tribal paint markings makes an incongruous sight gag by pulling out his mobile phone. I’m alarmed. Subconsciously I’ve been subscribing to the same joke.

Yvonne reels off the digits, and there in front of me is my brother’s phone number.

Yvonne says Errol lives by himself in a north side suburb called Aspley. She tells me Errol’s at work at this time of the day, that it’s best to leave a message.

Errol’s at work.

I’ve been staring at Aboriginal men at the park and in malls and Errol’s been working all along.

“Thank-you so much, and it’s good to finally speak with you.”

“Finally?” she says with a guffaw. “You didn’t know I existed till today.”

“No,” I reply awkwardly, not able to think much beyond Errol’s phone number, “thanks anyway.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

I gather my belongings and return to the train station for the trip back to Beth’s. I will ring from there. Scared I will lose his number I hold the paper in my hand. Then, in the final minutes of the journey, I’m fearful the moisture from my hand will melt the numbers away. While the train whines on, I tear a notebook page into pieces. I copy down his number over and over again, *quickly, before the train derails in a flaming heap, or a bomb explodes*, then I hide each folded piece away in different pockets and separate areas of my bag and wallet till I’m satisfied nothing will ever again make me lose his contact details.

I ring six times from Beth’s house but each time the number rings out and fails to divert to message bank. I worry that the number is obsolete, or wrong, that Yvonne heard something she didn’t like in my voice, something false, and has deliberately given me the wrong number.

Beth arrives home after her shift and we share a cigarette on the back porch while I tell her about the failed phone calls. Beth wants to see the number on the piece of paper for herself. I’m explaining my frustration at not knowing whether there’s something wrong with Errol’s phone, or the number, when the landline I’ve been trying to leave messages from starts to ring.

“No one dials that number,” Beth whispers hoarsely. “People ring my mobile.”

It can’t be anyone else. Beth steps away for me to answer it. I pick up.

“Hello?”

“Yep?”

“Hello?”

“Why have you been ringing me?”

The voice is equal-parts man and nicotine.

“Errol?”

“Yep.”

Ants erupt from holes in my skin.

“It’s David.” I want to add ‘your brother’ but I stop.

“David who?”

“David, your…” I can’t... I need him to say it first. “We grew up together.”

“My foster brother, David?”

HE SAYS IT HE SAYS IT HE SAYS IT

“Yeah, David. Your brother.”

“Are you for real? Are you for real?”

Beth stands with one hand over her mouth, and with the other, starts making fast upwards and downwards movements as if it’s a pump to reverse the water racing to the edges of her saucer eyes.

“Yeah, Blackstone Road. Mungala Street. Peel Street.” I reel off our childhood addresses like I’m showing off passport stamps.

“What are you ringing me for?” he says soberly.

His abruptness throws me. I thought it was obvious.

“Because I wanted to find you,” I say, deciding quickly against adding the caveat, ‘I’m writing about this, about you and me and where we’ve ended up.’

“I didn’t think anybody was interested in what happened to me.” There’s a tone of disbelief in his voice. “How did you find me?”

“I rang Cherbourg and spoke with Bev Johnson and Roberta in rehab and they put me onto your sister Yvonne and she gave me your number.”

I also fail to mention the police station.

Errol is chuckling at the process involved.

“I didn’t think anyone was interested,” he repeats.

“Where are you now?” I ask.

“At work, I left my phone in my locker and I found these six missed calls. Where are you?”

“At Beth’s.” I turn back and look at her and she’s given up trying not to cry and her eyes and cheeks are soaking wet and she has the biggest grin. “Do you remember Beth?”

“My sister?” His voice takes off in another flying leap. “Yeah of course! Hey, where do you live?”

“Newcastle.”

“Why do you want to live down there?” His voice wheels about suspiciously.

“I go to university down there.” I decide not to tell him about Jason, or of my feelings for my home state.

“How’s Mum?”

Oh God.

“Mum died.”

“When?” His voice bogs.

“Ten years ago.” I feel the insult in the words, and their implication — *why didn’t you find me then?*

“We looked,” I say weakly, “but no one could find you.”

“Who did?”

“Me. Every time I came to Brisbane I scanned the streets. And Aunty Linda and Uncle Richard checked the electoral rolls and rang all listings in the phone book, but your sister spells her last name differently.”

Excuses, excuses, excuses.

I remember how Mum’s will failed to mention the foster kids as if they didn’t exist.

To get away from the unpleasantness I hustle him to the next window of his life as if he’s a spectator and people are figures in the David Jones’ Christmas displays.

“Ron died,” I offer as recompense, “a horrible death from cancer.”

“He got his karma,” Errol speaks low and I can barely hear him, “for all the bad things he did.”

“Mum died of cancer too,” I interject, “but at least she had all her kids round her.”

It’s out of my mouth before I can stop it. Not all of us were there at all. Errol wasn’t, neither was Lindsey or Rayley, and I can’t vouch that Ron’s boys weren’t gathered about his dying body either.

“Have you got a woman,” he changes gears, “or any kids?”

“No.” I throw a look of horror at Beth, and laugh awkwardly. Surely he must remember the eyeliner I was wearing the last time he saw me in King George Square.

“No, I don’t have kids, or a woman.”

Beth is stifling laughter and I shush her with a hand movement.

“Do you have a wife,” I turn it round, “or a girlfriend, or any kids?”

“No wife. But I’ve got a boy up in Cherbourg,” Errol chuckles quietly. “He’s angry at me because I can’t afford to buy him football boots.”

“Karen is married and has four boys.”

“Karen, hey?” his voice swells with pride. “She’s doing well.”

“Have you seen Lindsey?” I ask.

“Not for years. I heard he was in a psych hospital.”

I don’t know what to say to this so I just continue through the roll call.

“Did you find your real mother and father?”

“I met my mother on her death bed in Cherbourg, and my father lives up on Palm Island. Hey, the last time I saw Lindsey I tried to tell him about our family on Palm but he wasn’t interested.”

I silently thank God Errol was at the deathbed of his real mother – and then realise how fucked up this is. I also remember the three brothers who’d been killed in the car accident but decide not to mention them.

“Hey, I’m sorry your mother died.”

“Yeah,” he’s quiet for a second, “both of em.”

“Have you been up to Palm Island?”

“Yep, I was up there a while back.”

“Did you know Doomadgee?” God, why can’t I think of anything *happy* to say?

“Yeah, he was a good bloke. A joker. He didn’t deserve that.”

“Don’t worry about it. That cop will get his,” I say like I know, “Queensland’s changed.”

“When can I see you?” he asks brusquely, moving me away from things I know nothing about.

“Yeah, when? We can’t this afternoon because we’re going to see Dad,” and then I qualify, “the bloke that fostered you and adopted me.”

“He still alive?”

“Yeah, he’s still alive and married to his fourth wife! He’s had two since Mum.”

“That’s my Dad!” he bellows.

“How about tomorrow?”

Beth shouts, “I’ll drive!”

“I finish work at quarter past two and I’m home by 2:30.”

“We’ll be there on the dot!” I write Errol’s address beneath his telephone number and underline it. I can’t think of anything else to say. We say goodbye and hang up.

The receiver is barely back in its cradle when Beth grabs my arm and we’re both hopping up and down on the spot screaming and laughing.

“We found Errol! We found Errol!”

“No.” Beth pulls me into her version of a bear hug. “You found Errol and I’m so proud of you.”

Father Figure

Our Dad, the man Mum left thirty years ago, has hair like a mad scientist in a black and white movie, but his eyes are the crispest blue.

“Guess what Dad,” I yell through the flyscreen as he shuffles to unlock the door, “we found Errol!”

Because of his multiple strokes Dad moves slow and his left arm hangs uselessly at his side.

“Oh, yeah?” Dad says in a high old man voice, “how is he?”

“He’s really good. He lives in Aspley.”

“Yeah?” Noncommittal, like I’m blithely telling him gossip about someone he doesn’t know. I don’t expect him to break out in a song or a dance, but I do want more from him than just *Yeah?* I want Dad to say he can’t wait to see him, but he doesn’t.

Gwen, Dad’s fourth wife, bustles out from the kitchen and gives Beth and me a hug. Our mother was Dad’s second wife. His first wife divorced him for reasons lost in time. Dad’s third wife committed suicide the day he retired. She had a terrible disease called lupus. He found her laid out on the duvet in the bedroom with a plastic bag over her head when he came in from work. She’d tied it shut with a red ribbon like it was a present. A woman down the road told Dad that his wife had told her she couldn’t bear the thought of him being underfoot all day everyday adding to her pain.

Dad knew the thought of his constant presence had been worrying her and had lined up a part-time mowing job at an old people’s home but the drought broke and it rained and rained. The grass grew and the administrators couldn’t wait the few days for him to finish work, and hired someone else. That’s when she did it.

“Someone’s always out to cut my grass,” he sighed at the funeral, smiling weakly.

Dad attended Mum’s last Christmas. He didn’t leave the side of her hospital cot. He held her hand and cried and told her he never stopped loving her. I couldn’t tell if Mum understood, or even cared.

Dad returns to his recliner and sits staring out the window at the electricity lines and Gwen takes over the conversation.

“Your father is going in for an endoscopy at the end of the month.”

Medical item number 11820. One of the numbers I remember off by heart.

“He’s been waiting six months to get into the hospital system. I told him we should have private health insurance but he doesn’t listen.”

“Six months,” he nods, turning away from the electricity wires, “but I’m still not looking forward to it.”

“His doctor thinks he’s internally bleeding.”

We don’t stay long. As we get into the car Beth says that we should go to Karen’s and get Mum’s old photos. She says there might be some of Errol we can show when we visit him. I wish I had the one of the three of us standing on the log tower at Bullen’s African Lion safari. It would help me to explain to Errol I’m gay.

‘Look,’ I’d say, pointing to my limp hands hanging in front of me, ‘it was obvious.’

Boomerang

“Wow,” is all Karen can say when we tell her about finding Errol. She makes us sit down and tell it from the beginning.

“Does he have any kids?”

“One,” I repeat, “a boy. But Errol says he can’t afford his football boots.”

Karen’s brow creases slightly but she doesn’t say anything. I wonder why it’s this bit of information I chose to relay. And then I realise. I’m using Karen as a miner uses a canary to warn of poisonous gas. I’m scared Errol will ask for what he is owed. But surely if he’s my brother he’s entitled.

Beth grabs Mum’s remaining photos and Karen’s parting words are for us to be careful, as we don’t know what time or circumstance has done to Errol.

I scoff and tell her not to be silly, and hug her again.

As Beth drives I flick through the photos and find one of Errol in a football jersey standing proudly against a backdrop of scarred and bruised banana trunks. From

the foliage I can tell the photo was taken in the backyard of the house we went to after Mum left Dad.

The next afternoon I ring Errol on Beth's mobile and say we are pulling into a drive-through bottle shop and ask whether there's anything he'd like us to bring.

"I don't drink during the week but don't let that stop you."

The thing to do would be for Beth to drive right through without stopping. If Errol doesn't drink alcohol during the week we should honour this and not take alcohol into his house. Like a breeze through curtains, everything I've read about booze and Aboriginal men flutters through my head, but I shut the window.

'It's a celebration,' I tell myself, knowing the beer will be there primarily to calm my nerves.

"A case of XXXX please," I say to the car attendant.

We drive north over the Story Bridge and through the old north-side trinity of museum, hospital and showground. The old museum building with its towers and cupolas is still standing. I think about Mrs Watson's tank. I imagine the ghost of Mrs Watson staring mournfully at us from out the top of one of the museum towers.

Past the old museum is the Royal Women's Hospital and I wonder how my birth mother had arrived that day. Whether, with me in her belly, she caught a cab, an ambulance, or in those days, maybe even a tram. I bet, whichever way, she was scared.

Twenty minutes later we pull up in front of a long, thin strand of flats.

A man wearing a shirt of bright orange reflector panels sewn onto a dark background stands looking out an open window. His stance looks uncertain. It may be the shadows in the room but his skin looks smoky. There is a faint discolouration about his mouth like he's a Papuan who chews betel nut. The man looks old. I don't recognise him. We've found the wrong man.

“Errol didn’t mention a flatmate,” I say to Beth; but then I realise it’s been twenty years. There is an Aboriginal flag in the window and a boomerang leaning against the windowpane. It must be him. He was always proud.

“I’ll just bring in one six-pack,” I whisper.

We step out and open the trunk of the car. I rip open the cardboard flaps and remove the beer. We head towards the small flight of stairs that takes us to a corridor that leads to the flat’s front door. I’m on the second step when the first front door opens. The man from the window is standing there. He is short. Errol was never short: he was always huge. I reach the top of the stairs. The man hasn’t shaved and the stubble about his mouth and chin is grey. His eyes are greenie brown and the smile on his lips is not too shy and not a grin.

It’s Errol. He puts his hand out and I take it in mine. His hand is small and rough. The top of his head barely reaches my shoulders. I remember the muscle man twenty years ago in King George Square and I wonder what has happened.

“Look at you.” He looks me up and down. “You got big!”

I want to hug him but I don’t. I stumble sideways into his flat without being invited. Behind me Beth introduces herself, “Do you remember me? I’m the little redhead with freckles.”

I turn in time to see her force a hug on him.

The kitchen, dining and lounge are all in one room. A small television with the volume turned low faces a two-seater couch. Judge Judy is in the middle of making one of her pronouncements. A rectangular table, covered in swirling green and blue plastic, is pushed flush beneath the window. Three vinyl chairs have their seats tucked beneath the other three sides. Behind the table and chairs is the kitchen area.

The pantry door is partially open and I can see neat shelves of evenly spaced condiments. A collection of trucker hats hangs off individual pegs on a wall differentiating the living area from the bedroom. Through a second doorway I can see an unmade bed and shoes kicked off under it. I'm spying but I can't help myself.

Errol's flat is as austere as a monk's residence, or a prison cell. I wonder if he'd tidied because we were coming. But surely he wouldn't have lined up his pantry shelves and left the bed unmade. Making the bed is the first thing a person would do if they were going to tidy.

I'm still carrying the beer and plastic bag holding the photos. We go and stand by the table. Beth sits with her back to Judge Judy, and I sit in the middle facing the window. Errol goes back to the seat from where he must have risen when we pulled up.

"This is where the king sits!"

It's a joke and he flexes his arm muscles to prove it. I notice he has an outline of Queensland tattooed on his right forearm. After everything that has happened he's still proud of his origins. I angle out a bottle from the pack, open it, hand it to Beth and repeat. There is a half-full ashtray in the middle of the table. I light a cigarette and so does Beth. Errol grabs the remaining beers, twists round in his seat and puts them on the top shelf in the fridge. I don't see much of anything in there. On top of the fridge is a framed picture of a man and a boy. I don't recognise them, but why would I?

"Because it's a special occasion, I'm going to have one too," Errol says with the door still open. He removes a beer from the door, the four Xs are emblazoned on all our cans.

"Cheers!"

We all take long draughts of beer.

“I can’t believe you wanted to find me. I didn’t think anybody was interested in what happened to me.”

Errol wants to hear again the process involved in finding him. He sits back. I tell him about punching his name into the computer, how Errol Rebato comes up within the broader confines of a death in custody case. Errol looks uneasy. I don’t mention that I rang the police station. I say that someone I’d spoken to on the phone mentioned they’d seen him in Cherbourg recently. I tell him Beth and I had even been thinking of going to Cherbourg on the pretext of visiting the emu farm to ask about him.

“I haven’t been in Cherbourg for two years.” Errol looks for a long time out the window. “I had to fight those people in Cherbourg, hey. They blamed me for that boy’s death. I had to fight over and over.”

“You were just a boy yourself,” I say softly.

“I can’t use my fists anymore.” Errol turns his hands over revealing both wrists. “See these scars? They’re from operations I had for carpal tunnel. I’m getting a payout. Should be soon. The company I worked for had me assembling bull bars and putting them on trucks all day. I didn’t have mats under my feet or anything,” he mock head-butts the air, “but I can still fight if I have to.”

“You were the toughest kid in high school,” I remind him. “The second toughest: everybody was more scared of Lindsey.”

“Yeah, but how about this – one time, in a fight down the train station, I was on the ground being kicked in the head by my opponent’s friends in the crowd, and I saw Lindsey watching and he didn’t do anything.”

“I saw the same fight,” I explain, revealing my own presence. “I was watching from the train bridge.”

“You were watching?” He can’t believe that neither of us stepped in to help.

“I couldn’t see anything.” My voice is whiney. “But I also remember you telling me the last time I saw you at King George Square that Lindsey saved you from a gang of skinheads and then disappeared before you could say thank-you.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“How can’t you remember? That story has remained in my head forever.”

“All the weed and the booze fucked my memory. I haven’t smoked in two years.”

“I need pot for my back,” Beth says philosophically. “I ruined my back working in a chicken factory. Pot is the only drug that helps manage the pain.”

“Oh, sister!” Errol’s eyes have lit up. “Don’t tell me you’ve got pot or you’ll never get rid of me!”

“Hey, you gave up!” I sound like a wowser so I get up to get another beer from the fridge to prove that I’m not. I rest my eyes on the man in the photograph on the fridge – he’s handsome. “Who’re the man and the boy in the photograph?”

“That’s me and my son.”

“Really?” The man in the photo is young, sinewy and attractive, with glossy, longish black hair. “I didn’t recognise you. How old is your boy? He looks like a rascal.”

“Thirteen. He lives with his Mum in Cherbourg. I can’t afford to buy him his football boots. I will after my payout.”

This is the second time Errol has mentioned his son’s football boots. I wonder if I should offer to buy them for him. Before I have the chance Errol pushes his chair roughly back from the table and disappears into his bedroom. We hear him rummaging in a cupboard and then he emerges holding a silver photo album.

“I had a daughter.” He opens the album to a centre page and points to a tiny bundle in a pink blanket. Her eyes are closed. “She died when she was twelve days old.”

The man holding the tiny baby is the same bloke in the photo on the fridge. It’s Errol only because he says it’s him. It’s as if all the deaths have shrunk and aged him.

“Why did she die?”

“Her mother is a drinker.” Errol’s facial muscles faintly quiver. “I was up on Palm Island visiting my father when I got the call she was dying. That’s the first and only time I’ve ever been on a plane. I had to get smashed to get on.”

Errol walks the album to Beth and shows her the photos of his daughter. She takes the book from him and stares for a long moment.

“What was it like going up to Palm Island for the first time?”

“I had to fight the moment I arrived to prove myself.”

“To prove what?”

“That I wasn’t weak. Some of my relatives were jealous I was getting on with Dad so well. The first person I had to fight was my little brother. He’s a boxer but I knocked him down.”

I’m reminded of how Lindsey treated Errol when he saw how well Errol was getting on with Mum when we first brought him home.

“I remember when we went to pick you up from the orphanage at Nudgee.”

“Hmmm, what do you mean… we?” Errol’s tone toughens. “*You* had nothing to do with it!”

I’m blushing. “I mean I was in the car when Mum and Dad went to pick you up.”

“That’s more like it.”

“What’s your little brother like?”

“He’s the only one of us kids that wasn’t taken. He’s lucky he’s been able to live the Aboriginal life. I’m going to buy a boat with my payout and he’s going to captain it. There used to be more brothers, but three died in a car crash on their way to Cherbourg for a big family reunion where they were going to meet me for the first time.”

I figure now is as good a time as any to pull out our photos. I place the pile in front of him. Errol gingerly picks up the first photo and then lays it down on the table in front of him. Then he does the same with the next, and the next, as if he’s playing patience. He holds each one and asks questions about the people pictured.

“That’s us on holiday on Stradbroke Island.” I point out and name each kid.

“That’s you, there’s me and that’s Lindsey.”

There is a lot he doesn’t remember and needs to be reminded of. There is one face he’s never forgotten. He finds a photo of Mum standing next to Ron and holds it out in front of him like he’s going to spit on it.

“I’m going to burn that arsehole.” His voice is venom and he reaches for a lighter.

“Go on,” Beth eggs him, “burn it.”

“No, don’t do that,” my voice panics, “it’s just a photo. Ron’s dead and I need all the pictures for my work. So I can remember, even the bad stuff.”

“What work?”

“I write. I want to write about this now.”

“I don’t want anybody writing about me,” he says firmly.

I change the subject.

“What happened after you ran away? Where did you go?”

“I slept in train carriages. At night I’d go through bins looking for food.”

“God Errol, how have you survived?”

“I’ve been smoked by a full blood out at Carnarvon Gorge. He wasn’t supposed to do it, because he wasn’t in his own area, and he had to go off and ask permission from the spirits.”

As he is talking he continues to go through the photos. He comes to a photo of Jason, Dad and me and looks up questioningly.

“That’s Dad, and that’s Jason,” I say quietly, pointing at him so there can be no mistake. To qualify I add, “We’ve been together twelve years,” and then I add hopefully, “you’ll really like him.”

For a moment Errol doesn’t understand, but then an awkward half smile appears on his face and I can tell he is blushing.

“I thought you knew.” I stumble over my words in my haste. “I thought you could tell...” I stop myself adding the words, *what I am*, “from the last time in King George Square. Remember?” I implore him with my hands. “I was wearing eyeliner, jewellery and had bleached hair.”

“I though you were punk!”

“Punk?” Beth splutters beer out her nostrils and breaks out into a half laughing, coughing fit. “Ha, ha, ha. Different P word!”

“Ha, ha, ha, Beth,” slightly hurt, I throw back, “like Pothead?”

Errol also bursts into laughter and the strange moment of my having to explain myself is gone.

“I know a couple of blokes like that up on Palmy.” His eyes, more comfortable now, move back to the photo of Jason, and then he levels them back on me. “They’re good blokes. I sometimes drink with them. As long as they don’t try anything, they’re okay.”

“Wow, gays on Palm. How do they cope?”

“Everybody knows, but nobody talks about it.”

“My people call me the uptown nigger,” Errol says, caught in his own thoughts about name-calling, “because I have my own place and a job and I can look after myself. Back in Cherbourg I almost hung myself a few times. After I did some domestic violence I ran into the bush and tied my neck to a tree, but I realised it wouldn’t make a difference to anyone. That’s what stopped me. That’s why I decided to change and be a new man.”

I want to tell Errol his death would have mattered to me but I say nothing and let him talk.

“There’s a lot of shit in that community, hey. Stuff like it’s okay to hit your woman if she gets out of line. I hit my sister Yvonne hey.”

“Why?” Beth asks, shifting in her seat.

“She took my meat out of the fridge for dinner when I was saving it for breakfast.”

“Remind me,” Beth says, leaning forward and tapping her cigarette in the ashtray, “never to touch your food.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you sister girl – I wouldn’t ever do that to a woman again. That was a long time ago.”

“David hit me,” Beth states it matter-of-factly, “didn’t you David.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah,” I say, hating hearing it again, but knowing it will be my due forever, “a long time ago, and I want you to hit me back and forget about it.”

“Na,” Beth says seriously, “I like to torture you.”

“See this scar here?” Errol hikes up his State of Origin cap. “A full blood woman black as the night I was sitting in did it with a chair for talking to another woman.” He is chuckling. “It was so dark I didn’t see her coming.”

Beth gets up from her end of the table and removes his cap completely so she can see properly. She parts his dark hair with her fingers and touches the greyish scar the size of a twenty-cent piece.

“You go girl! She really popped you one.”

I wonder about the women who have been in his life. I remember Chloe, the girl he’d been visiting Cherbourg with when Andrew Pringle died.

“What happened to Chloe your old girlfriend?” I ask.

“She’s dead.”

I can’t ask how. Already this is six deaths in our first face-to-face meeting: his mother, three brothers, his daughter, and now his girlfriend. Seven, if I count Sasha.

I need to go to the toilet so I politely ask the way and excuse myself. Errol’s bathroom is clean and tidy. There’s only one bar of soap and I figure he must take it backwards and forwards from sink to tub. Yellow Sunlight. There isn’t another product in sight. I resist the urge to open his bathroom cabinet, as I’d do in anybody else’s bathroom.

Beth and Errol have a lot of people in common. The pub Beth works in is a big Aboriginal hangout and Errol even knows members from her boyfriend’s extended family.

Errol names some people he used to hang round with in Musgrave Park. Beth mentions a man who used to come in who she said was a respected Aboriginal leader.

“He’s not respected!” Errol declares, outraged. “He kicked a baby out of Yvonne.”

Eight, that's eight dead in two days.

There is nothing more to say without risking more casualties. The three of us sit tapping our cigarettes, drinking our drinks and staying quiet. Errol breaks the silence.

"When can I go see Dad?"

"Next weekend!" Beth says brightly. "I'll take you!"

"No, not next weekend," I say, interrupting, "I won't be here."

I want to be there when Errol sees Dad for the first time so I can write down my impressions. I can feel myself losing control of the situation I have created. This is my baby and I have to be there for it.

But Errol is keen.

"Can't you come back next weekend? You told me Dad is old. I don't want anything to happen to him waiting for you to come back."

"I've got to get back to Newcastle for my job. I can organise it for maybe a month's time but not next weekend."

"I missed seeing our Mum, and I don't want anything to happen to Dad before I have the chance to see him."

It dawns on me, hearing him speak, what I am doing. I'm trying to control his movements for my own advantage. I've forced him into stating his losses just so he can see his own father. I'm showing my true colours.

"No, just ignore me," I say, feeling sick. "Go whenever you like."

"If you moved back to Queensland we wouldn't have this problem."

"Let's just say," speaking low to cover my self-disgust, "I'm not particularly fond of the place."

"Little brother you listen to me. You can't be a traitor to Queensland. This is your home. You were born here."

All these dead and he's still loyal to the place, and to me. Little brother. He called me little brother. I look down at his arm and the tattoo of Queensland. He is a true warrior and I'm a coward continually running away. If Mum was a rhino hiding behind a tree, as Beth had described her, what am I?

I know. I am the liger from Bullen's African Lion Safari. Neither here nor there.

We are at Errol's for five hours and Errol makes Beth stop drinking in the second hour because she's the one driving: "You can't drink drive. I can't lose you now we've found each other again. I lost three brothers already like that."

When Errol and I hug goodbye tears are running down both our cheeks. I pull out a disposable camera from the plastic bag and take photos. In the car all the way back to Beth's we roar, reliving every second.

The next day I return to Newcastle. That night I ring Errol and ask what his bank account details are so I can put money in for his son's football boots.

"No brother, no. I'm all right. I'll give him money when my payout comes through."

"Errol, I want to – I'm his uncle and I haven't given anything to him his whole life. Think of it as a late birthday present."

"No, that's really nice, but no."

*

The List of Black Dead	**The List of White Dead**
Andrew Pringle	Mum
Blood brother 1	Ron
Blood brother 2	Rayley
Blood brother 3	
Cory	
Sasha	
Errol’s daughter	
Errol’s birth mother	
Chloe	
Yvonne’s baby	

*

New South Wales

I can't sleep with the monster storm hurling bits and pieces of Newcastle about and trying to suck the roof off. I wrap my computer, photos and decorative aboriginal heads in plastic, just in case. Over the early morning radio comes news a ship is beaching itself at Nobbys.

I cram the disposable camera containing pictures of Errol into my jacket pocket and wheel my bike through the rain to the footpath. I am about to become a part of the Newcastle tradition, stretching back past 1866 and the SS Cawarra, of witnessing a shipwreck in action. Tree branches litter the road. The wind viciously snatches the handlebars and turns me out onto the road. Blood. I remember my haemophiliac fantasy from childhood, and how if I were so afflicted an accident like this could spell my doom. Looming high over Hunter Street I can see a ship's bow, maroon coloured, embedded in the heart of the city like a bloody axe.

BOOM. One, two, three, BOOM, One, two, three, BOOM. Explosions reverberate over the city each time one huge wave after another hits the ship.

The ship is a behemoth. I hurry past a small obelisk built to commemorate the building of the 1818 break wall and turn down a beach track of laddered posts, taking photos of the ship the entire way. *Pasha Bulka*. I am one of the first sightseers and the only person on the sand. I race to the water's edge.

Storm clouds stride towards the city on stilts of lightning. The ship is a huge conductor. I can't die. I've just found my brother. Standing with the camera in my hand I realise the only photos on the reel will be of Errol and a shipwreck. I've turned into

just another gawker; drawn like the townspeople peering through the mist and rain while the Cawarra sunk, without doing anything to help. But even if lives are in present danger there is nothing I can do. This maroon-coloured ship is a lesson. What was it I expected Queensland to do when my brothers were being tossed about the insides of the garage and hit with pieces of wood like flotsam during a raging storm? What did I expect Queensland to do when Ron slid silent as water over the lino of my sleeping sisters' bedroom? Raise a muddy fist up right out of the very earth? Hurl a tree and kill him? Raise a storm to sweep him away from our mother and us? Yes, yes, yes, yes. Irrational, but yes.

*

Karen's husband arrives in Newcastle on business a few days after the storm and I take him to see the city's newest tourist attraction, the *Pasha Bulka*. The authorities have erected cyclone fencing to stop people getting too close to the ship. Apart from officials no one has access to the sand. Ryan tells me he has recently been diagnosed a type two diabetic and how after all his years of hard living he can only drink dandelion coffee. He says it with a strange vulnerability that I thought completely foreign to him.

If Lindsey and Errol were the two toughest boys south side, Ryan would have come third. I think Karen married Ryan because of his ability to protect her from any man alive. Ryan tells me he is worried about my plan to reintroduce Errol back into our lives, that Errol might have changed in unknowable ways from when we were kids. He says he is disturbed by a man who says he can't afford to buy his boy football boots. He says this isn't something you say when you first meet someone after twenty something

years and adds that he thinks Errol might be after money. I gently remind Ryan that I found Errol and not the other way round, and that I have no money.

This is my doing. Me, setting people up. I started this fear rolling by telling Karen about the football boots in the first instance.

I tell Ryan I offered to buy the boots and Errol wouldn't let me.

Ryan says he is concerned, that's all.

Conveniently forgetting Ryan's diabetes we stop at the bowling club to have a few drinks. Apart from the staff we are the only ones there. The television relays the introductory interviews and panel discussions before the second game of the State of Origin series.

Shot from a helicopter, the open maw of Sydney's Telstra stadium comes onscreen. From up high it looks like an upended turtle with its stomach eaten away. The commentators rant and rave, making much of the fact that Queensland has never won a game at Telstra stadium. They keep referring to this phenomenon as 'a hoodoo' as if magic is involved. That Queensland is jinxed each time they run onto the turf.

"Hallelujah to that," I mutter.

"Hey, watch it," Ryan says.

The commentators throw statistics about like confetti. The pro-Blues commentator is gloating that the Maroons not only have to deal with the opposing players and the hoodoo, but also the hometown advantage. I doubt the power of the hometown advantage. Sydney hasn't put on much of a blue display – nothing like the ember coloured walls of Queensland's cauldron from the first game.

In the ninth minute a Blues player scores and another converts to take the score to 6/0. Men slam into men and the commentators start pouring their usual lumpy hyperbole over the scene.

“Talk about David and Goliath,” a commentator says gleefully.

David and Goliath. The only time I ever managed to hurt Ron was in the few hours after Mum died. And even then I couldn’t do it by myself. It was a team effort.

Ryan and I were out front waiting for the undertaker. A car drove up into the cul-de-sac, and as it passed I recognised Ron’s profile. He must have sensed something bad was happening. His car pulled to a stop in front of Mum’s house. Ryan also recognised the driver.

“If you take one step out of that car!” Ryan yelled, stalking towards the vehicle with his raised fist, “I’ll knock your block off.”

Ron rolled the window up. *Not so tough now*, I thought.

‘How’s Maggie?’ Ron mouthed to me through the car windscreen. The look on his face was of someone incomprehensibly trapped under river ice. He even reached out his hands and pressed them flat against the windscreen.

It was entrancing.

“She’s dead.” I said it triumphantly, loudly, so he had no chance of misinterpreting, and for two heartbeats nothing happened. Then his hands lost suction and floated to the sides of his head, as if moved there by invisible currents, and his body veered sideways onto the car’s centre console as if in breathless, perfect agony.

I was exhilarated. On the day my mother died.

Ron stayed bent in half, not seeing, not knowing, for an age. Then like drowning victims everywhere, he resurfaced. Without looking at either of us he released the handbrake and the car rolled, of its own accord, down and around the corner and out of sight.

I felt as if a monster had been slain and I knew I could never have done it without Ryan. If Ryan hadn’t been there Ron would have gotten out of the car and

approached me and I know I would have told him gently, not because of any sense of decency, but because I would have been scared.

In the twenty-first minute Queensland scores and then converts to take the score to 6 all.

“That Blues player should have taken the hit for the team,” Ryan exclaims, outraged. “I’d have gotten belted instead of dumping the problem.”

I don’t respond. If I were that player I would have dumped the problem as well, because now that the Queensland players have the Blues player on the ground it’s like watching a pride of lions going in for the kill. The Maroon players’ jaws are all working as if they’ve bloody flesh between their teeth. I’m a vulture – I’ve always known it. It’s my nature. I stand back and let other men do the hard work and then I flutter down.

“NEW SOUTH WALES, NEW SOUTH WALES,” the crowd screams. In the sixty-fourth minute Queensland scores but fails to convert for two more points. The score is Maroons 10 / Blues 6.

The cameras capture someone in blue garb running about the perimeter of the field and zooms in. The outfit is made up of a blue body stocking and a big fake blue head decorated with a pair of yellow antennae and giant green alien eyes. I’m embarrassed to realise it’s the official Blues mascot trying to rouse the crowd.

“Look at that thing!” Ryan has noticed the Blues mascot too. “Silly as a shit beetle!”

The only reason I blame Queensland is because I’m ashamed of myself for not doing anything. Never. I stayed too scared.

The final score is 10/6. Queensland destroys the hoodoo and has now won two out of the three matches, effectively winning the Origin series.

Anastasia

Every Daffodil Day the call centre has a fund-raising morning tea on the roof in the spot usually reserved for the smokers. On Daffodil Day the smokers have to stand behind the generators. I'm the son who stood at the foot of his mother's deathbed. On Daffodil Day I wear black, sip tea and tell the story.

"Yes, she died at home in the living room with all her kids gathered round." This is the story the call centre women want to hear and so I tell it. They're all terrified of cancer. They transpose themselves into the same place and imagine their own kids gathered about their own deathbeds. The way death is supposed to be.

The thing I hated most about Mum's illness was the desperate lengths she went to to stay alive. The worst was watching her try to swallow raw bone marrow from a shark, hand delivered in an ice-cream container from a fishing trawler, only to heave, and heave, and heave.

The most benign of the life giving forces she made herself ingest was the yeast tumour wallowing in a coat of frothy bubbles also delivered in an ice-cream container. Everything vile turned up in ice-cream containers. After Mum drank the tumour's old bath water I would top up the container with cold tea. The yeast tumour lay about in the fridge doing nothing like a queen in her bath. I named her Anastasia because her forebears originated on the Russian Steppes, where the oldest people on earth live.

I don't tell the women on the call centre roof that I was ready for my mother to die when the time finally came. I don't say I think Mum died thirsty, or recount how, in her last seconds her breaths came faster and faster, like a train building up steam, or that

I called out in a high, excited voice, ‘Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye,’ like a resident of Noddy’s Toy Town waving a kerchief after a diminishing caboose.

I don’t tell them how chaos ensued without our mother there as glue, or that this will probably happen in their own families. How in the days after her death we pawed through her handbag and through all its zippered compartments looking for the will. How we fell upon her papers, or how quickly the house was put on the market. Or how we took loads of her stuff to the dump, where I threw her white foam head and wig away. How the head was too light and the wind kept blowing it back down the garbage pile as if it didn’t want to go.

I don’t tell the women on the roof that while waiting for the morticians to come, I walked to the fridge and removed Anastasia from the second shelf and dumped her in the sink. How I used a knife to cut her up and watched while pieces of her slid like junket between the tannin-stained arms of the sink grate.

*

I got the ornament of the two boys, a golden half-farthing, and one of Mum’s ancestor’s war medals hanging on a long chain. Karen, Beth, the twins and I received the divided financial remains of our mother’s estate – twenty thousand dollars each. This is the money I used to start my new life in Newcastle.

I also got an envelope with a folded letter inside, dating from the mid-eighties, explaining that at this point in time Children’s Services can only give non-identifying information. I remembered Mum telling me that she had applied for this information for all of us adopted ones, but in the mid-eighties I was seeking the answers to my identity

questions in the bars and clubs on Sydney's Oxford Street, and I don't remember hearing anything more of her enquiry.

It is recorded that David's birth mother was 30 years old and single. Her nationality was Australian and her religion was Presbyterian. She had a Scholarship education standard and was employed as a machinist. She resided in a city area. She had orange hair, green eyes and a fair complexion. She was 5ft 3 inches tall (160cm) and weighed 7st 7lb (47.8 kg). She was especially interested in sewing. No other children are recorded.

It is recorded that David's birth father was 31 years old and married. His nationality was Australian and his religion is not recorded. He had fair hair, dark blue eyes and a fair complexion. He was 6ft tall (183 cm) and described as well built. He was especially interested in riding.

David was born at 8:20 p.m. and weighed 9lb 10ozs.

Not thirteen. Thirty. My birth mother was thirty. And after all this time thinking my birth mother was thirteen. A thirteen-year-old would really have no choice but to give me away. Thirty is different. A thirty-year-old could have kept me if she tried. Even though the information is supposed to be non-identifying, the level of detail reads true: a machinist who liked sewing. It's hard to summon the Cinderella story up out of all this. Oh, the occupation is certainly Cinderella…*ish*, but Cinderella was a young woman, not a thirty-year-old. I'm upset at the age disparity. If my birth mother was thirty then that would make her seventy now and probably in need of care, or perhaps she's already dead, like Mum. At least if she was thirty when she had me I'm less likely to be the outcome of a rape.

Every cloud…

Mum must have misheard the nurse when she transferred me to Mum's arms. Thirteen and thirty sound similar, and the guff about being very special must have been the usual mid-wife patter about all babies being special, even the ones given away. Thinking the information true, Mum came home from the hospital and wrote the false details in her diary, where it sat for over a decade waiting for me to dig it out and also believe it.

After Mum's funeral I wait a week and ring the adoption contact agency. I explain I had previously believed my birth mother was thirteen when she had me, and my shock of being told she was thirty in the non-identifying information.

"It's not unheard of that the official documents were changed to protect reputations. She may well have been thirteen. You won't really know until you find her."

I find the Protector of Reputations concocting 'machinist and liking sewing' hard to believe. 'Desperately beautiful, but doomed princess', is a far more realistic fantasy. No, the details of her occupation and religion are too real. Ma and Pa must have got together New Years Eve 1965, a factory machinist and a farmer, out on the town having some fun, and I was born nine months later.

The woman on the phone tells me there is a register that adoptees and those who adopted them out can scan to see if their details match up, and voila, it's like a game of snap where blood matches blood. After supplying my birth date and place of birth, the woman tells me there isn't anyone who corresponds. My factory-working birth mother still doesn't want me. Too busy sewing probably. Oh well. I don't want her either.

The woman on the phone says the laws have changed since 1985 and now identifying information is available. She tells me I can now order my original birth certificate no problem.

It dawns on me that I'm selfishly mourning the idea my birth mother wasn't thirteen. Is that sick or what? How it had been *something* to be born by a thirteen-year-old. But a thirty-year-old woman who operated a factory sewing machine, and liked sewing, is not the story I was looking for.

When my original birth certificate arrives my birth mother's name is Frances, Frances Fields, born in Melbourne in 1935. The Brisbane address where she holed up is also listed. One day, I promise myself, I'll go and see where she stayed.

Family

It's pelting down when Jason and I fly into Brisbane. It's been a month since finding Errol, and luckily, for reasons unrelated to my wants, the reunion between Errol and his foster family has been postponed till this weekend. As we come in to land the airport lights have been dampened down by the rain and seem to hang over the white terminal buildings in a golden shroud. The effect is beautiful, sultry, almost Arabian, and I'm struck again by how much Brisbane has changed.

Beth is driving a car I don't recognise. She tells me a drunken friend confiscated her car keys the night before and then promptly lost them. Beth is driving her boyfriend's car, which he can't drive because he lost his licence for drink driving.

"It's funny," I tell her, "what goes round, comes round."

Beth takes us to an office supply shop so I can copy the photos I've brought to give Errol. The only original I plan to keep is the one of Errol, Lindsey and me on the log tower at Bullen's African Lion Safari. I remove it from the album's protective sleeve and show Beth.

"God, look at you," she says in mock wonder. "Why was anyone surprised?"

Before we go to bed I ring Errol to remind him of the following day's events.

"It's the family reunion this weekend remember, and I can't wait to introduce you to Jason."

"Hey now," he says, laughing, "there won't be any kissing or hugging?"

"I'm sure we'll control ourselves."

The next morning, to free up room in Beth's vehicle, Karen arrives and takes delivery of Jason so Beth and I can go and pick up Errol and her boyfriend in relative comfort.

Errol is waiting in the window when we get to his flat, but instead of coming out he calls for us to come in. There are papers spread out over the tabletop.

"Can you make any sense of these?" Errol says.

I pick up the closest sheaf and read the words.

The Redress Scheme is part of the Queensland Government's response to the recommendations of the Forde Inquiry. Under the scheme, eligible applicants receive an ex gratia payment, ranging from $7,000 up to $40,000, to acknowledge the impact of the past and help them move forward with their lives.

"God, Errol, you might get up to $40,000!"

The government acknowledges that while neglect and abuse was found to have occurred in some institutions covered by the enquiry, this was not necessarily the case with all institutions. Payment will only be made if applicants sign a Deed of Release, agreeing to make no further legal claims on the State of Queensland in relation to claims that come within the scope of the Redress Scheme.

The Redress Scheme is specific to Queensland children's institutions and does not include hospitals, adult mental health facilities, foster care or institutions specific to children with a disability.

"I can't believe the government absolved themselves of any responsibility after you were fostered," I say, flicking through the document. "It's their fault you were available to be fostered in the first place."

Beth picks up another document off the table and reads out loud.

To determine whether the institution in which you were placed as a child, by the State, or by a parent or guardian, comes within the scope of the Redress Scheme, refer to the list in Appendix 1 of these guidelines.

"Nope," she declares, theatrically, after studying the document, "none of our old addresses are listed I'm afraid. They wipe their hands of you once they gave you to Mum and Dad to look after."

"So it looks like the most you can get for being taken is," Beth states, running her finger down a page, "$7,000."

"Na, they can forget it. What happened to me is worth more than that chicken shit."

$7,000. I'm astounded. I think about all the money in Queensland's coffers – the money that built the cliffs of culture along the south bank of the Brisbane River, the development of King George Square, the River Walk suspended out over the water, the new bridges and the highways, the beautiful airport.

Errol locks his front door and we walk back to the car. I reach in and get my bag out of the front seat and get in the back.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Special guests sit in the front," I reply, but the real truth is – I'll be able to study him better from a position in the back.

"I'm not a special guest. I'm just back from walkabout! Have you brought those photos?" he asks, turning and looking.

I hand each one through the gap and tell him he can keep them as I've made copies. The first one I pass through is of a teenage Errol opposite a small blond boy of about four, both of them concentrating on a tennis ball connected to a pole by string.

"That's Aunty Linda's son. He'll be at the reunion. Wait till you see him now."

He calmly studies each of the images then turns his face into the breeze curling in through the open car window. From the back seat I can't work out if he's trying to remember, or trying not to.

"That's taken at Somerset Dam. You're the furthest one out on that branch over the creek in the purple shorts and blue singlet."

"You sure that's me?"

"Positive."

And when I say this Errol reaches his entire right arm through and grabs hold of mine. He keeps hold of my arm just looking at the image of himself as a boy standing relaxed and suspended over the rushing creek. Simultaneously letting me go and dropping the photo in his lap, Errol turns to stare out the window. This time there is no mistaking what he wants the wind to do. I wait thirty seconds for him to recover and then pass another through in an effort to make him laugh.

"Where's this photo taken?" he asks.

"Bullen's African Lion Safari." I laugh self-consciously. "Look at my hands."

Errol looks at the photo of the three of us for a long time without a word.

"You're being a lion," he says decisively.

"What?"

"You're a lion."

"Let me see." Stunned, I reach out my hand.

And it's true. It isn't photographic evidence of my birth as a young queen. I'm being a lion at Bullen's African Lion safari. I've got my hands out in front of me like lion's paws and my fingers are lion claws. I'm being a lion, the king of the jungle, and my brother is the first to see it.

Beth overtakes a speeding P-plater and at the next corner the boy pulls up ready to give her a mouthful. When he sees Errol in the front seat he pulls his head in.

At the border of the Northern suburbs and the city we stop at the lights in front of the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

"That's where I was born!" Errol points.

"That's where I was born," I crow.

"Hey," Beth interjects, "I was born there too."

"God, we're the three little pigs."

"And Ron was the big bad wolf," Errol says soberly.

"Isn't it weird the thought of all our birth mothers walking the same hospital corridors?"

"Do, do, do, do. Do, do, do, do." Beth sings the theme music from *The Twilight Zone*.

"You know, you adopted ones are also the stolen generation," Errol states quietly.

It feels strange to hear Errol say this. It's not something I'd say myself, because colour has everything to do with being stolen. But the fact that Errol is generous enough to think this creates an overwhelming sense of rightness to the journey, that we all belong together right now.

But it's also something else. It's as if three spectral women wearing plain, cotton hospital gowns have come swooping, zooming, gliding across the road from the hospital eagerly looking into the car, reaching in their ghostly arms, stroking our hair and touching our faces, cooing, happy we remember them and happy to finally meet each other.

*

We stop to pick up Jeff and when he gets in the first thing he asks Beth is if she has lip-gloss as his lips are really dry.

“Yeah I do, in my bag,” Beth says. “It’s a bit glossy though.”

“I’m wearing it,” I say, “and you can’t tell.”

“Yeah,” Beth says, looking in the rear vision mirror, smiling, “that’s what you think.”

Jeff applies it to his lips anyway and I take this as an act that no matter what my silly sister says, he’s not one to judge me.

We walk into Karen’s with me leading the way. Jason, Dad, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, friends of the family, are all gathered waiting under the back pergola. I kiss all the women and shake all the men’s hands but I’m trembling as if I’m cold, and feel desperate for a drink so I head back indoors to get a beer. On my way through I pass Beth, Jeff and Errol, who’ve already stopped for refreshments to steady their own nerves.

I hear Dad say “Hello son” but I can’t see him.

“I haven’t seen you since you were this high.”

Everybody erupts into laughter and I can’t believe I’m missing this for the sake of a drink so I rush back to the open door.

“Dad, you’ve got the wrong one!” Karen chimes. “You’ve got hold of Jeff, Beth’s boyfriend. This is Errol!”

I push through the relatives just in time to see Dad and Errol hugging and Errol giving Dad a kiss. They both look really emotional. I can’t believe, that, after trying to control the timing of the reunion, I missed the actual meeting between them.

“This is the only Dad I had growing up,” Errol says to the gathering.

Errol stays standing behind Dad’s chair for the next few hours like Dad is an old king and Errol is his warrior. People approach for an audience and I hear him answering questions about his blood family, his whereabouts all these years, his current circumstances, and whether he’s seen or heard anything about Lindsey.

During a break I walk Jason over to introduce him to Errol. They shake hands but it’s awkward. Our aunt is taking photos and she positions Errol alongside each of her children in turn.

“I’ve never been to a family reunion before,” Errol says, pretending to hoist himself up onto the shoulders of his two tall cousins.

“What about on Palm Island?” our aunt asks.

“That wasn’t a reunion. I had to fight my way back in!”

Karen’s husband Ryan does all the cooking and cleaning and he’s not drinking. I go and stand by him and thank him for everything he’s done.

“It’s brilliant,” he says, “this would never happen in my family.”

“Ryan, this is your family. You and Karen have been together for over twenty years!”

“No, you know what I mean. I don’t talk to any of my brothers and sisters. When we were kids in Darwin our father used to take us on drives out into the desert and when he got bored he’d think it was fun to fire a gun at us, and we’d scatter in different directions. Mentally I don’t think any of us ever came back together. I think we are too shell-shocked. You lot are all diverse and come from every which way, but you all manage to get on.”

I ask him what he thinks of Errol.

“He’s cool. I was wrong.”

And I was wrong to set you up, I say to myself.

We turn and see my aunt recreating the shot of Errol playing totem tennis with her six foot five son.

At different times during the afternoon each of us takes time to stand silently by the rose pot where Mum's ashes are interred. Beth takes Errol to stand by it and Errol whispers something into the leaves. Dad has one beer too many, or maybe it's because of his stroke, but he has to leave early. Errol walks Dad to the car where Ryan is waiting to drive Dad home.

After Dad has left Errol returns inside and comments on how bad it must have been for Dad to discover Mum and us six kids gone all those years ago.

"Poor man," Errol says, "he didn't hit her or nothing ehh?"

"No," and I'm suddenly aware I've never really considered the effect our leaving had on Dad.

Karen is getting more and more drunk and is using her karate fighting sticks in the backyard to showcase her brown belt abilities. I don't know if it's because karate is Japanese, but I hear Errol say, "The Asians were the ones taking over and now it's the Indians you have to watch out for." Karen says something derogatory about an Indian taxi driver she once caught a ride with and Errol nods in agreement. I wonder how I can argue with one of this country's original inhabitants when Errol and his people fully understand the effect of people coming in and taking over.

Once the reunion is over the five of us pile into Beth's car for the drive back to her place where we are all staying the night. Beth lead-foots it because she is sick of watching everyone else on the drink.

At Beth's there aren't enough chairs in the lounge room to sit on so Beth goes into the bedroom and returns with a milk-crate and a loose cushion for the seat. It's a

maroon-coloured Brisbane Broncos cushion embossed with a stylised horse head. The Broncos are Queensland's premier football team whose members make up the majority of the State of Origin squad. Beth plonks the crate down in front of Errol and tells him to sit but he just stares at the cushion in pretend awe.

"I'm not going to put my stinking arse on the Broncos," his voice rises as if Beth has said something sacrilegious. He picks the cushion up and presses it to the side of his face. "I'm going to use it tonight as a pillow for my head and it will give me sweet dreams!"

Beth laughs and hands out beer coolers to put our bottles in. She makes a silent show of handing me a maroon coloured one with words printed down the side.

QUEENSLAND STATE OF ORIGIN

QLD BORN

QLD BRED

WHEN I DIE, I'LL BE

QLD DEAD

ONCE A QUEENSLANDER, ALWAYS A QUEENSLANDER

"Cheers!" Everybody clinks foam-covered bottles.

I'm a Queenslander. Queensland has won two of the three games in this year's State of Origin and the third game is pointless. Queensland has won fair and square.

After another hour I need to lie down on one of the three mattresses Beth has arranged on her living room floor. Jason is already down and Jeff is asleep on the couch. Errol removes his shirt and gets ready for bed. He yawns and lowers himself down onto the last vacant mattress. Without his shirt on another tattoo is visible on his upper right bicep. One I haven't seen. Faded. I have to squint. I'm drunk and seeing double. The tattoo is a name, Chloe. Chloe, the name of his girlfriend he'd been with in

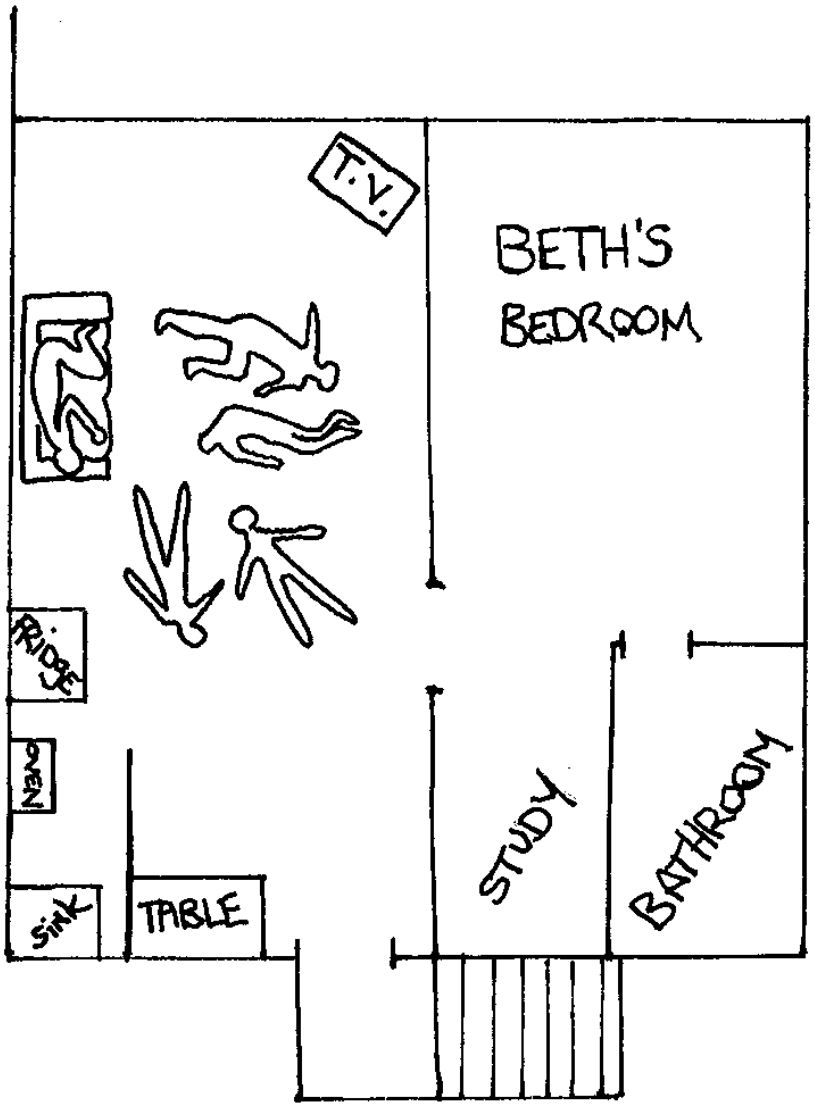
Cherbourg the day of the fight twenty years ago. The girl he told me had died, but not how, or when.

“What happened to Chloe?”

“She was raped and murdered by two white men.” He rolls away smothering the tattoo. “I was in prison and couldn’t protect her.”

Beth doesn’t want to sleep in her bedroom by herself, so she comes in and beds down on the floor between my mattress and Errol’s, and that’s how we fall asleep.

Third and final diagram of sleeping arrangements:



Hunger Strike

In the morning Errol spends a long time in the bathroom clearing his throat. He comes out and apologises for the horrible sound but he says it's his bronchiolitis. I remind him how Mum used to have to hit his back to clear his lungs. Errol says he doesn't remember. Jason leaves to spend the day with the married couple from Noosa, and Beth and Jeff leave for work. Errol and I set off to catch a river cat to the city to take up Beth's invitation of a free pub lunch. Upriver the cat glides past the migrant processing centre at Kangaroo Point.

"Look Errol," I raise my voice over the wind, pointing at the white migrant building. "That's the first place Mum slept in Queensland, back when she was seventeen. I bet she didn't dream the pair of us gliding past."

"Na, she would have swum back home!"

We both laugh. I turn back to the migrant buildings and wonder which window Mum would have stood in to look out at the brown water. The boat slides into the shadow of the Story Bridge, and the centre disappears behind the curve. I wish she had swum back home, but maybe she had been forewarned of the likes of us. She'd bought the Aboriginal heads of two boys who look like brothers before any of us had been born. She might have known what she was getting herself into. The cat slows to a stop at the Riverside Markets and we get out. Among the stalls I spot one selling chocolate croissants.

"Oh, my God, Errol look!"

"What?" He looks round like we are under imminent attack. "What is it?"

"Chocolate krwä-sã!" I say it the way the French say croissant. Like a tosser. "It's French for crescent. Do you want one?"

Errol squints at me long and hard. I can tell he's debating calling me a wanker. He doesn't.

We are *The Odd Couple* – a small, stocky Aboriginal man in shorts and thongs and a tall, white queen nibbling a chocolate croissant. It's blissful and stupid at the same time. Walking past Customs House we head towards Beth's pub.

"There used to be a park there before all that went up." Errol indicates the phalanx of skyscrapers obscuring the view of the river from the road. "Just above the river, that's where we used to hang out and drink. Stay on the Captain Cook Cruises."

I remember there used to be wharves along this stretch, where cruise ships used to berth, and I imagine he means he used to creep aboard and crash out on the cushioned li-lows.

"Was it comfortable?" I ask.

"No." He is looking at me like I've lost my mind. "I think it would have fucking hurt!"

"I don't understand." I realise I've missed something. "Did you say STAY on the Captain Cook Cruises?"

"Not STAY," he shouts like the idea is blasphemy, "STONE. I said we used to STONE the Captain Cook Cruises as they went past."

I spit pastry down the front of my shirt at the thought of the cruise ship passengers finding themselves under attack from stone throwing Aborigines two hundred years after Cook landed.

"That's brilliant!" I say.

I can imagine the men and women sitting drinking on the river bank in the shadow of the Story Bridge being constantly reminded of their loss by the coming and going of Captain Cook. But it's not brilliant. It's futile and sad.

To change the subject I ask Errol who his best friend was in those days. “The person with the money to buy the booze. And that would change daily.”

At the Blood and Bone Hotel, while we wait for lunch, Beth gives us complimentary money to put into the pokies. Errol sits at the first of a row of ten differently themed machines. I sit at the second. His is called Fifty Lions and mine is The Queen of Sheba. Whenever a press of Errol’s buttons achieves anything lions bolt through grass and his machine makes a galloping noise. I expect roars.

Rose petals fall in front of the Queen of Sheba’s beautiful face whenever I have a successful spin but my machine stays silent. Neither of us wins anything except ten free goes. After the money runs out the three of us go and stand in front of photos that make up the Wall of Shame. Errol knows some of them, and Beth and Errol spend time discussing the merits of one of the Aboriginal women on show. Both agree she is really nice.

We have a beer and order steak.

*

Beth arranges a co-worker to fill in the rest of her shift, so she can spend the last few hours with us before I have to fly back to Newcastle.

“Let’s go for a drive,” Beth offers cheerfully. “Where shall we go?”

As she asks I’m turning the pages of the local newspaper and I find my glance resting on the tide times. The tide is low.

“Let’s walk out to the island at Wellington Point. I’ll beat you both and be crowned king.”

“What are you on about?” Errol asks.

“Don’t you remember racing out to King Island?”

“Nup, I don’t remember anything like that.”

I’m glad he can’t remember. I’m glad he doesn’t remember the two of them being held back by Ron so I could race ahead. I’m glad he can’t remember, despite my hatred of Ron, that I seized the opportunity.

The drive to Wellington Point from the city takes half an hour. Warm air peeling in the open windows rips up the vocals coming out of the radio. I can hear only fragments. We’re teenagers again in a parallel universe: one where we all stayed together. Beth is laughing about something I can’t make out, and Errol’s fingers are tapping out a drumbeat on the window frame. Beth hits the horn and the three of us wave at a man on the street as if we recognise him, and crack up with laughter when the poor bloke waves back.

Beth parks the car and we go to the kiosk and buy some hot chips for the walk to the island. The sand pathway isn’t as red as I remember.

“What do you reckon the island was called by the local Aborigines before whites came?” Beth contemplates, shielding her eyes with her hand.

“Dunno,” Errol shrugs.

“I bet it was called Turtle Island!” Beth says, outlining the island with her finger. “See how it’s shaped like a sea turtle pulling itself up on to the sand to lay its eggs?”

“You might be right sister girl,” Errol says, generously slinging his arm round her shoulders, “you might have some Aborigine in you!”

“My original birth records say I was Indian,” Beth says shyly, “but I know sometimes that was code for Aboriginal.”

“Before whites came I bet this island was really significant,” I say, trying to join in.

“It was all significant,” Errol states grimly, turning his head and taking it all in. “We didn’t carve little slices off here and there and turn them into national parks.”

“Good try David!” Beth laughs and holds her hand out for me to take.

And it is in this fashion that the three of us, Beth in the middle and Errol with his arm along her shoulders, prepare to take our first simultaneous step onto King Island. At the last second I bend down on the pretence of dislodging a rock from my shoe. Errol keeps walking and is first on the island. I mouth the words *YOU ARE KING*, still bowing, without either of them seeing.

*

That afternoon Jason and I pack our bags in preparation for our flight back to Newcastle. Errol says he feels sad. I do too.

“I love you!” he yells out, as the cab pulls away from the kerb, loud enough for the entire street to hear.

*

Member number 1696703

Cora Morgan born 14/03/1932, rings to confirm whether she has cover for major eye surgery as she needs an operation for a degenerative eye disorder. Even without the medical item number I know she isn’t covered. Cora Morgan has been a member for over twenty years and used to have top cover but changed to a lower level five years ago when her husband died. I say it’s a pity she hadn’t stayed on her old cover.

“My husband needed that cover but I didn’t,” she says. “He became very sick after our son went missing eighteen years ago.”

She didn’t say murdered or killed, she said missing.

I look round to check my supervisor isn’t listening. I drop my voice.

“Did you ever find your son?”

“No, he’s been missing ever since.”

“Was he depressed?”

“Yes. He’d only been married for 14 months before he went missing and I need this operation in case he comes back. I have to be able to see him. I keep my hairstyle the same. I try to look the same, but I’m all changing. I’m so old now I wonder if he’ll recognise me.”

“Sons don’t forget what their mothers look like,” I say quietly.

“He was a lovely boy with a good sense of humour,” she continues, ignoring my solemn tone. “He used to tell me that when I got too old, he wouldn’t put me into an old people’s home, but would tie me up with rope and leave me under a big tree. I’m waiting for him. I’ve grown a big tree in the backyard.”

To prove it’s not impossible, and that she’s not the only one, I interrupt and tell her I found my missing brother who ran away in 1980. She gasps and adds up my brother’s missing years.

“That’s twenty-seven years!” she proclaims. “That’s wonderful. That’s truly wonderful. Why did he run away?”

I tell her about our stepfather.

“You’ve given me hope. What’s your name so I can let you know if I find my son?”

I give my name and the call centre operating hours and tell her to ring after seven so she won’t get stuck in a queue. Before the call ends I repeat that she isn’t

covered for private hospital care for major eye surgery and she'll have a one-year waiting period if she changes, but she doesn't seem to mind.

During my tea break I ring Errol's mobile number and when he answers I can hear the telltale sounds of a Queensland electric train in the background.

"Where are you going?"

"To Beth's place to watch the final State of Origin, and to pick up some weed. I finally got my payout."

"I thought you said you stopped smoking!"

"Don't worry about me brother. I'm not getting back into it. I might buy myself an ounce and just have some on weekends."

"Buying an ounce sounds like getting back into it!" I scold. "You'd stopped for two years."

"I just bought a new pair of shoes," Errol says, politely changing the subject, "guess how much!"

"Oh, I don't know."

"$240.00."

"Oh, Errol, don't waste your money."

"They're for my son."

"Oh, that's great." *Just ignore me. This is none of my business*. "Where abouts are you now? Which suburb."

"The train is just pulling out of Brunswick Street. I'm getting off at Central and then I'll get on one going to Cleveland."

We say our goodbyes and I hang up.

For the first time in decades I know exactly where he is. He's on a train heading towards Central, and then he'll get on another train heading to Beth's. I know exactly where he'll be for at least the next four hours and this fact gives me a perverse joy.

When I arrive home from work I ring Beth. Her phone is engaged. I try again later and she is pissed and unable to speak coherently. Errol has gone home. Without prompting Beth tells me she isn't going to help Errol get the ounce he wants, that she only gave him a little bit for his sore back. Then she states she shouldn't have to feel responsible for a grown man. That her only responsibility is towards herself.

"Go the Maroons!" she yells in parting.

I turn on the television news and the score for the final State of Origin is Queensland 18 and New South Wales 4. The series has been a whitewash. Queensland won every game.

*

I'm a search junkie and I know I've got a problem when, between genuine health insurance enquiries, I start cold calling all the F. Fields listed in the electronic phone directory. If an old woman answers I frantically whisper I'm adopted and looking for my birth mother who gave birth to me in 1965. This approach isn't the way the support agencies like it to be done. Apparently calls from out of the blue, out of the mouths of their babes, terrify the birth parent, and nine times out of ten they hang up in a panic, and then they get silent numbers, but I don't care. Part of me enjoys the thought of scaring her.

*

A psychic woman on the television strokes a child's shoe. Children's names and ages swim up out of the depths of the television screen.

Jane 9, Arnna 7, Grant 4.

The Beaumont children. Following a lead the investigators dig up a cement floor but find nothing. I wonder if instead of being dead the three children were brainwashed and raised in another family somewhere else. But then I think this wouldn't have been possible. Somebody would have noticed three kids just turning up out of nowhere and alerted the authorities. But then I think of Lindsey and Errol, and how the only question people ever asked mum about their point of origin was, 'Where did you get them?' – as if they were shop-bought.

Back in Brisbane, after a quick flight, I buy a bottle of red wine to visit Errol. I haven't told him I'm coming, but my plan is to read Errol what I've written and to ask him if the bits I've taken from his life are okay to use. I catch the train and walk the several blocks to his street. Errol already has a visitor. A white man, my age, my height, work stained fingers, dusty jeans and boots, sitting at his table. Errol introduces me to Ross and says they used to work together in the same factory. Ross is fiddling with a small magnifying glass attached to his key ring and doesn't look up as Errol explains their relationship. Errol tells Ross that I'm his foster brother and gets up and retrieves the clump of family photos I'd delivered to him on the previous visit. Errol extracts the picture taken at Bullen's African Lion Safari and points out Lindsey. Then he points me out.

"He's being a lion," Errol makes a paw brimming with claws with his hand "see, with his hands."

Ross grunts. I'm intruding on Ross's real reason for being here and I suddenly feel possessive.

What do you want from my brother white man?

I want this man to prove his credentials. Ross casually pulls a photo from the pile and I recognise the picture of Mum sitting at her kitchen table wearing the wig donated by the Cancer Council. The look on my mother's face is of real pain. Pain at everything. I don't know why I took the photo.

Ross looks closely at the photo of our mother through his magnifying glass. He fails to make the appropriate sounds about loss people would normally make. He moves the focus of the magnifying glass to an area over our mother's head. He busies himself deciphering the labels on the cans and bottles that sit on the open kitchen shelves behind her. He ignores the pain of my mother. He calls out the brand names of the products Mum has in her cupboard and makes disparaging remarks about some of them. I want him to stop, but it's not my house, he's not my guest, and it's not my photo. Errol is smiling indulgently, unaware this autopsy of our mother's kitchen, a kitchen Errol never ate in, is a knife in my gut.

Part of me wishes I'd thought to look at the same photo with a magnifying glass. To enlarge the image and make it seem like I'm back there so I can tell her how beautiful she is without the wig. I want to snatch the photo – I don't want this man looking at my mother's things like he's casing the joint. I hate this man, and then it dawns on me. This man is a junkie and he's after Errol's money.

The irony sinks in.

This man is my doppelganger. He has come on the same day to ask for Errol's money as I have to ask for Errol's stories. The timing can't be a coincidence. I imagine it to be the work of ghosts, Errol's mothers, my mother, maybe even my birth mother –

setting this up, sending me a lesson to tell me they are watching what I'll do with all our stories.

Even though the sound is turned down Errol's focus is on Barack Obama on the television. Ross lifts his head from the photo to see what's captured Errol's attention.

"There won't be a black American President in this generation," Ross says definitely.

Errol doesn't respond and just keeps watching.

Don't be so sure," I exclaim, shocked he can be so certain, shocked he would say such a thing in front of my brother. "Look at Condoleezza Rice, Americans like her. And who is that African American bloke who retired?"

"Colin Powell," Errol says without thinking.

"Yeah him," I say, wondering just how bad Errol's memory is. "Americans liked him too."

When Ross sees me refilling my glass, he pushes back his chair and rises from the table.

Ross looks to be going.

Yay, I think. *I've won*.

"Adios Amigos, I gotta go see my old woman."

"Yeah, see ya brother," Errol says, without any irony. "Look after yourself."

I wait until the door clicks shut.

"Who was that guy?" I ask, like I've a right to know. "He looks dodgy."

"I told him I was getting a payout and ever since then he keeps coming round to borrow money." Errol chuckles, shaking his head. "You turning up ruined his chance."

"I hope you haven't given him any."

“I’ve lent him some but I’m not giving him any more until he pays the first lot back.”

The idea of reading my work out to Errol is now too awful to contemplate.

Feeling ill I also get up to leave. I apologise for dropping in unannounced.

“Hey don’t worry about it. That’s what family does.”

Walking back to the train station I don’t know who I am. What really cracks me up is realising, now I’ve found him, that Errol calls everyone brother.

The word means nothing.

*

At the State library, I load the microfilm reel of Queensland newspapers to try and locate the article about Lindsey’s arrest for attempted blackmail of homosexuals in city parks. I start the slow acceleration and deceleration through Australia’s recent history. Like children going on a car trip the three little Beaumont faces slide by. That’s twice in one day. I wonder if the Beaumonts are an omen, or whether I’m just caught in the spokes of the cycle where every few years there’s a revival of interest in what might have happened to them.

I decide this will be my last documented account of my search for Lindsey. It’s not acceptable for me to write about him if he’s confined to a mental hospital, and if I’m faithful to the truth, I know I don’t want to find him. I’m scared that if I don’t like what I find I’ll retreat, and I wonder what this retreat will look like: after how many visits to the hospital? One? Two? Three? Will I have to sign him out to take him for walks? On the final walk will I tell him I’m not coming back? Will I tell him I only looked for him because I knew if I found one without the other my concept of brotherhood is flawed.

It’s while I’m thinking all of this, and scrolling half-heartedly at the same time, that my vision snags on the word *Aboriginal*.

> Aboriginal Woman bashed to death, court told.
>
> Sasha Rebato, 27, of West End, was found dead in her bed at the Musgrave Hostel early on May 7, Brisbane Magistrates Court was told. Police charged Rhonda Pringle, 25, of West End, with Sasha Rebato's murder after Rebato was found with multiple bruises to the head and neck. Police alleged Pringle bashed Rebato after finding her in bed with Pringle's de facto husband. Rebato suffered a brain hemorrhage and injuries consistent with punching and kicking, the court was told. Forensic pathologist David Williams, who examined Sasha Rebato’s body, said her injuries were caused by severe force and not a simple fall. Mr. Williams said Rebato had brain shrinkage from chronic alcoholism, which made her prone to subdural hematoma - bleeding between the brain and its surrounding membrane caused by head trauma. Mr. Williams said Rebato had suffered a previous brain hemorrhage and there was

> ""always a risk of re-bleed''. The hearing will continue today.

Sasha, the hungry little girl in a lilac dress died a violent death. There's no room to wish things had turned out differently. If Mum had been successful in her wish to keep Lindsey, Errol and Sasha together, then Ron would have done to her what he did to Rayley, and Rayley's dead as well, and wishing the three of them were never stolen is as pointless as throwing stones at Captain Cook Cruises. Sasha went on a hunger strike. For Sasha, finding two brothers, after going hungry for so long, must have been like a gift from God.

Compared to Sasha and what she did as a sister, I'm a nothing brother who can't stop moaning *woe is me, Queensland did me wrong.* Suddenly my thoughts crystallise into the words I didn't think possible, and I cover my mouth to stop them.

"I'm not their brother."

I'm not their brother, foster or otherwise, and with Lindsey, I admit, I've known it all along. His illness scares me. Brother is just a word, because there isn't any other to describe these relationships.

I know from Lindsey's one surviving memory that the government stalked them like lions in long grass till they were the right age to be taken. I know this from published reports and watching T.V., but still I've never questioned my own position within this framework.

If you knowingly receive stolen goods you are guilty. Mum knew what the government was doing was wrong, she told me. The literal version of brother I've been using is from the instruction manual for thieves who want to forget they are thieves.

Sasha went on a hunger strike. I went online and ate my chocolate croissant away from the computer so I wouldn't get crumbs in the keys.

This surely must be one of those moments alluded to on the printed card at work, back in Newcastle: 'Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.'

I feel exhausted and empty.

My eyes rest on the murderer's surname.

Pringle. The name rings a bell.

And then it comes: the awful symmetry. Pringle is the last name of the young bloke who committed suicide in the Cherbourg watch-house. If Rhonda Pringle is related to Andrew Pringle she is also related to Errol's ex-girlfriend Chloe, the girl raped and murdered by two whites.

Errol said the community blamed him for Andy's death. I wonder whether revenge for Andrew had anything to do with Rhonda's rage, or whether it's because this community is so intertwined that if you're going to murder someone, invariably it's someone connected to you.

I scroll back to the beginning of the newspaper reel, past the Beaumont children on their interminable journey through the nation's consciousness and place the microfilm spool on the return tray. Mum always told us to remember the Beaumont children and I remember them now. They're the last nail in the coffin. If the Beaumont children were kidnapped off the street and forced to live in a house with other children the other children wouldn't automatically become their brothers and sisters.

*

Walking back into the city over the Victoria Bridge I can't stop my face crumpling up like rubbish. There must be a way I can salvage my family. Maybe I should return to the library, find a dictionary, and look up the word brother.

YOU SHOULDN'T NEED A DICTIONARY TO WORK OUT WHAT BROTHER MEANS.

I realise from the shifting faces of my fellow pedestrians that I'm yelling. I don't care.

I stop against the bridge railing and summon up a collection of the world's most famous brothers:

• Cain and Abel

• Romulus and Remus

• The Brothers Grimm

• Peter and Tim Costello.

I laugh a hopeless sound. The other pedestrians give me as wide a berth as possible. At least laughing loosens my facial muscles. Tim Costello is a decent man who does a lot of work for victims of the tsunami but this list is ridiculous, and to compound the problem, each set I've come up with, except for the Brothers Grimm, is of the same blood.

I need to ring home.

"Jason, tell me quickly all the sets of brothers in the world you can think of."

"What's wrong?"

"I need a list of brothers like Cain and Abel."

"Jeez, nothing biblical. How about The Bee Gees…" He thinks for a bit. "Or the Baldwin brothers. Will that do?"

“No,” I groan.

“You sound terrible. You need to come home.”

“I can’t. Not yet. I love you. Talk later.”

There is no example for me to follow. My relationship with Lindsey and Errol can’t come from outside, it has to come from within, like it has all along.

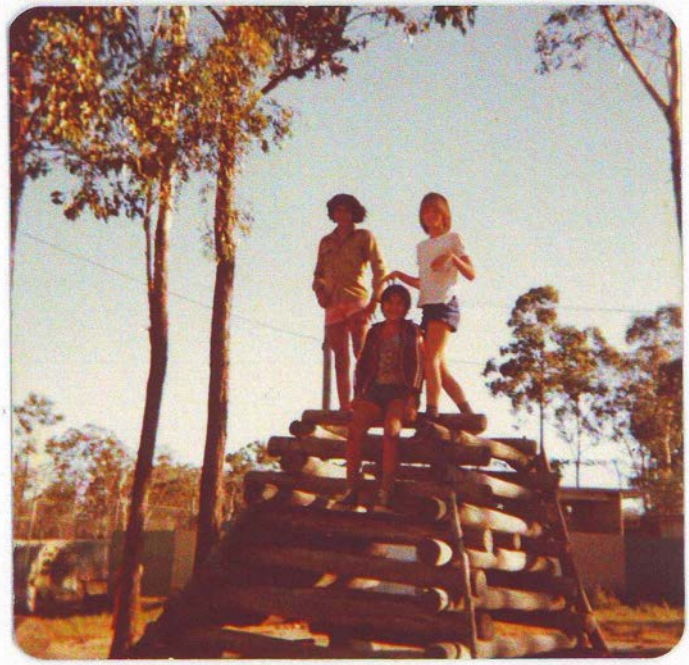
Errol did say when I found him, *my foster brother, David?*

Errol said I could drop in anytime because that’s what family does.

Errol’s not questioning whether our relationship is correct or not.

Foster brother is Errol’s title for me. This title is good enough for him to describe me. Surely if I’m to be disowned it has to come from Errol and not the other way round. Even if we both know his forced removal was stealing. And we both do.

I try to smile a smile not too shy and not a grin.



Ornament

The address on my original birth certificate showing where Frances stayed is now a family home behind a high fence with a security keypad for entry. She would have caught the train up from Melbourne with a suitcase or two before her bump became too noticeable. She would have disembarked at South Brisbane train station and caught a tram or taxi across the Brisbane River to this house I'm now standing in front of.

A plastic slippery slide sits protected from the weather on the veranda. Despite the keypad and the fresh paintjob, I can imagine how the outside of the place would have looked in 1965. Red corrugated iron roof, coloured glass panes in the upper window panels, chipped and faded house paint. Trams used to trundle along the street in front.

Frances may have even worn a pawnbroker wedding ring so she could move round undetected in the months she planned to be in Brisbane. She may have gone on little day trips. She may even have visited the museum and stood in front of Mrs Watson's tank and seen similarities in their conditions: two women frightened away from their homes with no idea what would happen to their babies.

I press the buzzer. Through the gap between the house and the neighbours I can see the olive green slump of Mt Coot-Tha wearing its television towers like party hats.

This is a good omen. There's a small wish inside me that my birth mother herself will open the front door and come to the fence. That she stayed in Brisbane all this time and bought the house in the hope I would one day turn up.

A man comes out with a small boy trotting by his side. In a voice halting with emotion I introduce myself and show him, through the fence, where his home address is listed on my original birth certificate. I'm a door-to-door salesman selling myself instead of vacuum cleaners. I tell the owner I'm researching my origins. He nods at my story and says that in the early sixties the house had been divided into six flats. I ask him if I could come in and see the view from the back landing. My request sounds whiney. He says so much work has been done on the house that the house and its interior have no relevance to this story of mine. I say it would only take a minute. No relevance he repeats.

For a split second I imagine kicking down the gate. *How dare you tell me what's relevant*.

I ask if this is his final decision.

The man nods and repeats his claim there is no relevance. In a fog of confusion I thank him for his time and move away. I want to yell, 'I was a foetus in that house!'

I didn’t think rejection would affect me in this way, but then, I didn’t think I was going to be rejected.

Moving slowly back along the street I wonder what the homeowner would say if I went back and asked if there might be other reasons for his refusal. Maybe he would say I’m too old to be looking for my mother, or that I’m scary. Or maybe he would say he’s sick of his house being a pilgrimage site for middle-aged adoptees tramping up from the city. I want to turn back and yell something about him selling renovation wood chips outside his security fence as relics. Tell him I’d buy a piece.

But yelling on the street would be scary.

I feel insulted and chastised and I start to wonder if the homeowner is right.

In comparing my reasons for searching I know my whole heart was implicated with finding Errol, but only a quarter of it with Frances.

Deep down I wonder if my reaction to the homeowner’s rejection is about being denied, not my birth mother, but access to more opportunities and settings where I could elaborate on my fantasies: I’m addicted to make-believe. Filling the empty air with an actual someone would have removed so many possibilities; I’d have had to deal with real flesh and blood.

On the flipside, I’m going to ask Errol if he wants the ornament of the plaster of Paris boys that sat on Mum’s dressing table throughout our childhood. This ornament has represented my foster brothers for far too long. He can throw it in the river if he wants to.

And there’s another thing: I started this search wondering what ‘brother’ means exactly – and what right I have to use that term with Errol: Errol my Indigenous foster brother who hasn’t the option of developing a relationship with his real mother, for she is dead.

If I forego searching for my birthmother I can be even more level with him, and maybe just a touch more real. Maintaining this absence in my own life is the only thing of substance I can give him, and show I'm more than just words.

Introduction:

This exegesis is comprised of an introduction, three essays and a conclusion. I have split my argument into three parts in order to make sense of where, and how, I am positioned as a non-Indigenous person writing work with Indigenous content. As a white subject I am writing from my need to explore how this impacts on the recipients of my creative and critical gaze.

With memoir there will always be an element of appropriation of other people's stories. Focusing on recent observations from Indigenous academics and commentators regarding the continued appropriation of Aboriginal story, history and culture by whites, the question I consider in these essays is: can I, ethically, focus on subjects who have had so much of their lives, land, and history stolen?

Despite the fact that I have completed *State of Origin*, the answer is not an unequivocal yes, and the further I delved into the impulse that drove the production of this memoir, the more disquieting and self-serving the needs and politics behind it became. Yet at this point - the beginning of my exegesis – I am not sure whether such a statement of disquiet is a useful caveat. My hope is that writing the exegesis will help me decide the answer to my question: have I taken too much of my foster brothers' lives?

A quote found on many writers websites, listed to offer guidance for writers seeking to answer the question as to why they find themselves in the lives of others, is the Nobel recipient and poet Czeslaw Milosz's, who said, 'Once a writer is born into a family the family is doomed' (qtd. in writersservices n.p.).

Milosz's quote implies that writers are born to include family stories in their writings and, although they are aware of the consequences, that they cannot be helped. Several years after first reading his statement, I still find Milosz's words intriguing. I wonder how many aspiring writers have read this quote and then, chastised, put down their pen. I think there is a decision influenced by the desire for gain that writers of all genres *must* make to be able to continue: to hold nothing back and damn the consequences.

As a non-Indigenous writer dealing with the story of finding my Indigenous foster brothers, this quote fails, however, to consider the issue of appropriation. The quote is predicated on the idea that we all start on an even playing field.

The question of appropriation is not one that writers of memoir usually have to ask themselves, but in Australia, in the twenty-first century, finding, or at least seeking, an answer to this question is still important and necessary. The argument 'I'm not responsible for what happened two hundred years ago', used by proponents of the white blindfold view of Australian history, and heard most loudly in Pauline Hanson's 1996 maiden parliamentary speech, denies the fact that the Indigenous people to whom this argument applies are currently affected by decisions made just forty years ago. My position as an adopted white child growing up alongside two Indigenous foster brothers gave me some insights and experiences into the ways these decisions still reverberate to this day.

Everything that I write comes from personal experience. As a result, the personal no longer belongs to those who find themselves exposed or implicated because of their proximity to me. Perhaps, when I meet new people, I need to sign a document promising I won't take their stories. But this would mean that people I would meet would assume that I would want their stories, which I don't. I am only interested in my

own stories, or at least the narratives I have constructed about situations and places where I've found myself during my life.

The non-Indigenous writer writing Indigenous content may argue that their intentions are good and honorable, and that their story-telling is designed to foster better understanding. This was my own stance when embarking on the search for my Indigenous foster brothers. What I failed to consider, however, was the sense of entitlement I presumed to possess in using my Indigenous foster brothers' stories to justify my exploration of all the other 'takings' that had affected them.

Thomas Keneally has said of his 1974 novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, based on the true story of Jimmy Governor and written from an Aboriginal man's viewpoint, that "It would be insensitive to write from that point-of-view now"(Byrnes, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*). I mention Keneally because in *State of Origin* I present a tree-climbing incident from my childhood whereby I show Errol possessed by the spirit of his blood mother which enrages his brother Lindsey.

This now, looking back at my writing practice, is, I believe, an insensitive portrayal. This is insensitive because I purport to know the spiritual connection between my foster brothers and their blood mother, and I make it a mystical/magical connection.

There is really only one moment in *State of Origin* where I acknowledge my trespassing, and this is the scene where Beth drives my character to visit the orphanage where years before the family had gone to pick up Errol:

> "I feel strange looking down the sweeping driveway we drove into over thirty years ago. It feels as if I'm invading part of Errol's story where I'm not meant to – as sure as if I'm trespassing.
>
> > "'Let's go,'" I say getting back into the car. ""We don't belong here."" (95)

In writing this critical evaluation I realised that this concession to the sanctity of Errol's life and stories was forfeited once Errol was in the car and had left the orphanage. Once he was in my exclusive domain, I assumed all authority.

In 2003 I had a novel published, *Fantastic Street*, that also relied on my family's stories, and *State of Origin* can be read as its extension. In *Fantastic Street* I made a lot of insensitive presumptions, and I revealed a lot of personal information about all of my family, not just my Indigenous foster brothers. I revealed my father's impotence, and my mother's molestation at the hands of her stepfather. I revealed the sexual abuse suffered by my sisters.

I tried to counteract these revelations by writing over-blown details about myself – creating a cowardly, petulant, bedwetting alcoholic who likes to dress up in drag, so I could say (and I remember saying) "Don't be upset, sister dear, I revealed more stuff about myself than I ever did about you."

As if this approach made everything all right.

I labelled *Fantastic Street* a novel and this helped alleviate much of the moral pressure to do with questions of appropriation. Family members I was in contact with were suitably nonplussed. This 'answer any questions later' approach to that work was also integral to my being able to start and finish *State of Origin*.

In *State of Origin* I presume to know that one foster brother suffers mental health issues as a result of anger about his Indigenous origins. I effectively criminalise his childhood behavior without any real knowledge as to the root cause. I am not a psychologist. I do this to fit his behavior into the narrative of my writing. I purport to know both my Indigenous foster brothers nearly thirty years after having last seen them, and I force their lives to fit my memoir.

While the original decision to continue writing may have been influenced by self gain (having a writing project to sink my teeth into), I also think that over time this decision was supplanted by other concerns; but it must be acknowledged that the foundation stone on which this whole enterprise is based was purely derived from the wants and desires of the author.

Pick up any memoir-writing guide, as I did at the beginning of my project, and you will receive advice on your 'right' to delve into other people's stories. Patti Miller, in her 2007 memoir-writing guide *The Memoir Book*, repeats the question she has been frequently asked:

> Do I have the right to tell the world about my mad mother/my boyfriend's infidelity/my nasty neighbours?
>
> This is the trickiest question of all and one on which many memoirs founder. The anxiety induced by whether you have the right to tell the story can stop you in your tracks […] [but] in order to leap over at least the beginning hurdle, you need to ask yourself, once again: 'How important is this story to me?' If it has been deeply significant in your life, then as a starting point, you have the right to tell it as part of your story. (15)

'So far, so good,' I told myself. I could embark on my story detailing the search for my foster brothers (and birth mother) because this story is deeply significant to me.

Miller then brings her whole permission structure crashing down by continuing, "You can also try the Scarlett O'Hara trick – 'worry about that tomorrow'" (15); failing to mention where this trick got Miss Scarlett in the end.

Raising the ghost of Scarlett O'Hara reminded me of what is at stake, and re-alerted me to those pesky questions of appropriation. Scarlett O'Hara, the unrepentant

slave-owner from *Gone With The Wind* certainly isn't the person I should model myself upon to write about my search for my Stolen Generation, Indigenous foster brothers.

When I think of Scarlett O'Hara I think of Alice Walker's epistolary short story *A Letter of the Times*, from her collection *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*, which describes the hurt one woman feels for another after a fancy dress ball held to celebrate their feminist heroines, which the addressee attends done-up as Scarlett O'Hara:

> My trouble with Scarlett was always the forced buffoonery of Prissy, whose strained, slavish voice, as Miz Scarlett pushed her so masterfully up the stairs, I could never get out of my head. [After the character named Susan finishes describing her other reasons for her outrage, she goes on] And so, Lucy, you and I will be friends again because I will talk you out of caring about heroines whose real source of power, as well as the literal shape and condition of their bodies, comes from the people they oppress. (118-122)

Turn to the index of Patti Miller's *The Memoir Book* and you will see there is no listing for those intending to write a memoir with Indigenous content – in fact, there isn't one mention of the Indigenous beyond a generalisation which mentions that care needs to be taken when writing about other cultures (152-153).

Miller's flippant advice concerning Scarlett O'Hara's "worry about that tomorrow" dictum is irresponsible, best ignored: especially when it comes to Indigenous subject matter in Australia (or elsewhere). Any further delay in addressing problems of entitlement simply compounds the innumerable situations where Indigenous concerns have been ignored for the benefit of the non-Indigenous.

In contemporary Australia, where a 'Welcome to Country' is a commonplace beginning at official functions, and where university departments are more and more involved in the Indigenisation of their courses, I wonder how long it will be before every degree, memoir and novel written in Australia, about Australians, says 'thank you' and acknowledges the traditional land owners.

There is already a precedent. Gail Jones, in the acknowledgements page of *Sorry*, her 2007 novel exploring the relationships in Western Australia between an immigrant family and a young Aboriginal girl, writes, "I would like to acknowledge that Aboriginal Australians are the traditional custodians of the land about which I write, and that their spiritual and material connection with the land is persistent and precious" (217). There is also a page dedicated to explaining the meaning and the politics of *Sorry*.

I can't help but ungenerously wonder whether this is included to placate those Indigenous commentators who, stirred on by the precedent set in response to *Australian Rules*, the film version of Philip Gwynne's novel *Deadly Unna?*, may be upset by Jones' foray into Indigenous subject matter. I will delve further into this history, and Jones' response to it, in the first essay.

Another writer whose work I will explore in the first essay is Louis Nowra, who tells us on the back cover of his survey, *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children*, that he writes "out of a profound respect and concern for Aboriginal people", despite his having little more than a layman's understanding of the issues at hand and, to justify his interest, lists a lifetime's worth of unproven relationships with Indigenous people before embarking on his study.

Beyond my study of contemporary non-Indigenous writers' work stands Xavier Herbert and his novel *Capricornia*, and beside him the ghostly figure/figures of a

pregnant black woman/women of which Herbert made mention during a recorded interview, just months before his death, in 1986. This woman/women haunts me, and I will explain more of her in the second essay, as this presence goes some way towards explaining why I persisted with my memoir.

Equally interesting is the non-Indigenous writer who finds herself writing work with Indigenous subject matter and claims no prior knowledge of Aboriginal concerns beyond the basics learnt in high school. This is a situation I explore in the third essay with a study of Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man*.

Each of these non-Indigenous writers is similar in that they all refer to authors embedded in the Western literary firmament. It is as if all of these non-Indigenous writers, including myself, have had to look outside Australia to European culture to make sense of the happenings in Australia, and in some cases, seemingly, to get permission to speak. Jones makes constant allusions to Shakespeare; Nowra introduces his survey with a quote from Chekhov; Hooper makes reference to Mailer and Orwell; I hold onto Czeslaw Milosz for strength. I think each writer does this for similar purposes, which I will also explore throughout the following essays.

Affecting all of these elements are critical theories of 'whiteness'. Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in her introduction to *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* states that, broadly speaking, 'whiteness theory' describes the benefits emanating from the dominant society's culture that can be attributed back to being white, to the detriment of those who are not. Those who are not white then become 'other' and open to exploitation beyond that experienced and protected by those inhabiting white subject positions. As Moreton-Robinson writes in her essay "Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation": "whiteness is constitutive

of the epistemology of the West; it is an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life" (75).

Margaret Mitchell writes her famous character Scarlett O'Hara as operating within a whiteness paradigm, unaware, as indeed is Mitchell, that her privilege has come about at the expense of others. Whiteness is the atmosphere that allows this ignorance/intelligence to prosper in Western cultural products.

A clear example of how I have personally benefited at the expense of my foster brothers is the production of *Fantastic Street* and *State of Origin*, both of which came out of my university education. My schooling continued while theirs fell to the wayside when they were forced to run away. The violence they could no longer endure at the hands and feet of our stepfather was watered down when meted out to me. Strange as it sounds, in this violent household I was in a more advantageous position than them, and this had to do with my colour.

The relationship of someone standing in the white subject position and the effect this has on those standing about him are what I was most interested in exploring in my memoir. By making myself the case study, I wanted to explore any benefits I received in comparison to those received by my two Indigenous foster brothers. Whiteness has been let off the hook when applied to those coming from a lower socio-economic background. Down here we are *supposed* to be the same: poor, colour-blind and equal, as indicated by Pauline Hanson during her 1996 maiden speech in Federal Parliament:

> This nation is being divided into black and white, and the present system encourages this. I am fed up with being told, "This is our land." Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here, and so were my parents and children. I will work beside anyone and they will be my equal but I draw the line when told I must pay and continue paying for something that

> happened over 200 years ago. Like most Australians, I worked for my land; no one gave it to me. (3860-63)

One Nation is long gone, thankfully, but as Michael Cathcart and Kate Dorian-Smith state: "Pauline Hanson's own One Nation Party rose and fell over the next decade, but by then many of her divisive, hard-line attitudes had become commonplace in conservative attitudes and policies" (322).

Christian Lander, the author of *Stuff White People Like*, said, in an interview to promote his book, that, "'White' is more about class than anything else. You don't have to be white to be 'white'. You just have to be rich" (30).

I disagree. Whiteness flows across the entire socio-financial spectrum and, with *State of Origin*, I wanted to explore the idea of the currency of having white skin in a family that never had any money. I want to show that whiteness permeates through everyone, and everything, that no one is absolved. That money is not the only indicator.

The family I grew up in lived on Blackstone Road in Ipswich, Queensland, where, years later, Pauline Hanson had her fish and chip shop. I have always felt I had a personal stake in the racist concepts Pauline Hanson espoused, as if I had to protect the good things from my childhood. I was alarmed by her 'what about me' argument in terms of the supposed monetary benefits given to the Indigenous that had failed to be advanced to the non-Indigenous on the same financial footing. I also recognized that this simplistic argument was hard to counter by dint of its simplicity; the issues involved with appropriation went much deeper than non-Indigenous people would allow or could see.

I also felt that competing outside political influences were watering down the full import of the *Bringing Them Home* report, the compilation of evidence supplied by 535 Aboriginal witnesses of the state detailing Commonwealth practices of forced

removal of children from Aboriginal families. As Stuart Macintyre tells us in his book *The History Wars*, "the government's final rejection of *Bringing Them Home* was prepared by a concerted right-wing campaign to discredit it" (154 –155).

Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology on behalf of the nation, became, in a way, more about Kevin Rudd and his banishment of John Howard than an apology. Rudd became the hero of the day, but I felt the stories outlined in the *Bringing Them Home* report got lost in the melee.

As a result, I felt I had a duty to tell my story of growing up with two Stolen Generation foster brothers. And this sense of duty was further intensified when I discovered what had happened to my foster brothers' blood sister. Now that I have completed *State of Origin*, it is this idea of duty that intrigues me. Who made me the knight of the realm? These are questions that I will seek to answer in this exegesis.

What I started out to achieve with my work was exploring the idea of family, and whether I have a family at all. What I ended up with was emotionally far more affecting on a personal level than I ever thought possible. I destroyed my family, à la Czeslaw Milosz, and then I rebuilt it.

Writing about family is fraught with ethical issues, but when the family members are Indigenous, the stakes are even higher. I had to apply for ethics approval before embarking on *State of Origin*. I had to seek permission from a university ethics committee as to whether I could delve into my own past and family. I felt that there was something ethically suspect about this interference. I made the point that my memoir was to begin as a search narrative, that I didn't know who, or what, I would find, or if I would find anything at all. The ethics committee took my word that this memoir was to be about my journey and no one else's.

On a more personal ethics scale, here is a list of issues I feel guilty about having used in my memoir (but continued on with regardless):

- I raise the fact that I think one foster brother has mental health issues.
- I reveal my sisters' molestation.
- I repeat my foster brother's admission that as an adult man he bashed his sister. I then try to downplay this by comparing his violence to my own childhood violence enacted on my adopted sister.
- I downplay my relationship with my partner of fifteen years.
- I make myself more 'white' to highlight the contrast in colour with my foster brothers.
- I strive to show equivalence between being Indigenous and being gay.
- I 'read' my adoptive parent's behavior retrospectively with no real idea of the truth.

These are statements of fact as I know them; but these statements fail to take into account how the contents are transmitted in the text. Each of these statements is worked into the narrative in as unobtrusive a way as possible so as to restrict them from being individually highlighted and remarked upon.

State of Origin is a combination of memoir, reportage and narrative about where I came from and who I am in terms of family. Subconsciously I think I allowed myself a space to continue with my work because I'm adopted: I'm not blood family. I'm the monstrous cuckoo in the nest with pen and paper. This ability to divorce myself from family plays even more neatly into Milosz's, 'Once a writer is born into a family that family is doomed.'

But who, or what, am I? I feel as if my character is diminished, that I unpicked myself as well as my family. I know I am the narrator of *State of Origin*, but it is a role

similar to that of a narrator on a stage: it's a fake construct divorced from reality. What the reader reads is me taking my own character and bending it and twisting it into a fantasy retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* where I play all the characters. I am the cowardly liger – the unnatural offspring of a lion and a tiger; I am 'a friend of Dorothy' in the old -fashioned sense; I am the straw man, in urgent need of a brain so I can work out what family means; and I am the Wizard, the false white king with an over-inflated sense of self and worth. I am Dorothy going exploring, and then trying to find my way back home.

This paralleling of self with the characters from *The Wizard of Oz* isn't accidental. The Hollywoodisation of the way Australians tell their stories can best be seen in the Baz Luhrmann movie *Australia*, which references *The Wizard of Oz*. Marcia Langton, an Indigenous academic, views Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* in a particularly generous way. She believes it gives Indigenous people, exhausted by myriad forms of loss, a pathway to a new type of myth. But Hollywood is also the supreme whitener, and I will show how Luhrmann takes Xavier Herbert's image of a deceased Indigenous mother and child, the ultimate symbol of loss which concludes *Capricornia*, and subsumes this into an adoption narrative where the white woman raises an Indigenous child. I will explore this in the third essay.

Fantasy narratives and myth-making are intrinsic to my writing – none of the connections linking each story in *State of Origin* is particularly 'real'. All the stories are designed to echo off each other, which isn't how real life works. There is a definite gap between the reality of the situations I describe and their written representation.

Real people are plasticised in my work. They aren't 'them'. I am the sum total of everybody I grew up with. They fed me what I now know about myself. They are all

part of the parts of me. The work is really a questioning of self and self-display. What this memoir really is is self-dissection, and probably self-deception.

The gaze and the standpoint of the narrator are intrinsic to showing my stories. By using the history of the Romanovs, the Russian Imperial Royal family, I try and dismantle my own childhood sense of privilege and entitlement. I try to show that the politics of power are still as much in evidence in a poor family as they are in the Russian Royal family. Perhaps the delusion of greatness and power lasts longer in white male children because less exists in their day-to-day experiences to disabuse them of this notion. An over-arching shield of whiteness protects and coddles them.

Perhaps this is my greatest transgression: I romanticise the situation with my foster brothers and their blood sister. I make them into the kings and queens of the European tradition. I bow down to Errol on the walk out to King Island in a sentimental pastiche that has no actual historical precedent, and to my mind, cannot possibly bear any positive ramifications for either brother. What I wrote is a narrative construct to help propel the memoir forward:

> What do you reckon the island was called by the local Aborigines before whites came?" Beth contemplates, shielding her eyes with her hand.
>
> "Dunno," Errol shrugs.
>
> "I bet it was called Turtle Island!" Beth says, outlining the island with her finger. "See how it's shaped like a sea turtle pulling itself up on to the sand to lay its eggs?"
>
> "You might be right sister girl," Errol says, generously slinging his arm round her shoulders. "You might have some Aborigine in you!"

> "My original birth records say I was Indian," Beth says shyly, "but I know sometimes that was code for Aboriginal."
>
> "Before whites came I bet this island was really significant," I say, trying to join in.
>
> "It was all significant," Errol states grimly, turning his head and taking it all in. "We didn't carve little slices off here and there and turn them into national parks."
>
> "Good try David!" Beth laughs and holds her hand out for me to take.
>
> And it is in this fashion that the three of us, Beth in the middle and Errol with his arm along her shoulders, prepare to take our first simultaneous step onto King Island. At the last second I bend down on the pretence of dislodging a rock from my shoe. Errol keeps walking and is first on the island. I mouth the words *YOU ARE KING*, still bowing, without either of them seeing. (Kelly 164)

Knowledge is power, and in the third essay I will also explore the power battle going on between historians and fiction writers as to who best tells Australian stories. I study the conflict between the historian Inga Clendinnen and the novelist Kate Grenville, and the furore that arose when Grenville claimed a more intimate relationship with history because of her abilities as a fiction writer.

Before I started writing my family stories I had to ask myself – what right did I have to write about anyone in my family, male or female, Indigenous or non-Indigenous? The answer I came up with is that I don't have the right – I'm not writing their stories, I am writing my own, and this is the answer that I doggedly cling to. The emphasis became not my family's stories, but MY family stories, or the stories of

family that I have concocted in my own head. The people in my stories aren't real, and neither are the stories. Of course there are consequences, but this, I decided, cannot be helped. The main consequence is the impression that I am claiming rights over all family members' stories. Coming to terms with this and explaining that I can speak only from my point of view was the first hurdle.

Question: Why did I continue and not desist?

Answer: Because I wanted to find my foster brothers, and I saw some importance in detailing my foster brothers' upbringing compared to my own.

Writing is also my way of self-protection – I knew if I kept a record as the search unfolded I could be less hurt by who and what I would find. If I found rejection, then I would still have my writing. If I found that either one had died, then I would have my writing. Self-interest played a huge part in writing this memoir. And what I am about to say is a banal admission: writing makes me feel like someone. With writing I can be more than a telephone call centre operator trying to get a job in academia. I can be more than an adopted gay man from a broken mish-mash of a family.

The key, I think, to having completed an effective story that relies less on thievery than subtle and thoughtful commentary is in the positioning of self. The writer has to somehow explain, in a satisfactory manner, what he or she is doing there. This has nothing to do with rights. If rights are introduced the person has already lost, as we will see with Louis Nowra's work in the first essay. Raising rights means the writer hasn't thought beyond her or himself. But this thinking outside oneself is extremely difficult; it isn't as simple as it sounds.

I split my argument into three to better explain the issues at work in suffering the anxiety I felt at the start of my writing project. The arguments against this project arose over its course. I didn't know what they would be before I started. I knew there

were issues I would have to deal with, but I didn't realize the full extent of them. I went ahead anyway because, on some base level, I am hypocritical and greedy. It can't be helped and has to be admitted. But is admission enough? This is the final question I hope to answer by my conclusion.

Essay One: *"Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people?"*

Issues around appropriation of Indigenous stories by non-Indigenous writers are yet, if ever, to be settled; they create a zone of contention which has seen many non-Indigenous writers seek to explain the impetus for their writing practices.

Before undertaking any creative interpretation of my Aboriginal foster brothers' lives I needed to explore how other non-Indigenous writers had revealed their anxieties associated with writing work involving Indigenous people and how these anxieties were introduced and arranged. This exploration is one I needed to undertake because, as Gillian Cowlishaw states in her essay "Racial Positioning, Privilege and Public Debate", "There is the fear of seeming, or accused of being, or indeed of actually being exposed as, racist in some way. Then there is the fear of inadvertently silencing black voices" (67).

In this essay I will analyse a variety of texts written by non-Indigenous authors, both fiction and non-fiction, and discuss how, in relation to my own fears regarding accusations of trespass, the non-Indigenous writer positioned him or herself in relation to the Indigenous elements in the story. Or, to use a metaphor, how deftly he or she laid his or her white planks across or through these black stories, as with a zebra crossing, to get to the other side.

In his 1968 Boyer lecture *After the Dreaming*, Professor W.E.H. Stanner spoke of attitudes towards Australia's Indigenous peoples from the 1930s through to the early sixties, stating:

> A partial survey is enough to let me make the point that inattention on such a scale [to Indigenous lives and matters] cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from *a window* [my emphasis] that has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. (25)

Forty-one years later windows have been erected and positioned everywhere by all sorts of writers: journalists, historians, fiction writers, non-fiction writers, all peering out into this once-ignored quadrant of Indigenous lives and affairs.

Marcia Langton, in her 1993 essay *'Well, I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television…'*, refers to anthropologist John von Sturmer and his work which questions

> […] ethnographic filmmakers who purport to objectively record information from another culture: Some of them [filmmakers] seem to sit there waiting for the truth to suddenly unfold itself before the lens of their camera, while others seek to impose, more often than not unconsciously, their own narrative. There are also those who require the participation of their 'subjects'. But while it is reasonable to assume the truth of a society is to be found embodied in each of its members (how could it be otherwise?), it is quite another matter to assume that any of them has the capacity to enunciate in filmic terms the truth of their own

> condition or that of their own society. It involves an act of translation, an imaginative recreation invoked and unleashed by the potentialities of the medium. Truth may be there in every moment of lived reality, of actuality, but fiction alone provides the mechanism for the expression of truth. (78)

I quote Langton's reference to von Sturmer's findings because of the parallels I found in imagining my Indigenous foster brothers' lives; but while von Sturmer notes the *unconscious* imposition of film-makers' own personal narratives, I aimed to relate my own story knowingly.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the voices that come to us out of these once-ignored quadrants are distorted and, as a result, some of these windows can be considered one-way mirrors where the only clear voice that can be heard is the white voice describing what that white person imagines is going on through the glass.

Indigenous author and social commentator Alexis Wright, winner of the 2007 Miles Franklin Award for her novel *Carpentaria*, proposes that this muffling, or silence, has in some cases been self-prescribed:

> In the closing years of the last century and most of those of the first decade of the twenty-first century […] there were so many commentators who weren't Indigenous writing about Indigenous people, nor did they have any meaningful contact with Aboriginal people or live in an Indigenous community – those few that did, did so as result of the privilege and status accorded to them as 'professionals', which is different to Indigenous people actually speaking for themselves. Strangely, as though Indigenous people had become innate objects, their voices were practically never heard. The constant message to them from

> others was to forget Indigenous rights, which also included, it seems, the right to be heard. The effect of this vitriolic attack of vilification from the powerful on a defenseless people mostly living in poverty was that Indigenous people became silent. You could call it a counterattack by Aboriginal people – sometimes it is a cultural strength to remain silent – that instead became a terrible self-inflicted wound of psychological harm to the spirit, intensifying inside *the wall* [my emphasis] […] The question yet to be answered is why Indigenous people were silent, whether Indigenous voices […] really had been silenced, needed to be silenced, or chose to become silent during this period. Where was their freedom of speech? (Wright 132)

Germaine Greer, in her essay *On Rage*, writes of listening to Bob Katter, member for the Federal electorate of Kennedy, raging on the radio at the injustice visited upon rural workers in North Queensland due to successive changes and deregulations across a broad range of industries, and compares his genuine rage to that experienced by Australia's Indigenous people. Greer writes:

> Australian Aboriginal peoples have suffered far greater losses and outrages than Katter's farmers will ever be called upon to endure, but most of them, if offered the opportunity to air their grievances for half an hour on national radio, would not take it. The rage that eats away at Aboriginal hearts is too deeply embedded to be trotted out and paraded in a talking shop. (16-17)

So, taking stock, the silences surrounding Indigenous issues in this country can be seen to be emanating from three dimensions: the silence Stanner describes as a "cult of forgetfulness"; the self-prescribed silence Wright describes as a form of cultural

strength; and Greer's hypothesis that Indigenous people have literally been rendered speechless by rage. But there also is a fourth silence: Langton writes that "During the 1970s and 1980s, the Aboriginal response to racist representation, especially in the large urban centres, was to demand control of representation. These demands for control […] have been expressed at every major film and media conference during the last twenty years" (9).

Rosemary Neill, the author of *White Out: How Politics is Killing Black Australia*, points out in a 2009 article entitled "*Inconvenient Truths"*, published sixteen years after Langton's article, that the calls for silence that Langton refers to are still affecting those attempting to write about Indigenous subject matter:

> In 1968, anthropologist WEH Stanner famously coined the term "the great Australian silence" when describing the 'cult of forgetfulness'[…] Now among the creative class there is a different kind of censorship at play, a self-censorship encouraged by postcolonial dictums that people from oppressed cultures should control and vet their own stories, or stories told about them. (7)

Architectural allusions, made by Stanner to windows and by Wright to a wall, are apt, given that writers play a major role in the building of the structure of accepted Australian history. But because of the effects of these four competing silences this structure is under peculiar stresses and strains.

The role commentators play in history-building is tacitly acknowledged by the historian Inga Clendinnen in *True Stories: History, Politics, Aboriginality*, when she proposes that: "The picture of relations between black and white in this country must not be made too bleak" (80). Here, Clendinnen refers to the actual production of history as if history is a recipe to be followed in a certain way for the best results.

Forms of silence involved with so-called history-building correspond with my own anxieties about working with a narrative rendering of my foster brothers' lives. My first anxiety is driven by the possibility I am simply erecting a window of one-way glass through which I project my thoughts. My second is that I am contributing to the weight of non-Indigenous written matter, which somehow serves to silence authentic Indigenous voices. My third fear is twofold: fear I have inadvertently subscribed to Inga Clendinnen's call for history to not be 'made' – 'too bleak' – and its opposite – that I have somehow corrupted my own biography to promote a black armband view of history. My fourth fear involves the potential that my representations in *State of Origin* promote nothing more than failed leftist ideals, leaving myself exposed to calls from the Indigenous community that I am racist and/or stupid.

In the preface to her book *White Out: How Politics is Killing Black Australia*, Rosemary Neill writes "When I began writing this book, I encountered many people who were wary of my motives. One publisher liked my ideas, but said she would only print them if I was Aboriginal" (1).

The arguments against white authors writing in this area have been strident, and reached their zenith with *Australian Rules*, the film adaptation of Phillip Gwynne's debut novel *Deadly, Unna?*. Gwynne tells us in an interview titled "Rules of Engagement" that this film adaptation "created an unexpected controversy after a group of Aboriginal activists branded it racist and disrespectful, and called for the creation of 'cultural protocols' to govern how artists use Indigenous material" (26).

The construction of protocols dealing with stories involving Indigenous content is not a new one. Langton, writing in 1993, refers to the Northern Land Council's protocol for filmmakers on Aboriginal land entitled *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner in Arnhem Land?*. This protocol is "designed to produce advice to communities, as well as

assist, where possible, potential filmmakers" (qtd. in Langton 91). This protocol deals with issues such as: Whose Interest Does the Film Serve?; Editorial Control; Distribution Control; Employment; Environment Issues; Sacred Sites; Legal.

These concerns are particular to an industry such as the film industry when, if desiring to make a film on Aboriginal land, the film unit needs to physically move onto this land and physically utilise the inhabitants. Writing about the search for my foster brothers is different, but still involves two of the aforementioned issues that I had to face during the creation of the work: *whose interest does the story serve*, and *editorial control*.

While protocols for authors – as opposed to filmmakers – have since been compiled and published by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Society of Authors, it is the raw emotion and the accusatory tone contained in *Writing About Indigenous Australia*: *Some Issues to Consider and Protocols to Follow: A Discussion Paper*, compiled by Anita Heiss for the Australian Society of Authors in 2002, that stayed with me throughout my search for my foster brothers. These protocols link excerpts from a variety of Indigenous writers and historians. The bluntest comes from fiction writer Melissa Lucashenko, who asks, "Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people? If it wasn't Aboriginal people themselves, I suggest you go away and look at your own lives instead of ours. We are tired of being the freak show of Australian popular culture" (qtd. in Heiss 10).

When I read Lucashenko's blunt summation I still cringe and wonder if this charge can be leveled at me.

Gwynne, the author of *Deadly, Unna?*, spoke about the controversy surrounding the adaptation of his novel into the film *Australian Rules*:

> Look, the problems were that it was an Aboriginal story and because we are whitefellas we have no right to tell that story. And I agree that white people really do not have the right to tell Aboriginal stories – but that never was an Aboriginal story; it was always *my* story of growing up in the country, one of eight kids, alcoholic father, playing football with the Aboriginal kids. (26)

Gwynne's explanation for his right of access mirrors my own internal dialogue: *'State of Origin' was always my story of growing up, one of eleven kids, child molester father, playing in the backyard trees with my Aboriginal foster brothers.*

Whatever I decided as to how I was positioned as the author of the story I was embarking upon needed to be under constant review. 'Positioning' is a social science term that recognises "the links between an individual's position within a social order and their social consciousness and thus their social theorising" (Cowlishaw 68).

So, the idea that I could simply, and fairly, lay down planks of whiteness over black stories, as with a zebra crossing to navigate myself safely across, without impinging, or trespassing, was naïve in the extreme.

* * *

Fantastic Street is about a large mixed race family in Queensland made up of a mix of adopted, fostered, step and blood children. *State of Origin*, almost as a continuation, goes on to explore what happened to my Indigenous foster brothers who have run away by the novel's end. I wrote *Fantastic Street* as a novel instead of a memoir because I wanted my surviving relations to have the ability to say the work was a product of my imagination, to give them a way out from people asking them whether what I wrote was true. I wanted this alibi because I made revelations about my family I

had no business to make. None have since castigated me, but I know they were, and are still, well within their rights to drag me over the coals.

That was a lie. What I just told you about not being castigated by my family is false. I have been completely cut off from contact by one family member. My grandmother refuses to speak with me for calling the character based on her “a bitch” in *Fantastic Street*. We haven’t spoken at all since the book was published over seven years ago.

That is an ugly admission and proves the Milosz adage that “When a writer is born into a family, that family is doomed.”

After publication of my novel I then had to think of the subject of my second book. 2003 was an interesting time to consider writing about looking for my foster brothers. The history wars were raging and non-Indigenous writers were being criticised for writing Indigenous lives.

The desire to find my missing foster brothers has always been with me. If proof is required, my diaries from over the last twenty years will show this. But I find this defensive statement of mine, and this instant proffering up of evidence, offensive. Only the guilty retreat so quickly to this position.

I still need to qualify my position and this is where it really does get embarrassing.

Before starting my search, I wanted to achieve something in my life, something of which I was proud. I wanted this because I wanted to own something tangible I could hold onto if either of my foster brothers rejected me for not being the right kind of brother. The publication of *Fantastic Street* partially gave this to me. I was a writer. Before the publication of *Fantastic Street* I didn’t think my combined attributes amounted to much. I was a waiter with a Bachelor of Arts working in a five-dollar pasta

restaurant, and before that I was a cocktail barman. I felt rejectable, and this had always put me off starting an intense search. I wanted to be able to say '*I am a writer*' against the taunt, '*You are a homosexual*.'

After the publication of *Fantastic Street*, I felt I had an achievement to be proud of, but this feeling of achievement was tempered by the fact I'd destroyed my relationship with my Grandmother. Now I wanted to write something positive and strong and put the family back together again. But I also became aware that to start searching for my foster brothers at this point might be construed as a mercenary rush into a second body of work. I also realized that this was partly true, and it was this mercenary aspect that made me reconsider and delay.

Another part of the reason for my waiting was that I was scared off by the contemporary arguments going on about non-Indigenous writers taking, or insensitively dealing, with Indigenous stories. I recognized the truth in these arguments, but I also felt that I knew and could recognise what a commercial project would look like and I didn't think this was it. I am adopted, and I knew I could have started a documented search for my birth mother, but lacked the emotional investment to embark on such a journey.

Finally I guessed my work would speak for itself, and if my intentions were dishonorable this would be readable in the text, and then I would be criticised, and so be it.

I imagined that if I was to be castigated my prosecutors would be Indigenous people angry with me for writing about my foster brothers' lives without getting their permission. I imagined I would suffer the same fate as Phillip Gwynne, or Xavier Herbert before him.

This calculated positioning of self suggests I had more invested in the politics of positioning than I did in any emotional imperative to find my foster brothers. A true brother wouldn't have hesitated.

This realization has always made me catch my breath.

* * *

'Whiteness' is what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls, in the preface to the collected essays in the book *Whitening Race, Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, "the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law" (vii). She continues on, in her essay 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation': "Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin colour, instead, it is [now quoting Shome] 'more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neo-colonialism, privilege, and the sustained global dominance of white imperial subjects'" (78).

I decided the position I took was paramount to my being able to negotiate the danger of my proposed documented search. I also decided that if my position changed I would document this change and allow it to become a part of the narrative. I decided to interrogate the processes involved in searching for my foster brothers.

The self-positioning of authors has often been criticised in arguments against those who have trespassed stupidly into Indigenous stories. The responses to Germaine Greer's *On Rage*, from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous commentators alike, told her that her position as an outsider, looking back at the country of her birth, was problematic – that the time she had spent residing in Britain had caused her to lose sight of the changes in Indigenous politics over the last thirty years.

Marcia Langton wrote in *The Australian*:

> During the course of her little treatise on rage, Greer lays out some of the evidence of the crisis of alcohol and drug abuse, violence and suicide in the Australian indigenous population, albeit in a crude fashion[…] We proceed then to a 1970s style argument attributing the causes of Aboriginal male alcohol and drug abuse, violence (especially against women and children) and the misery of their condition to a string of slogans used in many Aboriginal street marches of the past 40 years (while Greer was abroad).
>
> These sweeping generalisations concerning invasion, genocide, stolen land and so on explain, she suggests, the humiliation of the Aboriginal male. And it is this past, Greer asserts, that fuels the inherent tendencies to rage and violence. (20)

The editor of *The Australian* newspaper wrote an article, titled "Welcome Germaine, but would you kindly tell us when you're going home?", that derided Greer's treatise, stating:

> By blaming white men for black men's anger, Greer displayed her sexism, racism and ignorance[…] While she is in Australia, Greer should take the opportunity to read a *Griffith Review* essay by anthropologist Peter Sutton published in *The Australian* last week. Sutton said the left-wing consensus he once supported has collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions[…] It is no surprise that after more than 40 years abroad, she is locked in to the progressive consensus of the 1960s and 70s. What might come as news to Greer, however, is that the debate has moved on since she left in 1964. (20)

There is a tone of self-congratulation going on in this editorial about Greer, as if, to quote Fiona Probyn-Rapsey:

> there is a white competition going on between whites to see which of them belongs 'more' than the other. Who is more at home? Who is more 'foreign' in relation to Aboriginality? […] This competition between whites (to be less Other, less strange, less foreign, less 'the invader', less white) requires a possessive interest in Aboriginality itself – a promise of 'true belonging' that, like a prize, is symbolic, silent and squabbled over. (157-173)

This was the same competition I engaged in when researching work by other non-Indigenous authors. I felt my work was better than theirs. I privately gloated I wasn't going to make the same mistakes. That I could 'pass' any test.

My concern about this attack on Greer's book *On Rage* is that until I read Langton's criticisms, I believed everything Greer said, and my memoir seemed to mirror Greer's political viewpoints. *State of Origin* attributes the mental health issues suffered by Lindsey to being caused by rage at being disenfranchised by having his rightful bedroom stolen. What Greer wrote in *On Rage* seemed to correspond with my upbringing in the sixties, seventies and eighties, and I replicated these experiences in my creative work. But, unlike Greer, I haven't lived overseas for over forty years. It would seem I haven't moved on in either mind or body. *I am terrified I'm perpetuating stale ideas in my work.*

The one thing I think I can be sure of is that Indigenous people are sick and tired of the non-Indigenous blundering into their lives and making statements they know nothing about. As Langton writes, "Racism and highly evolved strategies that some white Australians use to dismiss, obstruct and trivialise Aboriginal people are like a

virus: just when you think you have inoculated yourself against it, another version of the attack hits you when you are unprepared" (20).

So just when I was feeling superior to those other white writers the carpet was pulled out from under me.

This brings me to author and playwright Louis Nowra, and the reception of his book *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children* where he was charged with simply jumping on the Indigenous issues bandwagon because he needed something to write about.

Nowra opens his book *Bad Dreaming* with a quote by one of literature's greatest masters, Anton Chekhov: 'A writer must be objective as a chemist … he must know that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones' (epigraph).

The positioning of European sensibility at the beginning of Nowra's study places the local under the gaze of the international, creates objective distance and can be read as an attempt to sideswipe any national Indigenous objections out of the way. Who can argue when work is sanctioned by none other than Anton Chekhov?

By quoting Chekhov, Nowra couches his enquiry into Indigenous affairs within a polite European sensibility. Yet my own enquiry is couched in this detached sensibility. Nowra's use of Chekhov reminds me of my use of Czeslaw Milosz.

A helpful tool I used to embark on the narrative exploration of the search for my foster brothers was to look beyond Australian shores for sanction, and I found this navigational aid in the Milosz quote. Throughout the writing of *State of Origin* I returned to Milosz's statement time and time again. I used it like a passport to give me right of way with an international sanction – a Nobel prize winner no less – while remaining aware of the irony that something that gave me succour could doom my family.

Czeslaw Milosz's fatalistic European tone is a detached voice coming from outside the hot swirling atmosphere within the bell jar of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. Quoting Chekhov similarly appears to give Nowra the license to embark on his study of Indigenous issues.

The opening chapter of *Bad Dreaming* begins with Nowra remembering:

> In 2005, I spent several days in the Alice Springs hospital. I was very sick and the doctors contradicted each other daily as to the cause of my illness. In my ward was a middle-aged Aboriginal man who was quite proud that he had raped a thirteen-year-old girl. As he said, "She wouldn't say yes, so I fucked her hard."
>
> A few years before, I was in Central Australia talking to two Aboriginal men in their early seventies. They were preparing to go into town to buy plastic toy dinosaurs. This was to pay a twelve-year-old girl for having sex with both of them at the same time. What amazed me was their lack of shame or even simple embarrassment. I also knew something else. One of the men had been convicted of raping a white girl many years before. The insouciance of these men troubled me. What disturbed me even more was that the most common sight in the hospital was Aboriginal women and young girls with severe injuries suffered during domestic violence. The confronting evidence of what men had done to the women was almost unbearable. My illness paled by comparison with what these women had had to bear and would have to continue to endure. (1)

Nowra then goes on, in the first chapter, to justify his positioning of self and the impetus for writing his book *Bad Dreaming*. He lists his involvement with these issues

throughout his life, starting as a child: like Gwynne, like myself. Nowra positions himself as a child who personally witnessed domestic violence. Nowra writes that his parents' fights:

> were not in the worst category and even though I could understand how my poor sod of a step father was goaded into assaulting my mother, I felt he shouldn't have reacted in the way he did. Perhaps because I was brought up in a world of women I have always disliked men's physical cruelty towards women and children and have regarded men who perpetrate it as thugs and cowards. (3)

Then from his young university days he cites an 'impassioned article' he wrote about domestic violence for the student paper, in which no interest was shown; then, and I quote, "After university, I was close to an Aboriginal drag queen who pretended he was Sri Lankan or Javanese to avoid the casual racism of white society"(3).

What Nowra is doing here is silky: Nowra is saying he was close to the most marginalised of the marginalised, an Aboriginal drag queen, which now gives him the right to write what he is writing. But let's stop for a moment – 1974 – can you see it? "So you're positive you're a Sri Lankan drag queen, and not an Aboriginal drag queen? Come in, come in, come in from out of the cold! That's a very nice frock!"

Nowra throws every tenuous link he has with the Indigenous community into the mix to prove his right to the right of way.

It was hearing the nameless Aboriginal drag queen's stories about being molested by his father and two brothers that lead to Nowra's interest in the topic of Aboriginal men's violence towards women and children. Finally Nowra declares his 25 years of collecting newspaper articles on the topic of Aboriginal violence and the fact

that nothing seems to have changed, the subtext being that Nowra has been forced to speak.

In the creation of his credentials, and whether true or not (the bibliography shows no newspaper article older than 1998), Nowra's list beseeches: LET ME WRITE ABOUT YOU. And then the final last words on the back cover come almost like a disclaimer: 'I have written about this issue out of profound respect and concern for Aboriginal people.'

In a written response to Nowra's book in *The Australian Literary Review*, Larissa Behrendt and Nicole Watson begin by saying "It is easy to understand why non-Aboriginal people are moved to do something when they see images of crisis in Aboriginal communities. But sometimes their good intentions are not enough, and sometimes attempts to help can do more harm than good" (22).

Behrendt and Watson go on to question Nowra's memory of having witnessed "two men[…] buying gifts to 'pay' their 12-year-old victim for having sex with them" (22). Behrendt and Watson question: why "Nowra make[s] no further mention of the confessions", and ask "did Nowra report the confessions to the police? Had Nowra approached the police with this information perhaps they could have acted to protect the victims from further abuse" (22).

Behrendt and Watson then make the point that:

> It is ironic that Nowra apparently failed to discharge his moral responsibility, because […] he criticises indigenous people for similarly turning a blind eye to sexual abuse.
>
> Finally, if Nowra chose not to share this information with the police, why is he now telling the world at large? That his shocking revelations coincide with the release of his new book is disturbing.

> Equally disturbing is (Nowra's) lack of intellectual rigour. According to Nowra, violence against women is innate to indigenous cultures, apparently proven by reference to the accounts of early anthropologists. He portrays such individuals as blank canvases whose observations were sanitised of the prejudices of their times. (22)

The point Behrendt and Watson make about anthropologists is an interesting one because the work of early anthropologists can be both dismissed, or relied upon, to support whichever argument is at hand – the loser from these arguments each time being Indigenous people. I will extend this observation in the second essay with Aileen Moreton-Robinson's study of The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision.

Behrendt and Watson's questioning of Nowra's reasons for writing his book raises more questions about my own – why did I wait thirty years to look for my brothers?

Behrendt and Watson end by asking, "How can essays that propose no genuine solutions save anything other than Nowra's writing career?" (23).

My fear is I could be charged like Nowra; that I am picking up on Aboriginal issues because I want a writing career; that I've got nothing else to write about.

My position as a writer is not blameless or guiltless, and I use the ornamental plaster heads in the first chapter of *State of Origin* to show that, yes, my brothers are mute: muted by time and distance and, like Wright's innate objects, can be moved ornamentally around by my big white hands.

So off I went and started to write about my foster brothers, not sure who I would find and not sure if, by keeping a record, I was doing the right thing. Elements of story became like puzzle pieces as I positioned different aspects of the search for my foster brothers against memories of the past, and against analysis of the self.

What is interesting to me is how in *State of Origin* I have sub-consciously positioned my being homosexual as something akin to being Indigenous. I sensed it as soon as I started doing it. It started off partly because I thought doing this would deflect criticism, and also partly because I actually believed the two were similar in many respects – as if the non-Indigenous homosexual is blameless of ever having perpetrated violence against the Indigenous.

The two main strands in the story are intertwined. Searching for my foster brothers at the same time as looking for my birth mother I discover, by memoir's end, that if we really are brothers then I would have to give something up: hence, my decision to forego finding my birth mother. This is not just a narrative construct.

The experiences of being an adopted white child and of being a Stolen Generation child are worlds apart, as are the experiences of being a white homosexual and a straight Indigenous person; but in *State of Origin* I try to find a correlation between adopted/homosexual and Stolen/Indigenous. I try to use both being adopted *and* gay as a passport that I can use to enter into the Indigenous experience. I also play with these supposed similarities by having my character say, in *State of Origin* "I have a gay voice" (Kelly 5) to the policeman on the other end of the telephone line who may, or may not, be Indigenous.

I also position my character using a hypothetical reversal, deciding

> "I'll visit the emu farm where visitors are encouraged and question the employees if they know someone called Errol. I'll go in under the cover of tourist. I wonder if Errol would be scared if he had to enter all the gay bars on Oxford Street looking for me. I think he would be. After this I don't feel so bad." (2)

I wanted two things to be apparent in this paragraph: I am the one starting to look, and not the other way round, and that Errol would experience the same feeling as I would, if looking for me on my home turf.

I am not a definitive example of ‘whiteness’ in all its awful glory, but I promote the view that I am by giving my character the conviction that he is of royal stock, and then dismantling this fantasy. This is not a false representation of myself as a child. Every adopted person I’ve ever met has, in their childhood, harboured fantasies of being secretly royal. My work seeks to reveal these machinations. The revelation of these machinations is part of any process of research and discovery.

What I have attempted to show in this essay is the immediate background to the particular stresses and strains within the politics of appropriation and how these have affected my writing practice. As a result of becoming acquainted with these questions, I recognize my writing practice has become more thoughtful than when I blithely embarked on this search without taking into consideration questions of appropriation, and the politics of whiteness.

Over the course of writing *State of Origin*, the ultimate meaning of this memoir became clear. My aim had necessarily become to subvert the politics of whiteness and reinstall, and make textually intact, the relationship between a blood sister and her brothers that state and federal governments, and the societies that they governed, had done so much to destroy.

Essay Two: *a black metal tank*

The book I most remember reading in my mid-teens is Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia* – the same heavy hardback edition that survived every family upheaval and house move for over twenty years. There were plenty of other books lost over that time, including beautiful hardcover picture books on Wales, books that had traveled with my mother's family from the country of her birth, books in which our mother had a lot of sentimental investment. *Capricornia* followed us from house to house as the other books, not so tenacious, fell by the wayside. I remember I first read *Capricornia* during school holidays when I was fourteen.

My foster brothers shared the room next to mine and I remember being severely affected by the brutalities meted out to the Aboriginal inhabitants who lived in the fictitious northern lands of *Capricornia*. I remember walking past my brothers' bedroom to talk to my mother about the book. We often talked about books. I really was affected by the brutalities portrayed, and I remember for the first time in my life questioning where I stood in relation to the politics of it all. This was before my foster brothers ran away because of the brutalities meted out to them by our so-called step-father.

I lost sight of that hardback edition of *Capricornia* when our mother died. I don't remember whether or not the novel was thrown onto the trailer taking the rest of her unwanted belongings to the dump; but I lost sight of my foster brothers well before I lost sight of the hard cover edition of *Capricornia*.

I looked for my foster brothers each time I returned to Brisbane, but only in the way a person can from a bus or train window, or by scanning the crowd as I passed through.

I mention Xavier Herbert and his novel *Capricornia* because both have been an influence in the writing of *State of Origin*. As well as Herbert and his work, my writing has its foundations in the lives of three women – two real individuals, and one who is a stand-in for an unknown number. This one woman who I use to represent an unknown number may even be fictional as there is no definitive proof that she, or the women she represents, even truly existed. These women lived at three diametrically opposite points on the map of Australia: the first in the north of Queensland, the second to the north of Western Australia, and the third on Bruny Island, off the coast of Tasmania.

As part of my writing process I drew a line from one woman to the next creating a triangle in my mind's eye that I could then place over an imaginary map of Australia. This triangle was a cog in my creative machinery, an imaginary apparatus that could be cranked round the map of Australia to form different permutations. There was another cog made up of my fears about appropriation that spun in the other direction. I'd use one against the other. It sounds very mechanical, I know. Whenever I felt ethically compromised about writing my foster brothers' lives I spun the cogs looking for the permutation that would allow my writing to go forward. The weightier cog, the one with the most strength, is the one with the three women. I used these three women to go forward and they eventually lead me to the story of my foster brothers' blood sister. This story, in turn, cemented my resolve to finish the memoir, despite my concerns about appropriation. The triangular shape also had the added benefit of introducing my own sense of persecution to the mix. All I had to do was colour in the triangle pink.

It's not a particularly sophisticated machine, and it is only in hindsight that I realize that *State of Origin* is propelled by a machine whereby the three different cogs are the bodies of women (no male body is represented). I am mystified as to why this is so, and can only deduce there is some psychological reason for this reliance on the

bodies of women to fuel my writing machine. I want to make more of this but I don't know how.

Is it a case of, to borrow and reword the feminist critic Gayatri Spivak's phrase "white men saving black women from black men" from her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (296) "one white man saving black women from white men"? I think so, but the thought of my memory of my foster brothers' sister receding further and further away unmarked became not just the impetus to continue writing *State of Origin*, but also the defining reason.

The first woman at the point of the triangle I want to introduce is the only one I refer to directly in *State of Origin* – Mrs Watson. Mrs Watson is a Queensland heroine, and has been dead for well over a hundred years. Mrs Watson was the first woman in the country, other than a head of state, to have a monument dedicated to her memory. Mrs Watson is famous for the dreadful way she died with her baby and her Chinese servant on a deserted coral cay in the Great Barrier Reef.

With her husband away, and after having lost one servant to an attack by Aborigines, Mrs Watson, her child and her remaining servant pushed off from Lizard Island in a black metal tank that her husband used to boil beche-de-mer. The cauldron was originally a ship's water tank. We know what happened because of the diary found alongside Mrs Watson's body. All three seemed to have died of thirst, and the monument dedicated to Mrs Watson's memory in Cooktown is a drinking fountain. No one who quenches their thirst from this fountain in Cooktown could, or can, help but be reminded of the horrors that befell Mrs Watson, or how Indigenous people are implicated. The tank that held the bodies of Mrs Watson and her child has been on display in the Queensland museum for over a century.

The tank has an awful power and symbolises the dangers facing white women and their helpless dependents in the early years of white settlement. Mrs Watson, whether she likes it or not, embodies the role of tragic white victim of Aboriginal brutality. She can also be seen as a stand-in for all of the white women in the Far North who fell victim to the hardships of colonisation. This is despite the fact that the brutality seems mainly to have cut the other way, as this quote from an article published in *The Monthly* magazine shows:

> In 1881, a massive pastoral boom commenced in the top half of the Northern Territory, administered by the colonial government in Adelaide. Elsey Station on the Roper River – romanticised in Jeannie Gunn's *We of the Never Never* – was the first to be established. These were huge stations, with an average size of almost 16,000 square kilometres. By the end of the year the entire Gulf district (an area the size of Victoria, which accounted for a quarter of the Territory's pastoral country) had been leased to just 14 landholders, all but two of whom were wealthy businessmen and investors from the eastern colonies.
>
> Once they had taken their lease, landholders had only three years to comply with a minimum stocking rate. By mid-1885 all 14 stations were declared stocked […]. At least 600 men, women and children and babies, or about one-sixth of the population, were killed in the Gulf Country to 1910. The death toll could easily be as high as seven or eight hundred. Yet no one was charged with these murders. By contrast, there were 20 white deaths, and not a single white woman or child was harmed in any way. (Roberts 21-27)

This is not to say Aboriginals didn't murder white women. As a child the author Rosa Praed "lived on the property next to the Frasers, who were killed by Aborigines at Hornet Bank in 1857, and her father Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior led the subsequent ferocious retaliations" (Buckridge 30). What interests me is that we have the names of the women killed or who have died due to Aboriginal involvement, but not the names of the Aboriginal women who have died, or been murdered. With the Frasers, for instance, we know their names, the date, and where and how they died. After the Fraser deaths, and after the bodies of Mrs Watson, her child and servant were found, retaliations began. No name of those retaliated against – how and where – exist in so clear a fashion as the names, times and places of the deaths of the Frasers or Mrs Watson.

Not only is Mary Watson's tank on permanent display in the Queensland Museum, but the fountain erected in her memory in Cooktown is listed on Queensland's Heritage Register, overseen by the Queensland Government's Department of Environment and Resource Management. The criteria for making the Heritage Register are listed in the Queensland Heritage Act 1992, and *Criterion H* calls for proof of 'importance in Queensland's history' (n.p.). The corresponding detail fulfilling the monument's requirements of *Criterion H* is that, 'It has a strong association with Mary Watson, and serves to perpetuate the legend [and mythology] of her death.' ("Mary Watson's monument") It is the ongoing perpetration of the myth and legend of Mrs Watson that I became interested in.

The entire story of Mrs Mary Watson is also contained on the same Queensland Government Departmental website, and describes how the:

> monument was erected in 1886 by the citizens of Cooktown to honour Mrs Mary Watson, who perished, along with her infant son and

> her Chinese employee Ah Sam, from thirst and exposure on one of the islands of the Howick group, northeast of Cooktown, in October 1881.
>
> Mary Watson's tragic death reverberated through far North Queensland. To her contemporaries, she epitomised the self-sacrifice of countless women who were helping to 'civilise' the bush, and her youth, her brave struggle to save her infant, and the sad little journal she kept until the end, created an additional pathos and sense of the heroic to her story which captured the public imagination. ("Mary Watson's Monument")

I remember the effect of seeing Mrs Watson's tank on museum visits during my primary school years. The power contained and emanating from that awful tank is concentrated to such a point that the container seems to completely overshadow all the shelves and cabinets of Aboriginal dilly bags and message sticks. Visually, it's the same now as it was then. There is nothing on show in the museum to counteract the impression that the tangible experience of white women was worse than the experiences of Indigenous women.

I think Xavier Herbert, on his travels through Far North Queensland to Darwin and his eventual writing of *Capricornia*, heard of Mrs Watson and was similarly haunted by the one-sidedness of this story. As Frances De Groen tells us in *Xavier Herbert: A Biography*,

> By 1927 […] Herbert was planning an ambitious novel along the lines of an Australian *White Cargo* and needed to experience the far north at first hand to study the condition of the Aborigines […]. The experiences, yarns and social history Herbert accumulated on his travels during 1927 and early 1928 nourished romances for the *Australian Journal* and an

> unpublished novella, dating from the same period and emerged later, changed utterly, in *Capricornia* […]. (51-52)

I take it as a given that Herbert knew of Mrs Watson's story and added it to his collection of yarns and social history even if he has never referred to her directly. I think the reason for this is because Mrs Watson dead, unlike in life, is unassailable. She has become, after death, a heroine whose story is never to be tampered with.

Xavier Herbert, in a 1984 interview published in *The National Times*, introduced me to the second woman making up my triangle.

> One particular thing in the Kimberleys – the pearling industry, which was established in Broome, I think they had some Portuguese people there, they were the master pearlers. They used to go up into the Kimberley country and steal young gins, and they used to take these girls and used to work them as skindivers. Of course, they used to rape them too and when they got too pregnant they used to chuck them overboard. (29-30)

I have forgotten when and where I became aware of Herbert's statement. I have known of the story for well over a decade. Suffice to say this image of the drowning pregnant woman/women affected me greatly – just as greatly as the story of Mrs Watson did when I was a child. I was reminded of the original Xavier Herbert statement because the journalist Alan Ramsey referred to it in a newspaper article written in the weeks before the Rudd government's official sorry to Australia's Indigenous people. But Ramsey's use of editing throws a slightly different cast over the affair. Alan Ramsey writes:

> Before he died in November 1984, aged 83, Xavier Herbert gave an interview in central Australia in which, during 3 ½ hours, he talked of

> the widespread practice in Australia's north and north-west of what he called 'gin-rooting', as well as boasting of having been, as a young man in the 1920s, 'the biggest gin rooter around' […]. I [Alan Ramsey] know this because I was the paper's fill-in editor that month. I recall vividly an interview, recorded by the Alice Springs and ABC broadcaster Dave Richards, that was often as confronting as it was rambling. [*Ramsey then goes on to quote Herbert*], "One particular thing, in the Kimberleys. The pearling industry was established in Broome and the pearlers used to go up into the Kimberley country and steal the young gins to work as pearl divers. Of course, they used to rape them, too, and when they got too pregnant they'd chuck them overboard. (33)

Ramsey leaves out Xavier Herbert's stated fact that the pearlers were Portuguese to promote the view that the aggressor/aggressors were generically white. I assume he does this so white Australia can't turn round and say it's the Portuguese who need to say sorry, not us.

Xavier Herbert also seemed to change the story as he saw fit. On the Radio National Book Show of the 1st of January 2010 the book under review was Herbert's *Capricornia*. The show used archival material along with standard interviews with scholars and other experts. The show utilized another recording of Xavier Herbert talking about *Capricornia*:

> Ah, it was just a book about the Aboriginal question, the raw book as I knew it. My early experiences in the Territory – I got mixed up with pearling and all sorts of things on the north coast – they used to steal Aboriginal women in those days, you know: more for fun than anything else. The usual thing was, you know, the Aboriginal would lend

> you his woman, sell his woman to you, hire her out. And curiously enough, the men who used to hire them used to get annoyed at this. They thought it was indecent. So they used to annoy blacks by… they'd hire them you see, especially if you had a boat, pearl-fishers, and they used to up anchor and shift out with the girls on board. They never stole them for good – who'd want to steal women like that for good? Then you'd put 'em off somewhere else, you see? And everyone would be running round ants. ("Australian Classics: Xavier Herbert's Capricornia")

"Put 'em off somewhere else…" In the water? Down or up the coast? The location is nowhere to be found. Xavier Herbert is also more implicated in the disgraceful acts by this statement – he positions himself as one of the pearlers, which begs the question: could Herbert have man-handled a pregnant woman overboard?

And now I can answer the question I raised earlier about why the machine I use to go forward is constructed on the bodies of women. I think this machine exists because I am a white writer and one of the reasons I am writing is because I don't want to be like Xavier Herbert and leave any ambiguity about whether a woman/women existed or not. The slippery details given and then taken away by Herbert are a shocking indictment on how he felt he could use these people's lives.

Against the shifting story of the woman/women thrown overboard, Mrs Watson's story has remained static. In fact the only part of Mrs Watson's story that has ever been questioned is the reason for Aboriginal aggression towards her in the first place.

In *Cruising the Coral Coast*, a handbook for those who enjoy boating, is the following quote:

> Until recently the motive for the aborigine's attack on Mrs Watson was vague. It took a group of young film makers to unearth the real reason. In 1972-3 a group of documentary film makers headed by Peter Marjason camped for five months on Lizard (Island). During their stay they climbed the mountain and discovered rock formations which suggested some form of early aboriginal ceremonial grounds. After sending their information to museum authorities it was confirmed that it was indeed of religious significance and that women could not be tolerated near such sacred ground. Mrs Watson had to go.
>
> Perhaps the most amazing facet of this find is that no one in the past had discovered it. I, myself, have climbed that mountain without seeing anything remarkable as have countless other yachtsmen and fishermen. (291)

What Lucas is questioning here, perhaps subconsciously, is the veracity of the evidence establishing why Mrs Watson was frightened off the island. Lucas implies that the island contains nothing of significant value and Mrs Watson had every right to be there. This is despite the *Reader's Digest Illustrated Guide to Australian Places* telling us "Aboriginals visiting (Lizard Island) for many thousands of years […] have left extensive shell middens as a reminder of their long term presence" (469). Lucas seems to have unknowingly stepped over these most recognizable leftovers of Indigenous lives in his rush to get to the top of the empty island's mountain.

The two images, Mrs Watson and her infant son and the pregnant Indigenous woman/women, both white and black lost at sea, can be seen to be almost an inverse of each other. But while Mrs Watson has had her tank conserved and displayed for over a hundred years and a fountain erected in her memory, there is nothing built or remaining

of the pregnant indigenous woman thrown overboard. There is nothing beyond Herbert's differing statements to suggest something happened. The woman/women thrown overboard has had to suffer the double indignity of being abandoned twice: first by the brutality of man, and second by the lack of care shown by officials and historians in not looking for evidence, or acknowledging the crimes, or memorializing those un-named women.

This bothers me because I too believed the information found in a diary. As I write in *State of Origin*:

> I wait until she goes shopping. I enter her and Ron's room and riffle through her papers in her bedside drawer looking for the information about my real family. I find a small diary buried at the bottom.
>
> There on the very last page are two sentences.
>
> 'The nurse said David's birth mother was 13 when she gave birth,' says the first sentence.
>
> 'David's hospital bracelet has him named as Mark Fields,' says the second sentence.
>
> Mark Fields.
>
> My real name is Mark Fields, and my birth mother was thirteen years old. (83)

I believed my birth mother was thirteen years old and it wasn't until I received my original birth certificate that I found my birth mother was thirty years old when she gave birth. I am not trying to cast complete doubt over the information found in Mrs Watson's diary, just enough to unsettle the story from being so unimpeachable.

The ‘call for facts’ is one of the weapons used by people who would prefer a far less brutal looking and sounding history, or by those who feel we need to move past this violence so people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can get on with the business of living. Or, as Peter Sutton states, “One of the ways in which sympathetic liberals have not served the Indigenous community well has been their tendency to believe that the politics of compassion do not require expert or statistical evidence, or not much of it” (5).

Or its literary equivalent in this dialogue between guests at a meal at a salubrious Perth residence, in Robert Drewe’s 1976 novel *The Savage Crows*:

> Crisp’s eyes fixed on the silky oak’s swaying wind chimes. ‘For that matter it was popular among the graziers to distribute typhoid infected blankets to the Aborigines in winter – a neat trick which saved valuable bullets and carried off the women and children with much more approbation.’
>
> ‘What bullshit,’ Oakes said. ‘Typical left-wing propaganda based on legend and heresy but with no facts to back it up.’ (99)

The problem with proof when it comes to Indigenous issues is that, when found, it can be dismissed out of hand, giving the impression – ‘damned if Indigenous people do, damned if Indigenous people don’t’.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson interrogates the findings of the High Court’s decision not to grant land rights in “The possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision” and quotes Justice Callinan’s lengthy determination. Callinan stated that the Yorta Yorta’s case was disadvantaged by:

> Loss of traditional knowledge and practice because of dislocation and past exploitation; and, by reason of the lack of a written language and the

> absence therefore of any indigenous contemporaneous documents, the need to rely extensively upon the spoken word of their forebears, which, human experience knows, is at risk of being influenced and distorted in transmission through the generations, for example, fragility of recollection, intentional and unintentional exaggeration, embellishment, wishful thinking, justifiable sense of grievance, embroidery and self interest. Anthropologists' reports, which also relied to a large extent on transmitted materials were liable to suffer from similar defects as well, in this case, as his Honour held, as some lack of objectivity ordinarily to be expected of experts […]. (para 14)

So no diaries exist, spoken word histories are inadmissible, and anthropologists' reports fail because they can't be trusted. What can – *how* can – Indigenous lives and stories be marked as existing or having existed for the purpose of establishing any rights or claims if all manner of transmission can be thus discarded? This is the state of convenience that Macintyre and Clark interrogate in *The History Wars*:

> The revisionist condemnation of academics engaged by Aboriginal history is also patronising. When (Keith) Windschuttle accuses them of 'white vanity' and presuming to 'play God', he dismisses the significance of Aboriginal memory. His view is that 'Aboriginal oral history, when uncorroborated by original documents, is completely unreliable, just like the oral history of white people'.
>
> Just like the oral history of the white people? Historians have relied on memory ever since Thucydides drew on his own recollection and the recollection of others to relate the history of the Peloponnesian war. No-one recorded the speeches given by the Athenian leader Pericles

> on the values and aspirations of his city-state, and the version given to us by Thucydides is an early example of oral history. Would Windschuttle have us set this oratory aside as uncorroborated by original documents? If so, he would leave a gaping hole in western tradition of civic patriotism. The same is true of the New Testament gospels: all of them are products of oral history. (45-46)

So while word of mouth histories and memories are so disallowed it is interesting to then find that such rejection fails to be applied when the violence is seen to be occurring the other way, i.e. black on white violence – as with this online excerpt from the Western Australian Museum's *Wrecks of the Kimberley Coast*:

> The 27-tin Swan was a wooden cutter, built in Fremantle in 1875 for Isaac Doust of Cossack. The vessel sailed from Beagle Bay on September 2, 1883 with a cargo of water for the Lacepede Islands and Mail for King Sound. Aboard was the owner with a crew of five Aborigines. The vessel struck unfavourable north-westerly winds and was driven out to sea. Doust tried to land at two places along the coast but was driven off by local Aborigines on each occasion. It was October 18 before the crew finally made their way into Darwin. After repairing the Swan, Doust set sail for Cossack but he and his vessel did not survive the voyage. The cutter struck a reef off Cape Londonderry near Stewart Island. The five crew made their way back to Beagle Bay but Doust was not with them. It was reported at the time that he had been murdered and thrown overboard by one of the crew. In July 1884, four of the men were arrested but the case was never proved and Doust's body was never recovered. (2)

Here the reader starts to believe innuendo. The rumoured murder of a man is presented by the Western Australia Museum as something akin to fact.

I started these essays with the image of the zebra crossing and of the idea that the white planks non-indigenous writers put down over Indigenous stories are placing these white planks over solid territory is if with a road leading surely from one place to another.

I have come to realize over the course of writing *State of Origin* that Indigenous stories are far more tenuously located than this earlier image allows. I have also come to realise that Indigenous stories can suffer the fate of a vanishing trick. This tenuousness is one of the reasons I didn't abandon the writing of *State of Origin*.

Reading the article about the murder of my foster brothers' sister gave me a reason to persevere with my writing. I did not grab the article and think goody-goody this will look great in my memoir. I wanted to remember the girl who came looking for her brothers. I wanted to remember the brave girl who really did go on a hunger strike. Sasha isn't a cog in my memoir writing machine – her story became one of the main reasons why this machinery was built in the first place. I know an Indigenous writer should have written her story; I know I am unfairly advantaged in terms of education in comparison to my foster brothers – after all, I didn't have to run away; but I couldn't take the chance her story would be lost to time like the story of the woman/women thrown overboard. I know her name, some of the places she occupied, and the place and time of her death. I never want her to be forgotten.

The job I set myself was to remember the death of a girl I knew to exist – Errol and Lindsey's lost sister Sasha. Unlike Herbert's woman/women thrown overboard, whose existence can't be verified by any form of official data, I can draw on my own true memories and place her story into a larger narrative. The charge that Behrendt and

Watson level at Louis Nowra – that he failed to discharge his moral responsibility to report the confessions of sexual abuse he heard to the police – is a charge, to my mind, that could also be leveled at Herbert for holding onto the horror of the murdered woman/women. Failure to remember Sasha's story in *State of Origin* would allow this charge to also be leveled at me.

The third woman in my writing machine comes courtesy of the writer Robert Drewe and his novel *The Savage Crows*, which draws on real life events and the written words of G.A. Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Tasmania in the nineteenth century. Drewe writes:

> I came to the realization that in the person of Truganini stood the blueprint for the larger tragedy of her people. She was the daughter of Mangana, who had been the chief of the Bruny people, giving way to Wooraddy as he reached middle age. Her mother, Mangana's first wife Thelgelly, I discovered, had been stabbed to death by white settlers before her eyes. Her elder sister, Lena, had been raped and carried off by sealers to the islands in the straits. While a young girl Truganini had been the intended wife of a young warrior, Praweena. Wishing to return to Bruny from the mainland (Tasmania) one day, the young lovers and another warrior, Progenna, were offered a ride across the channel by two sawyers (timber-cutters) known to them, Watkins Lowe and Paddy Newell. In mid-channel, Lowe and Newell threw the males overboard and dragged Truganini to the bottom of the boat. As the natives swam to the boat and grasped the gunwales, the whites chopped off their hands with their hatchets. The helpless men waved their arm stumps and drowned before Truganini. The Europeans were free to do as they

> pleased with her. Such were her first encounters with our civilization. (93-94)

The story of what happened to Truganini acts in the manner of a 'scientific' control to which the other two women, Mrs Watson and the woman thrown overboard, are compared. What happened to Truganani is proof that terribly brutal actions were deliberately aimed at Indigenous people, on the land, and on the water. If it is ever proved that pregnant women were never thrown overboard, then all I have to do is visit the third point of my triangle, where Truganini lives, to support my case for telling my foster brothers' sister's life. What is interesting is that most people know of Truganini as supposedly being Tasmania's last full-blood Aborigine. This supposed fact stands in front of the horror in the boat. There is no monument to the helpless men thrown overboard on or near Bruny Island.

Xavier Herbert ends his novel *Capricornia* with the dreadful death of a woman and her baby. Herbert turns the woman/women thrown overboard into a character whose end comes about because of a tragic chain of events and not because of horrifying viciousness. Herbert writes:

> Norman, spluttering with laughter, went across to the stock-tanks to drink. He was drinking from a trough, when he was startled by the sudden appearance of two crows that swept up from out the broken tank. Then he noticed fluttering from the rim of the tank a piece of rusty blue cloth. He stared. The cloth fell limp, fluttered, fell again. Dry grass rattled against the iron. Dry wind moaned through rust-eaten holes. He stepped up to the tank and peeped through a hole. Nothing to see but a rusty wall beyond. He climbed the ladder, looked inside, saw a skull and a litter of bones. He gasped. A human skull – no – two – a small one and

> a tiny one. And human hair and rags of clothes and a pair of bone-filled boots. Two skulls, a small one and a tiny one. Tocky and her baby! The crows alighted in a gnarled dead coolibah near by and cried dismally, "Kah!-Kah!-Kaaaaah!" (448)

This image of the dead black woman and child in *Capricornia* dampens much of the moral outrage experienced by the reader because their deaths are accidental, and not because of a man coming towards her with the intent of murder. The death of Tocky and her child is simply a tragedy. Herbert has, in effect, watered down this image.

There is no proof beyond supposition, but I think Herbert knew of Mrs Watson, and upon hearing of the pregnant woman thrown overboard found himself with two stories that were untouchable, albeit for different reasons. Mrs Watson couldn't be directly referred to, as she was a Queensland icon who had a monument dedicated to her in Cooktown's main street. I think Herbert reversed this also, in a cruelly obscene parody. Herbert writes in *Capricornia*:

> Krater evidently lived for Black Velvet. He waxed eloquent when he talked about it. He said it was actually the black lubras who had pioneered the land, since pursuit of them had drawn explorers into the wilderness and love of them had encouraged settlers to stay. He said that a national monument should be set up in their honour. (11)

The story of the pregnant woman thrown overboard was so repellant to a contemporary audience that it could not be told, as Herbert states in *Capricornia*:

> "I don't like this Black Velvet business. It makes me sick.
>
> […]
>
> Do you know that if you dare write a word on the subject to a paper or a magazine you get your work almost chucked back at you?

> I wouldn't be surprised. Why shouldn't such a disgraceful thing be kept dark?" (73)

It is my hypothesis that Herbert was haunted by both the story of the woman/women thrown overboard, and the death of Watson and her baby, and he completely reversed the image, down to both women having died of thirst in water tanks – Mrs Watson's cauldron having been a ship's water tank in the first place.

The story of women in the water has had a final incarnation in the 2009 Baz Luhrmann film *Australia*. The name of the English thoroughbred horse is called Capricornia in homage to Xavier Herbert and the final scene, where Tocky's body is found in the empty water tank, is reduced to a side story where an Indigenous woman drowns in a full water tank leaving her child to be raised by the wealthy, white, English property owner played by Nicole Kidman.

The story of Mrs Watson has travelled to the other side of the continent and stands in for the pregnant woman/women thrown overboard because there is nowhere to go with a story of this particular horror – the image of a pregnant woman deliberately thrown overboard is just too brutal. Herbert hears of this story of the woman/women thrown overboard, but can't do anything with it, so he reverses the story of Mrs Watson into an Indigenous woman and child in a water tank who die of thirst. Then, over time, this story is taken and turned into a small side story in the film *Australia*, where Daisy drowns in the water tank.

The release of *Australia* also brought Marcia Langton and Germaine Greer back in conflict with each other, after Langton wrote an article pertaining to the film's positives:

> In his fabulous hyperbolic film Australia, Baz Luhrmann has leaped over the ruins of the 'history wars' and given Australians a new

> past – a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching. At its centre are two forbidden love stories: one a romance between the English Lady Sarah and the Drover, and the other, which carries the film and all its historical and social subtext, is the love of the lady Sarah for the mixed-race boy, Nullah. […] Luhrmann brings these events to life with gusto and emotion, responding to the persistent concerns about the nation's past and how it should be represented. […] This adventure into the soul of the nation succeeds with powerful cinematic craft, passion and humour. (12)

Germaine Greer responded in an article titled "Strictly Fanciful":

> The scale of the disaster that is Baz Luhrmann's Australia is gradually becoming apparent. When the film was released in Australia in November it found the odd champion, none more conspicuous than Marcia Langton, professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University, who frothed and foamed in The Age about this 'fabulous, hyberbolic film'. Luhrmann has 'given Australians a new past,' she gushed, 'a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching.'
>
> Myths are by definition untrue. Professor Langton knows the truth about the northern cattle industry but evidently sees as her duty to ignore it, and welcome a fraudulent and misleading fantasy in its place, possibly because the fantasy is designed to promote the current government policy of reconciliation, of which she is a chief component.
>
> Reconciliation is the process by which Australians of all shades forgive and forget the outrages of the past and become one happy nation.

> State and federal governments have pumped money into reconciliation and created a new class of Aboriginal entrepreneurs who accept the values of the property-owning democracy and are doing very well out of it. Luhrmann's fake epic shows Aboriginal people as intimately involved in the development of the lucky country; the sequel would probably show Nullah setting up an Aboriginal corporation and using mining royalties to build a luxury resort on the shores of Faraway Bay. (11)

Marcia Langton doesn't want to hear any more horror – she has had enough. It is as if Langton and Clendinnen have, from different routes, come to the same conclusion: "the picture of relations between black and white in this country must not be made too bleak" (Clendinnen, *True Stories* 80). Langton's earlier response to white infringement in her article titled "Greer Maintains the Rage of Racists", likening "Racism and highly evolved strategies" to "a virus", highlights her political state of mind and her exhaustion (20).

It is as if Langton is trying to find another strategy to stay strong.

Langton then responds in an article titled "Why Greer is Wrong on Australia":

> The expatriate's criticism of Baz Luhrmann's film is historically inaccurate and betrays contempt for the first Australians by consigning them to perennial victimhood. […] Her attacks on me are partly in response to my own review of the film in *The Age*. I was senior consultant to the television series *First Australians* and worked with often distressing historical records for almost seven years; nine months after the apology to the stolen generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, I was thrilled with Luhrmann's compassion and good humour, and his visionary way of overcoming the guilt complex that poisons our

> national debate, and, as we have seen, Greer's view of her homeland and Aboriginal people. (11)

Langton is saying, "enough with victimhood – we need positive stories", suggesting that Indigenous people need stories and myths to uplift them. That to stay focused on the foul and dreadful things that have happened, that Indigenous people all know about, is to maintain the atmosphere of victimhood that Indigenous people need to be freed from.

Langton has made me realise that Indigenous people know all about the past, and what happened, that it is the non-Indigenous who don't, or need the constant reminding. The constant trawling through past horrors is mainly for the benefit of the non-Indigenous – it is still all about Whites and their guilt.

The juncture where fiction intersects with history, allowing a space for the unspoken to speak, while also making allowances for an ability to move beyond horrific happenings, is best seen in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This novel and its reception represent another reason why I continue to stand by arguing for my own presence in the Indigenous stories contained in *State of Origin*.

Morrison's *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who killed her own child to stop her daughter having to live a life of slavery. Morrison gives voice and memory to a dead child, and presents this dead child come back as a young woman to invade the world of the living. Morrison gives the dead a voice but also shows the price that is paid when the living immerse themselves, and remain lost, in the past.

Morrison also makes explicit that narratives dealing with the lives lead by slaves are written in the blood of those yoked. It is the protagonist Sethe's job to make ink for her white owner. Morrison dedicates *Beloved* to the "Sixty Million and more", the number Morrison uses to represent slavery's victims. Despite the controversy raised in

the implication that slavery's sixty is much more than the Jewish Holocaust's six million, these amounts also raise the question about the unknowable number of this continent's Indigenous victims, of whom the women/women thrown overboard represent just a few.

In her acceptance speech for the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award Morrison said:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300 foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to. ("Melcher Book Award acceptance speech")

I never considered *State of Origin* to be anything like an alternative memorial for the unknowable Indigenous dead. I'm not that presumptuous, or suffering delusions of grandeur (I haven't since I thought I was royal), but I do want it known that I found myself on a journey looking for my brothers and that I got too far along to turn back. This journey allowed me to discover, like Morrison, wherever you go in this country there *is no suitable memorial or plague or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby* dedicated to the lives lost as a result of past government practices. There's no bench in the north of Western Australia for people to stop and remember the woman/women thrown overboard. There is no bench at that point in the road where I saw a girl get out

of a car and look round for her brothers. The moment I knew I couldn't turn back from documenting my search was when I discovered the way my foster brothers' sister died and remembered her strength on the day she came to visit all those years ago.

Essay Three: ***I subsume the girl's story into my own***

"Who owns the past?" Inga Clendinnen asks in her essay "The History Question". She answers, "In a free society, everyone. It is a magic pudding belonging to anyone who wants to cut themselves a slice, from legend-manufacturers through to novelists looking for ready made plots, to interest groups out to extend their influence" (65).

I am one of these people cutting a slice of this magic pudding. This is my second helping. The first was with my novel *Fantastic Street*, where I detailed the genesis of my large unconventional family. Except for the part where I arrange the murder of my stepfather (the happy ending), the stories I drew on were all as true as I remembered them. Just that one deliberate falsehood, the arranged murder, allowed the space for me to label the entire package as fiction. I did not have the same anxieties about appropriation of other people's stories with *Fantastic Street* as I do with *State of Origin*. In *Fantastic Street* I reveal things that happened to my sisters for which I didn't ask permission. I thought disguising these family stories under the cover of fiction was my get-out-of-jail-free card.

The author Alex Miller tells us:

> Fiction wears a mask, it is a dance of the imagination and intuition. History is a scholarly discipline and aspires to the lofty ideal of detachment. Both serve the ends of civilisation. Both, in their ideal state,

> are products of what Inga Clendinnen has called ‘a high literary art.’ They might be sibling rivals, or loving brother and sister on occasion, but neither claim the exclusive right to speak for us of the past or of the truth. The past belongs to all of us […]. (7)

What Miller says resonates with my own writing practice but I want to remove the mask so that I don’t make the same mistake as I did with *Fantastic Street*. Fiction performs a service, imaginatively and intuitively, by allowing alternative ‘realities’ for the reader to ponder. But fiction also disallows true investment for the same reasons. Fiction elevates the author above the story – if the work is good the reader marvels at the clever writer and his or her power of imagination. History and non-fiction writing have the writer embedded on the same level as his or her subjects. The author is never better than the subjects they are writing about. Miller sees the subject in a different way, one that fails to take into account the position of the writer:

> I see the novel as a kind of unofficial history. It is not history in any formal or rigorous sense, and it does not set out to be history in that sense, or to nudge historians from their path. I know of no novelist who claims to write history and of no historian who claims to write novels. The novel, however, is often a kind of unofficial history of our culture. The story of the intimate and the private lives of us. The novel as the story of the interior and the unrecorded. Often it is the story of lives and experiences that leave little or no textual record, no documentation for the scholar to base his or her arguments on. The novel is often also the history of the so-called losers rather than the powerful ones. The novel is often, though not exclusively of course, the voice of those unremarked woman and men who slide into the dark and leave scarcely a trace of

> their passing. But we all leave some trace, no matter how slight, and it is often this trace that the novelist goes in search of. (6-7)

Miller's notion of fiction wearing a mask, and fiction acting as unofficial history, fails to acknowledge the power structures and imbalances informing the mask maker.

Of all the terrible scenes in Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, it is the final scene of the woman and child's bones being found in the empty water tank that is the worst. These deaths are presented to the reader as an unfortunate and tragic chain of events: the woman and child ended up in the water tank because of bad luck, not as a direct result of a racist enterprise.

Herbert does not or cannot imagine reprisals from the local Indigenous population, furious at the injustices that lead to the tragedy. This is in stark contrast to the reprisals meted out to the local Indigenous population upon the discovery of the bodies of Mrs Watson and her baby: i.e. fiction does not *have* to dip its pen into history – or rather probable history, in this case.

But still, if Herbert had not written *Capricornia* I wouldn't know about the woman/women thrown overboard. For me, it is only because of Herbert that the spectre of this woman/women exists.

But this is what I now realise – Indigenous people have known all along of the types of horrors that struck their people. This 'we' who don't know about the woman/women thrown overboard, is the non-Indigenous.

So the act of non-Indigenous writers writing the Indigenous experience can be seen as another link in the chain that supports the whiteness paradigm: non-Indigenous writers writing for non-Indigenous readers in a constant game of catch-up where the non-Indigenous and Indigenous never find themselves on the same page, and where the

catch-up never moves beyond the terrible atrocities. The sense of frustration from some Indigenous quarters is palpable. Marcia Langton likens this propensity to focus on visceral horror, experienced by Indigenous populations, to Jean Baudrillard's 'War Porn':

> The way images from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and other 'consensual and televisual' violence were used in the aftermath to September 11, 2001[…]. The worst is that it all became a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power. The scenes are the illustration of a power, without aim, without purpose, without a plausible enemy, and in total impunity. It is only capable of inflicting gratuitous humiliation. (1)

What could be deemed worse is when these stories of violence are subsumed into something else, or used to support a white man's fictitious tale-telling as with Xavier Herbert and his novel *Capricornia*, or Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*. This is the terrible price Langton, spiritually exhausted from all she has seen and heard, has allowed herself to pay for wanting stories that Australians can invest in positively.

The question of how my writing contributes to these debates is difficult to answer. Embarking on the search for my foster brothers, without knowing what I would find, meant my focus would be on occurrences from over thirty years ago which begs the question: who is my creative practice helping, and am I the only one who benefits? I am writing about the Stolen Generation, but after the Federal government's apology, what can I add that could be seen as a positive contribution?

I was aware of these questions from the beginning and needed to acknowledge them each step of the way.

Clendinnen asks, ‘who owns the past’ and Miller answers, ‘The past belongs to all of us’. This is the question and the answer, but Clendinnen makes the question a battlefield with no demarcation of the battlelines, while Miller dissolves the potential argument by being magnanimous, knowing all the while that the past doesn’t belong to all of us at all. Consider this except from the 2007 edition of *Writing: Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing*:

> Before Alex Miller began writing his Miles Franklin award-winning novel *Journey to the Stone Country*, he was invited by his friend and the main character of the novel ‘Bo’ (fictionalized name) to visit his homelands. Miller was then given the story by ‘Bo and Annabelle’ (whose relationship the novel is based on) and it was suggested that he write the book. Miller did so with the understanding that he’d only publish the novel if they were completely happy with how the country and people were portrayed.
>
> Miller’s research and understanding of Indigenous lives was based on a friendship with Indigenous people and spending time on country with ‘Bo and Annabelle’. When he returned to his home in Victoria he maintained regular contact with his friends in Northern Queensland. On completing the novel, Miller sent the entire manuscript to ‘Bo’ for feedback. Approval of the text was granted over the phone and all those represented in the novel are reported to be delighted with the final product. (Janke 7)

The freedom of non-Indigenous writers to appropriate is what Indigenous commentators rail against, but for different reasons to Clendinnen's. Clendinnen seems to have few qualms about the taking of stories but wants a clear demarcation separating the serious writers (historians) from the not serious (writers of fiction). Some Indigenous commentators have called for the non-Indigenous to cease altogether, with a few exceptions.

The Indigenous author and historian Jackie Huggins states in Anita Heiss' discussion paper *Writing about Indigenous Australia*, that she believes that white writers can in some instances write on Aboriginal themes citing "an historian at the University of Queensland, Ray Evans, who writes in a way that […] is very acceptable, and very hard-hitting" (4). Huggins also makes the distinction between works of fiction and history:

> I think in order for us to educate other people, particularly students, especially at universities, we need those qualities. But I don't think the same degree [access to Indigenous stories] should be given with writing fiction and stuff. It seems like they all feel that "'If they didn't nobody else would'" and I find that very patronising as well. And that they're doing us a favour. (4)

I understand and agree with Jackie Huggins's statement, as there is something always self-serving when I write. I want to be published, but I also wanted to find my foster brothers. In the process of writing I also realised I wanted to mark the passage through life of my Indigenous brothers' deceased blood sister so her story wasn't lost like the stories of the woman/women thrown overboard. I took this on as a duty.

But whose duty is this? White people caused this girl's premature death and now here I am, another white person, coming along and involving myself in her affairs,

again, without her permission. The anger of Indigenous people at non-Indigenous writers congregating round their stories is perfectly understandable, but still I persist.

It can be argued that I am still doing what Xavier Herbert and Baz Luhrmann did: I subsume the girl's story into my own. I take and use her story as permission to go forward and to give importance to my own.

Most of what happened to the children forcibly taken from their families would be new to Indigenous readers. It is probable that my viewpoint is stale to the people who I'm writing about. The duty I set for myself was to try and reveal, in a different way, the stories I have been privy to from a non-Indigenous stand-point. I realise I can be summed up as just another uninvited presence at the table feeding on Indigenous stories. So the fear is not on performing/writing the act, but on being discovered engaged in the act.

But even if this image of the uninvited feeder is true, I stubbornly hold onto the idea that my presence at the table is worth something, that I did process and recalibrate the relationship with my foster brothers, and that I did remember a young girl with guts. Guts I assumed were lacking in my own character, but now feel otherwise.

After proposing that history making has become a free for all, Clendinnen then takes a particular swipe at fiction writers in her essay "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?" stating:

> it is that confusion between the primarily aesthetic purpose of fiction and the primarily moral purpose of history which makes the present jostling for territory matter. Some readers might think that my 'ravine' – the gulf between writing imaginative fiction and writing evidence-bound history – is no more than a dint in the topsoil, or

> possibly only a line scratched in sand by historians desperate to defend their territory. (34)

My focus on this argument Clendinnen makes against fiction writers straying into the realm occupied by historians is related to my use of fiction writing techniques in *State of Origin*. My creative non-fiction writing is implicated because despite presenting *State of Origin* as memoir I am well aware of the fictional techniques utilised in an effort to forward the narrative.

As a child I knew nothing of the Romanovs, or Ava Gardner. I was not a sophisticated child and had little interest in history other than my own. I do remember fantasising I was descended from the British royal family. A fantasy that was given short shrift when I realised how physically unattractive the British Royals were. Prince Charles as a father? No sir.

Clendinnen rails at anyone engaging with historical representation claiming any sort of authenticity. Clendinnen takes particular umbrage with Kate Grenville, the author short-listed for the 2007 Booker Prize for *The Secret River*, her novel dealing with contact between early invader settlers and Aboriginal people along the Hawkesbury River. The novel evolved from research Grenville was performing on an ancestral convict figure who had been transported to Australia.

Clendinnen, quoting Grenville on the process of writing *The Secret River*, writes in the *Quarterly Essay*:

> Then came the passage which must have annoyed every historian who read it. Asked where she stood on the history wars, Grenville said she was up on a step-ladder, looking down on the historians battling away below […] about the details of exactly when and where and how many and how much, and they've got themselves into these polarised

positions '… *but a novelist* [Clendinnen now using italics to highlight the sections where she has taken particular umbrage at Grenville's argument] *can stand up on a step-ladder and look down on this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set up two sides against each other and ask which side will win… or you can go up on the stepladder and look down and say, well nobody is going to win.* […] *Once you can actually get inside the experience, it's no longer a matter of who's going to win, it's simply a matter of yes, now I understand both sides…*

The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. How will she do that? [Clendinnen asks] *Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me?'"*

"So here we have it" [Clendinnen mocks] "Grenville's secret method for penetrating British minds – although not Aboriginal ones, which must remain forever closed to us – is Applied Empathy: the peculiar talent of the novelist to penetrate other minds through exercising her imagination upon fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence." (20)

Clendinnen goes on to explain that, "Unlike fiction-writers, historians must keep their emotions bridled by intellect. It is because of that bridling that they have more chance than any novelist of penetrating sensibilities other than their own" (36).

Clendinnen would prefer to see fiction writers and creative non-fiction writers relegated to aesthetics; interior decorators who are only allowed to construct decorative

arrangements of pretty words between the walls of history as erected by historians. But unlike historians, fiction and creative non-fiction writers can work with the stories not sufficiently supported by official records.

For me, questions are raised as to what is lost when historians limit themselves to official documentation and recordings made and kept in various institutions. For a variety of reasons, mainly for their illegality, a million horrific incidents have never been officially documented and so have to be disappeared due to lack of evidence. What is left is what Clendinnen calls “fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence” (20), and these incidents fall into the ravine between “writing imaginative fiction and writing evidence-bound history” (34).

I think these fragments are worth salvaging from the ravine of unverified history, if only to counteract the propensity of the whiteness paradigm optimistically denying horrors such as the woman/women thrown overboard from happening in the first place.

Without constant vigilance ‘whiteness’ will always re-install itself as the default position, as can be seen occurring in this quote from Inga Clendinnen in *True Stories: History, Politics, Aboriginality*:

> Not all white institutions have been inimical to black interests. For example, right across the North, in a classic colonial paradox, Aborigines became the main custodians of the introduced animals which had usurped their land. The early cattle industry could prosper only because of its low-paid or unpaid black labour. In return Aborigines were able to stay in close contact with their country, receiving basic clothing and equipment, tobacco and rations for themselves and their closest kin, and perhaps as important, learnt some new and exciting skills. (80)

The paradox in Clendinnen's example pivots between two opposing views – on the one hand Aboriginal land was stolen to raise cattle, and on the other, Aboriginals became adept at caring for these animals. Clendinnen's paradox is not a balancing act between the supposed 'good' against the perceived 'bad' for, in the end, whiteness validates whiteness.

Consider what Xavier Herbert said about the men working in the pearling industry (an industry established as the same time as the cattle industry) and the woman/women thrown overboard, and compare his concluding image with Clendinnen's 'raft of exciting new skills'.

Clendinnen's patronising 'exciting new skills' obscures the cruel reality of unacknowledged abuse – a reality not supported by official documentation.

This so called paradox, as Clendinnen labels it, halts any further sustained enquiry into what is lost and what found. In fact these historical events were a simple act of swapping – with one hand we take your land and with the other give you exciting new skills. The naming of this as paradox has the effect of making the reader/the citizen feel the case is closed.

Whiteness always has to keep the upper hand and the building of paradoxes is one of the tools used to keep the jury out.

The relegation of oral history – story without factual evidence, myth and legend – to the too-hard basket has real ramifications, as in the case of the Yorta Yorta decision where the High Court ruled:

> Tradition, myth and legend are often indistinguishable, but mere existence of the latter, in the sense of a fictitious narrative, or an unauthentic or non-historical story, however venerated by repetition, will not suffice of itself to establish native title rights and interests possessed

> under traditional laws or customs claiming a relevant connection to land. (Moreton-Robinson 5)

Noel Pearson, the Indigenous author, politician and commentator responded: "indigenous people now face an unrealistic and inflexible burden of proof to meet 'white Australia's cultural and legal prejudices about what constitutes 'real Aborigines'" (Moreton-Robinson 7).

Indigenous stories are under attack from all sides. First, as Windschuttle states, if stories can't be substantiated then they are 'completely unreliable' (Macintyre 45-46) or reside in Neverland like the pregnant woman spoken of by Xavier Herbert. Secondly, even if substantiated they can be dismantled and still found wanting, just as the anthropologists' findings were dismissed as being corrupted in the Yorta Yorta decision. But it is the third attack that is the most insidious, more so than the obvious outrages, and one that every non-Indigenous writer needs to be aware of if dealing with Indigenous subject matter.

My fear as a writer of creative autobiography is not whether it is right that my written story contains Indigenous subject matter, but whether I inadvertently lapse back into forgetfulness, a racist strategy, to propel my work forward. This lapse in memory, or selected forgetfulness, can also work to do as Clendinnen requests and not make the picture of black/white relations in this country seem too bleak, or refocus the bleak as an emanation from the Indigenous side. The problem is that in trying not to, whiteness is reinstalled as the default position.

Whiteness is reinstalled as the default position as soon as we take for granted our right to be there with pen in hand. The idea that Kate Grenville can extricate herself from whiteness's 'ties that bind' and elevate herself on a ladder over the battles going

on below is a delusion. Grenville is saying she is capable of becoming objectively omnipotent, as if she is some all-seeing god.

Within my own writing practice I strive to remain aware of how I'm positioned socially as Cowlishaw understands positioning (68), or at least I hope I do, and I try to interrogate my own creative work critically. Of course there are many areas where I am probably blind, or where I completely, and inadvertently, misstep my position. An integral part of my writing process is stopping mid-way over the zebra crossing I create out over my Indigenous foster brothers' story, to stare down at the whiteness at my feet and try and decipher what the whiteness is made of. Is it just little bits of ground-up mirror casting back a fragmented image of self? Yes. To interrogate my own whiteness has always been my strategy, but I don't believe I will ever successfully see the entirety of whiteness effects.

I become just another white person stealing stories the moment I enter my foster brother's house and start compiling a mental inventory of his belongings and conversations. I stop being a guest and start being an intruder. I continue this behavior in the car with my surveillance of his responses to the family photos, and my commitment to memory of his every physical response at the family reunion.

And do you know what? I couldn't help it. I was on the hunt for a story. Half of me was celebrating and crying at every emotional moment, while the other half mentally computer-logged who said what, when and why, and who wore what, and who sat where, etc, etc.

I delayed the start of the search for my foster brother for three years while I grappled with the guilt over what came first – myself as a somewhat suspect brother, or myself as a somewhat suspect writer – knowing that I wanted to write about each stage of the process, and that I wanted to do it properly and without offence. The fact that I

intended to write about the search gave me reason to pause – for three years I waited while I grappled with fears that I could be charged as just another example of a 'white' appropriating black stories.

Maybe the best I can do is admit to this behavior.

The writer position I consider most resembles my own is that in Chloe Hooper's true crime text *The Tall Man*, where the author admits to nothing but her own ignorance to do with Indigenous issues.

Hooper's *The Tall Man* investigates the history and fallout of the death of Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island while in the custody of Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley. Hooper acknowledges that she knew very little of the politics involved in Indigenous issues and states that before she met Andrew Boe, the Burmese-born criminal lawyer representing the Palm Island Aboriginal Council, "I had never heard of Palm Island" (9).

The reason Hooper uses to justify her presence in this story is that "Boe wanted someone to write an article about the proceedings" (9).

In writing *The Tall Man*, Hooper was seemingly ignorant of the anxieties surrounding non-Indigenous writers dealing with Indigenous stories: at the same time as never having heard of Palm Island she had also never heard of the issues regarding appropriation, and she resisted reading the list of books and articles Boe recommended to give her some understanding of the goings-on on Palm Island.

But then Hooper performs the perfect sleight of hand, and presents Boe: "an elegant, monk-bald figure with glasses, and a tattoo on his bicep in Burmese that meant 'freedom from fear'"(9). Boe removes her from the decision-making process of whether or not she has any right to be on Palm Island in the first place by educating her: "We have to use our freedoms and privileges to see what respite we can give to those less

equipped to deal with their challenges" (9). The meaning of Boe's tattoo seems to encompass Hooper, protecting her from any self-doubt about trespassing.

Boe is the sanctifying 'other' in *The Tall Man*. He plays the same role in the text as Anton Chekhov plays in Nowra's *Bad Dreaming*, ('A writer must be objective as a chemist […] he must know that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones') and Gail Jones' use of William Shakespeare in her novel *Sorry*. Greer positions herself as dual international 'other' and Australian, while Miller is 'other' because he is Scottish. Each writer uses the presence of the 'other' to deflect accusation.

What is interesting with Hooper's *The Tall Man* is how ignorance about Indigenous issues is worked to her advantage: "When I was at school in the 1980s we never learnt about Aboriginal history, but somehow we picked up basic facts. We knew that land was central to Aboriginal identity, that they saw themselves as inseparable from the land. No land meant no Dreaming, and no Dreaming meant no identity, no meaning" (56).

To a white readership Hooper stands in for the uninformed. She claims to know as little as the next person and offers the reader a level of comfort in entering this story because the author is no smarter or more educated in the ways of the people she is writing about than they are. This is a perfect example of Spivak's sanctioned ignorance, the idea that "One can perfectly well not talk about something because one doesn't know about it" (291).

The problem for *The Tall Man* is that Hooper's positioning of herself as an interested, ignorant white person, fails to stop her restricting the case to being an anomalous one of frontier law, one without national implications. Hooper's position also fails to stop her from making outrageous comparisons between police violence directed at the Indigenous populations and that meted out to the non-Indigenous.

Hooper describes meeting a young white man who showed her photos of his bruised body and recounted the brutal treatment meted out to him and a friend when they found themselves on the wrong side of the law in the Gulf country: "'I had welts all over me, man, he got me everywhere,' John said. But this was the way of the world, the way of the frontier. He didn't report the incident. 'You're not going to win against police,' he told me – meaning, not even if you're white" (262).

This bruised white man should have no place in this narrative as this image of him works to re-sanction ignorance for the reader; his presence suggests this form of violence can happen to anyone, and that colour plays no factor.

Interestingly, Chloe Hooper's self-positioning as someone with little knowledge of Indigenous lives and affairs was never questioned by Indigenous commentators. Perhaps it is Hooper's professed ignorance that protects the work from the kind of analysis experienced by both Nowra and Greer.

There are many paradoxes in dealing with Indigenous affairs. Langton is one who can be seen to have identified certain problematic paradoxes, and rather than be stuck dealing with recrimination and blame, searches for a way forward out of this never-ending maze. Langton has pinpointed for me that those who benefit the most from playing this roundabout game are the non-Indigenous intent forever to view Indigenous lives as a titillating ongoing reality show.

Ironically, the closest a non-Indigenous writer has come to exploring the issue of the pregnant Aboriginal woman/women thrown overboard is the romance writer Di Morrissey in her 1995 novel *Tears of the Moon*. The story is told in third person by a woman who discovers a cache of documents pertaining to her true Indigenous heritage, which leads her to Broome, Western Australia. The romance is bracketed by this woman's point of view, but the bulk of the narrative concerns the story of the white

heroine Olivia Hennessy, who in the 19th century migrated to Western Australia and fell in love, the back cover tells us, with "the dashing pearling master, Captain Tyndall."

Morrissey writes:

> When the Aborigines were ready to work […] [s]ome dived off the lugger into a depth of three or four fathoms, resurfacing with several shells.
>
> Tyndall watched the work with satisfaction. 'They're natural divers but they were terribly abused in the old days,' he told Olivia. 'Twenty, thirty years ago the early pearlers, well, the more unscrupulous ones, used to virtually kidnap the natives and make them work their guts out diving for shell. Women, too. In fact the women were said to be better than the men at underwater work.' He paused, then added with a raised eyebrow. 'Not that they did all the work underwater.'
>
> Olivia was shocked. 'How terrible it must have been. Why didn't the authorities stop it?'
>
> 'Well they did. At least they passed a law in Parliament, but while the arm of the law is long, it has trouble reaching some of these parts.' (134 -135)

Morrissey doesn't shy away from the fact that Indigenous women were abused, but the revelation is lessened when Morrissey unshackles the laws and the lawmakers from any blame by outlining the supposed Parliamentary laws, thus alleviating any potential white reader guilt.

As is the way of the romance novel, and before they can be forever united, the lovers are forced to endure a series of set-backs. One of these set-backs is the relationship Captain Tyndall develops with Niah, the feisty Macassar woman whom he

rescues from the slave trade. The woman who tells us these stories is descended from the child born from this union.

What is interesting about this scenario is that Niah, her child safe with extended family, is recaptured by Karl Gunther, the slave trader of 'other' origins (it takes a German to be cruel), and escapes from him by throwing herself overboard in an action that ultimately leads to her death.

I argue that this mother of the child born of the union between the pearling master and the rescued Macassar woman is Morrissey's newly minted version of Xavier Herbert's woman/women thrown overboard, albeit with a happy ending, because Morrissey, in this act of story telling, has salvaged the child/children from the watery grave.

What is better? For the pregnant woman/women thrown overboard to have floated into view in a sweeping historical romance, where the discovery of the narrator's Indigenous forebears plays second fiddle to the romance between Olivia Hennessy and the raffish Captain Tyndall, or, for these women/this woman to remain completely lost from view until a more appropriate vehicle can be found to explore the matter of their lives?

Because, for all of this romantic froth, Morrissey does offer a way forward – Morrissey allows these women/this woman the chance to have descendants. The awful finality of a pregnant women/woman disappearing beneath the waves is alleviated by the idea that they/she may have left behind real flesh and blood, that something of these women/this woman survived, which is an idea I hadn't fully considered. Till reading *Tears of the Moon*, I had imagined these women/this woman completely dead and buried.

But, because this idea of progeny is embedded in a romance novel, a genre designed for little more than light entertainment, I'm still not sure if the outcome is vaguely obscene. The story of the woman/women thrown overboard is still subsumed to further the needs of the romance novel. Whiteness is continually re-inscribed. But perhaps *Tears of the Moon* can be viewed in much as the same way as Marcia Langton views Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*; let me bastardise Langton's review to show what I mean:

> In his [her] fabulous hyperbolic film[novel], Baz Luhrmann [Di Morrissey] has […] given Australians a new past – a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching. At its centre are two forbidden love stories: one a romance between the English Lady Sarah and the Drover, [the English Olivia Hennessy and the pearling master] and the other, which carries the film and all its historical and social subtext, is the love of the lady Sarah for the mixed-race boy, Nullah [is the love Olivia has for Maya the mixed race child born from the union between the Captain and Niah].
>
> […]
>
> Luhrmann [Morrissey] brings these events to life with gusto and emotion, responding to the persistent concerns about the nation's past and how it should be represented. (12)

I would like to think, however, that there are more honorable ways to remember the woman/women thrown overboard. I would not like to hear that the life and death of my foster brothers' sister was used to forward the narrative of a romance novel.

CONCLUSION:

What I've sought to do in these three essays is to locate and separate the different issues that affected my creative writing practice. The danger of interrogation is it can turn into self-attack, self-loathing, and other self-sabotaging behaviors to the point where the work is abandoned. In attacking my own creative practice I have engaged in all of these behaviors and also came close to putting the project aside. I have also engaged in re-inscribing and re-sanctioning ignorance to allow myself room to deal with my foster brothers' stories. The benefits of the interrogation, however, in hindsight far outweigh the disadvantages, in that I now view my relationship with my foster brothers in a much more clear and honest light. I also think this process of self-investigation was the permission I gave myself to continue.

An integral part of my continued writing, beyond the process of self-interrogation and the need to find my foster brothers, was the story of my foster brother's blood sister. I wanted this woman's story to be told, not only because I am a part of the dominant culture that took this child, but also because I met her when we were children and I remembered her bravery. I didn't want this memory to be lost, and I wanted to honor her strength, resilience and courage, in the face of nearly unbeatable odds, to find her brothers. Her story also acts as a sobering counterpoint, throwing into stark relief the differences between her life-threatening need to find her brothers, against my weaker ones, complicated by project-based curiosity.

This is not a damning prognosis on curiosity. A writer needs to be curious. For all my transgressions into other people's lives I am proud of this memoir. Before my mother left my father I had a good childhood. Like every healthy child I climbed trees, swam in creeks, played imaginative games, fought and made-up, drew pictures and

learnt to read and write. My brothers were my brothers, and my sisters were my sisters. Mum was Mum, and Dad was Dad. Hindsight is a fine thing, but this family environment seemed completely valid to me, and I am sentimentally happy about the bulk of my childhood experiences up to the age of twelve.

Perceptions of Indigenous disadvantage and persecution have changed considerably during my lifetime. From Stanner's perceived cult of forgetfulness (25), to Nowra's *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children*, to Greer's and Langton's fight over relevance, and the Clendinnen/Grenville fight over who is best qualified to interpret the landscape of Indigenous lives, the non-Indigenous writer has continued to stubbornly give his or her reading of Indigenous lives and concerns.

It has only been in the last decade of the twentieth century, and the first decade of the twenty-first, that non-Indigenous writers have felt the need to pause, or to be seen to be taking pause. This pause can be seen to be partially in response to the Indigenous attack on Phillip Gwynne, the author of *Deadly Unna?*, and the film interpretation *Australian Rules*, and partly in response to the zeitgeist of the times, when questions about appropriation were at their loudest. This situation then developed into the call for cultural protocols: ground rules for those non-Indigenous writers preparing to write about Indigenous experience. It also raised awareness where non-Indigenous writers could get a sense of Indigenous anger over the issue of appropriation, and where I personally felt the sting in Melissa Lucashenko's quote, "Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people? If it wasn't Aboriginal people themselves, I suggest you go away and look at your own lives instead of ours. We are tired of being the freak show of Australian popular culture" (qtd. in Heiss 10).

Gail Jones' thank-you to relatives and their nostalgia on the acknowledgements page of her novel *Sorry*, is exactly the same as my own acknowledgement that I had a good childhood to the age of twelve. The non-Indigenous can afford nostalgia and sentimentality over a past that had dire ramifications for Indigenous people. This cannot be helped and it would be dishonest to rewrite history to show a less rosy picture of my upbringing. I also think that Jones' acknowledgment of her family's nostalgic memories of Broome and it's surrounds is correct because it is honest and doesn't shy away from the fact that these nostalgic memories came at a price paid by the nameless, numberless people, such as the woman/women thrown overboard.

This reading of mine fails to take into account the existence of Indigenous nostalgia and sentimentality. My reading so far seems to indicate that Indigenous people don't have any, and I don't mean this, but Marcia Langton, with her strong support of the Baz Luhrmman film *Australia*, does seem to suggest there is a dearth of happy stories for Indigenous people to invest in. Langton writes: "In his fabulous hyperbolic film Australia, Baz Luhrmann has leaped over the ruins of the 'history wars' and given Australians a new past – a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching" (12).

Arguments about who can tell Indigenous stories can be seen to have come full circle – from the film *Australian Rules*, to the film *Australia*. The Indigenous voices that rose up in anger at the perceived injustice of Phillip Gwynne's foray into Indigenous stories with *Australian Rules* remain silent when Marcia Langton tells us that Australians, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, need new myths and positive stories to encapsulate Indigenous stories, even if they are fanciful. Langton tells us that she has worked for years dealing with 'distressing historical records' indicating that she has had a gut-full of the truth, when the truth is more than frequently bad.

Greer continues to argue the other way: that the truth should always be paramount, highlighting the fact that Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic commentators are still not on the same page. This argument runs parallel to the argument going on at the same time between Kate Grenville and Inga Clendinnen as to who is best qualified to write actual lived experience. Clendinnen's ire was raised when Grenville, unshackled by the historian's reliance on historical documents, claimed a broader view of the cultural landscape because of her abilities as a fiction writer to enter empathetically into the hearts and minds of people rumoured to exist.

State of Origin is situated somewhere in the middle of all these arguments which informed my writing, in ways I could not have predicted when I first lifted the phone receiver to contact the Cherbourg Police Station. Despite the anxieties informing these arguments, I am glad that I wrote *State of Origin* within this climate. The process did do as Czeslaw Milosz predicted – it did destroy my family story, but another more honest version arose to take its place.

My response to Melissa Lucashenko's question, "Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people?" (qtd. in Heiss 10) is that no one asked me. My writing is an exploration of myself, and what makes me me, while also showing the advantage I gained simply by being born white. I visited my memories of my childhood, in which my foster brothers play a part, to work out where I stood in terms of my being able to use the word brother. With my foster brothers I recognize that I have transgressed into their stories, and I have to resist the urge to qualify these transgressions. Errol said he didn't want anybody to write about him, and I've left his statement in *State of Origin* as evidence of my transgressions (133), and I can't be the one to judge.

Hearing my foster brother say my name for the first time in nearly thirty years, and then clarify that I was still his brother, is something I will never ever forget. That

moment is one of the most beautiful moments in my life and writing about it clarified all the issues that had previously caused me anxiety.

The other moment that made me realize I was too involved to retreat from writing *State of Origin* was the discovery of the newspaper article that told me what had happened to my foster brothers' sister. As tragic as her death was, I recognized that I had been a witness to her strength, and writing about her ensures that I've done everything I can to stop her ending up in the same unsubstantiated place where the woman/women thrown overboard reside.

I can't help but wish for the story of my foster brothers' sister to be remembered in the same powerful way that Mrs Watson's story is remembered. I think my foster brothers' sister was just as brave, courageous and resilient. The story of my foster brothers' sister embodies the worst aspects of the process of child removal, in that she didn't survive the ramifications. But this story is about how she fought back and won her battle to see her brothers.

When I completed *State of Origin* I went to Queensland to show my foster brother the manuscript and to explain to him that this memoir was about whether I had a right to call him brother. I wanted to tell him that this memoir is more about white privilege, and how this affected everything in our family when we were kids.

My foster brother had gone again, the boomerang was missing from the front window, and a different man answered when I knocked on the front door. This man said he'd signed the lease two weeks previously and taken over an empty flat. My foster brother's mobile continually fails to connect, and his sister, the one who gave me his mobile number, has also moved without leaving a forwarding address. Errol must have returned to Palm Island to buy a boat to be skippered by his younger brother. Perhaps his surviving sister is there with him.

Works Cited:

"Australian Classics: Xavier Herbert's Capricornia." *Radio National Book Show*. ABC. 1 Jan. 2010. Radio.

Australian Rules. Dir. Paul Goldman. Beyond Films, 2002. DVD.

Behrendt, Larissa, and Nicole Watson. "Good intentions are not good enough." *The Australian Literary Review* 2 May 2007: 22-23. Print.

Buckridge, Patrick. "Roles for Writers: Brisbane and Literature, 1859-1975." *By The Book: A Literary History of Queensland*. Ed. Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007. 13-72. Print.

Byrnes, Paul. "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith: Curator's Notes." *Australian Screen*. National Film & Sound Archive. Web. 15 Aug. 2011.

Cathcart, Michael, and Kate Dorian-Smith, eds. *Stirring Australian Speeches: The Definite Collection from Botany to Bali*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004. Print.

Clendinnen, Inga. *True Stories: History, Politics, Aboriginality*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2008. Print.

---. "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?" *Quarterly Essay* 23. Oct (2006): 1-118. Print.

Cowlishaw, Gillian. "Racial Positioning, Privilege and Public Debate." *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism.* Ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004. 59-74. Print.

De Groen, Frances. *Xavier Herbert: A Biography*. St Lucia.: University of Queensland Press, 1998. Print.

Drewe, Robert. *The Savage Crows*. Sydney: Collins, 1976. Print.

Gone With The Wind. Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939. DVD.

Greer, Germaine. *On Rage*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press. 2008. Print.

---. "Strictly Fanciful." *The Age* 17 Dec 2008: 11. Print.

Grenville, Kate. *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text, 2006. Print.

Gwynne Phillip. *Deadly, Unna?* Sydney: Penguin, 1998. Print.

Gwynne, Phillip. "The Rules of Engagement." Interview with Keith Austin. *Sydney Morning Herald: Spectrum* 16-17 Aug. 2008: 26. Print.

Hanson, Pauline. "Maiden Speech: Wake Up Australia!" Parliament of Australia. Senate. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* 208, 10 Sept. 1996. Print.

Heiss, Anita. "Writing About Indigenous Australia: Some Issues to Consider and Protocols to Follow: A Discussion Paper." *Australian Author*. Australian Society of Authors, 2002. Web. 2 Feb. 2008.

Herbert, Xavier. *Capricornia*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956. Print.

---. "The Last Words of Xavier Herbert." *The National Times* 18-24 Jan 1985: 19-20, 29-30. Print.

Hooper, Chloe. *The Tall Man*. Hawthorn: Penguin, 2009. Print.

Janke, Terri. *Writing: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing.* 2nd ed. Australia Council for the Arts, 2007. Print.

Jones, Gail. *Sorry*. Sydney: Random House, 2008. Print.

Kelly, David. *Fantastic Street*. Sydney: Picador, 2003. Print.

Illustrated Guide to Australian Places. Sydney: Reader's Digest, 1993. Print.

Langton, Marcia. "Faraway Downs Fantasy Resonates Close to Home." *The Sunday Age* [Melbourne, Victoria] 23 Nov. 2008: 12. Print.

---. "Greer Maintains the Rage of Racists." *The Australian* 19 Aug. 2008: 20. Print.

---. "Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show." GriffithREVIEW: *Re-imagining Australia*. 19 (2008): 1-6. Web. 5 June 2010.

---. *'Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television…'*. North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993. Print.

---. "Why Greer is Wrong on Australia." *The Age* [Melbourne, Victoria] 23 Dec 2008: 11. Print.

Lander, Christian. "What I Know About Women..." Interview by Alexandra Carlton. Sunday Life Magazine. The Sun Herald [Sydney, NSW] 16 Jan. 2011: 26. Print.

---. *Stuff White People Like*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008. Print.

Lucas, Alan. *Cruising the Coral Coast*. Hong Kong: Horwitz, 1976. Print.

Macintyre, Stuart, and Anna Clark. *The History Wars*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2004. Print.

"Mary Watson's Monument." *Department of Environment and Resource Management*. Queensland Government, 2011. Web. 24 Aug. 2011.

Miller, Alex. "Written in Our Hearts: Truth in Fiction and History." *Radio National Book Show*. ABC. 30 Nov. 2006. Radio.

Miller, Patti. *The Memoir Book*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007. Print.

Milosz, Creslaw. "Writers' Quotes." *writersservices*. Web. 25 Jun 2009.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1936. Print.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. "The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision." *Borderlands e-journal volume 3. 2* (2004): 1-9. Web. 25 May 2011.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, ed. *Whitening Race*: *Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Canberra: Australian Studies Press, 2004. Print.

---. "Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation." *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism.* Ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Canberra: Australian Studies Press, 2004. Print.

Morrissey, Di. *Tears of the Moon*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.

---. "Melcher Book Award Acceptance Speech." *Unitarian Universalist*. 12 Oct 1988. Web. 23Aug 2009.

Neill, Rosemary. "Inconvenient Truths." *The Weekend Australian Review* 27-28 June 2009: E6-7. Print.

Nowra, Louis. *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children*. North Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2007. Print.

Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona. "Some Whites Are Whiter Than Others: The Whitefella Skin Politics of Xavier Herbert and Cecil Cook." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors* (2007): 157-173. Print.

Ramsey, Alan. "Weasel Words Won't Hide Monstrous Shame." *Sydney Morning Herald* [Sydney, NSW] 2-3 Feb. 2008: 33. Print.

Roberts, Tony. "The Brutal Truth." *The Monthly* Nov. 2009: 21-27. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271 – 314. Print.

Sutton, Peter. "The Politics of Suffering." *The Australian* 5 June 2009: ALR3. Print.

Walker, Alice. "A Letter of the Times." *You Can't keep a Good Woman Down*. London, Women's Press. 1983. Print.

"Welcome Germaine, but would you kindly tell us when you're going home." Editorial. *The Australian*. 15 Aug. 2008: 20. Print.

Wrecks of the Kimberley Coast. WA Museum (2008): 1-5. PDF file.

Wright, Alexis. "A Question of Fear." *Tolerance, Prejudice and Fear*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008. 129-169. Print.