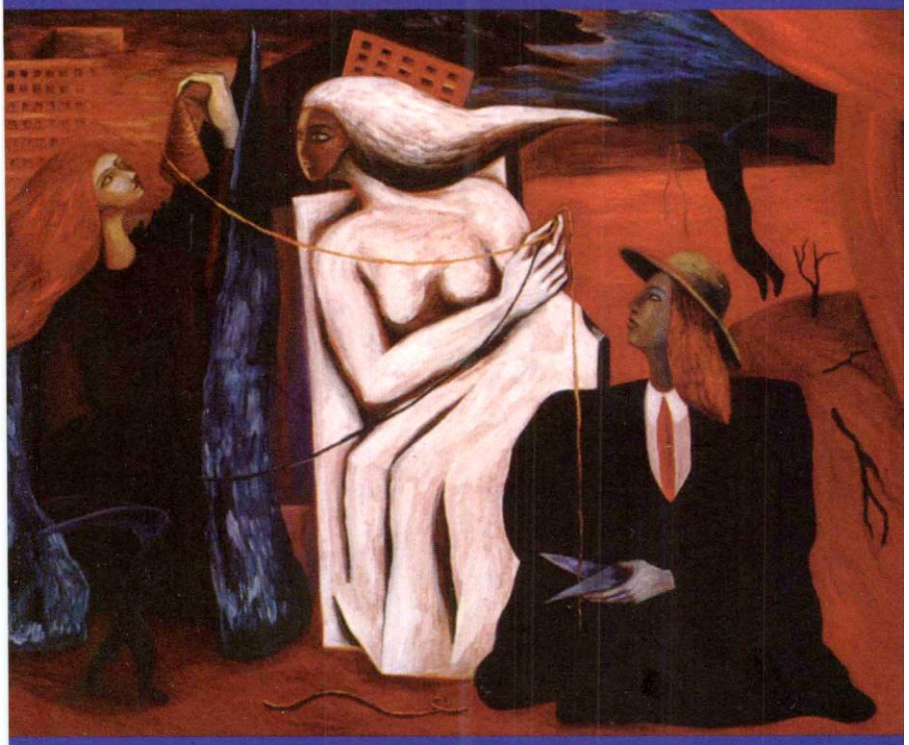
The Office as a Boat

A C H R O N I C L E

Moya Costello



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A CHRONICLE

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To Francis Bertram Costello — in one aspect of his shifting subjectivity, a hero of office work.

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This, Sir, is a very different story from that
of the earth's moving round her axis...

Laurence Sterne THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY

Whose opinion are you burrowing into as if it were real instead of
just one window into a room with a thousand windows?

Barbara Wels FINWOOD AND LISA

Before commuting, Isabel knelt in front of the framed holy card of Gabriel the Archangel, the patron of communication workers; it nestled, along with a posy of fresh flowers and a candle, on an occasional table. At this shrine she practised a number of karate katas, then drove to work in her Chrysler Valiant.

Casey headed for a small walled garden in her backyard to stretch and meditate on a triangle of peppermint lawn. She drove her ute.

Audrey and Susan listened obsessively for the weather details on morning radio, becoming impatient with news items like the outbreak of another war, which delayed the weather forecast, because they needed to know how to dress for the day.

Audrey's house was a fortress on a hill; grills on the doors and windows matched the surrounding fence, high enough to make it impossible to climb, but open to make it easy to see the carnation beds. Audrey had started out her working life by arriving early at her work in her Rover, and she would never change her objectives on the morning of a working day.

Susan left home in a cloud of perfume, after carrying a kiss from her lips via two fingers to the belly of the goddess statue by her front door. She drove to the office in a Porsche. 'A pretentious Volkswagen,' Lou said. Because of its red leather interior she felt she was driving to work in a winged womb.

In her city apartment, Lou fell groggily out of bed to sit huddled over the kitchen table with a cigarette and a cup of instant black coffee. Her Kingswood was parked out the front. Her lifestyle superseded all information regularly dispersed in

the community about the effects on one's health of the unchecked consumption of salt, sugar, fats, alcohol and tobacco.

I could have travelled to work by bus, but on that morning I wore a tutu to the office. I had bought the tutu for the express purpose of wearing it to the office. I left everything in motion: the top left off the shoe polish, the dirty dishes in the sink, the milk on the bench.

'I like women who don't sweep away the cobwebs,' Nell said. Women who leave them suspended, free-floating from the cornices, clinging to light fittings. Though Nell was tidy, a Trotskyite of domesticity — she believed in a continuous clean-up — she also did what she could to preserve wildlife. Nell fed her hoard of animals, but particularly the squawking ducks at the back door. She had a four-wheel drive.

Verity packed her lunch and headed off in her Mini Minor.

Sarah in her cottage watered her garden before rates of evaporation undid any possible good. She drove a station wagon.

That morning was like the morning of a holy day, late in a summer that had gone on for too long, when the mellowness of autumn should have been on us.

We all woke and rose from our beds eerily alert and strangely bright.

We travelled to work early, hoping to escape the heat.

We fell into our old habits uneasily, all the while sensing, but not yet believing, that there could be another way.

William Light, the city's first surveyor, dreamed of a canal coming from the city's port, the Port River, on which, at high tide, you could sail right up to the city's heart. Port Road is the remnant of that dream, an arterial road halved by a very wide nature strip — the fledgling canal.

We were waiting for the drought to break. In the long heat, our bodies had softened. We were set loose from our moorings. We were almost floating free.

Equally, we were on the verge of not wanting change. We were prepared to accept the deaths in our gardens and adjust to desert plantings.

Our houses, for the first few days of heat, were a sanctuary. Hot, dry winds blew from the sand and salt lakes of the desert in the north of the state. The city was blanketed in heat for days. The heat built up, and our houses became ovens. Even the normally coolest parts of our houses were hot. There was nowhere to go.

We went into the city to the pictures for relief in the air-conditioning. But the city itself was hell, hot air rising from the pavement, radiating off concrete walls. People slept out on the beaches, all along the long strip of coast which enclosed on one side — the hills were on the other — the narrow corridor of plains. Some slept in tents in the backyard, or slung up mosquito nets and slept under those.

Isabel and Audrey kept their cats and dogs inside. Isabel floated in her bath, a cat, balancing on the mound of her belly protruding above the water's surface, licking the water collected there.

Audrey had central air-conditioning.

Nell put her ducks in the bath and laid herself down with a book on a cotton rug on the polished

wooden floor of her lounge room, underneath a ceiling fan.

Lou found a table at a hotel and sat with whiskey-and-waters to ride out the heat.

Susan kept white wine in the fridge, Sauvignon and Chenin Blancs from the Adelaide Hills, the coolest part of the city, choosing those increasingly paler in colour and more subtle in flavour as the heat continued.

Formerly, to seek solace and refreshment, we would have turned toward our gardens, to the green and the softness, to the damp and the cool, where we would have licked leaves with our tongues and rubbed dew into our skins. Now we turned away to seek shelter and protection, away from our gardens where the clay hardened and cracked, where the mulch was a dry crackle of leaves that hid only dust not a sweet dark crumble, where the white light blinded and the heat burned, where we couldn't lift our heads, where we raised our arms over our heads for protection, where our shoulders drooped.

Sarah struggled to support her garden's increased water consumption, offering, under her husband's alarm, to get a second job to pay for it, to give up

the idea of a trip to the Chelsea Flower Show and the tour, The Great Gardens of England.

When she set herself at home to clean the house on a Saturday morning, she started with changing the vases of cut flowers, but remained distracted there.

From different rooms in the house she gathered up the vases — tall, clear glass and squat, coloured ceramic — and took them out to the garden. In the garden she threw the dead flowers on a compost heap and sluiced the vases clean and refilled them with rainwater from the tank. The detail of what was in flower was highlighted for her as she walked about surveying and discovering with the surprise of forgetfulness some small thing, the pink, musky dianthus, the mauve scabiosa shooting out on a smooth stem above its low, thatched foliage. She cut blooms of contrasting and complementary colour — intuitive and surprising combinations like yellow canna lilies and blue cornflowers or unlikely choices such as valerian, pandora jasminoides, spirea and yarrow in pinks and crimsons — foreshadowing with the length of cut the vase that would house the blooms. She cut foliage — the soft grey-green fur of lamb's ears and the bright golden

green of bamboo — for colour again, but with texture in mind too. It surprised her how flower and foliage sat there together in a vase. The vases full with flowers subtlety changed the ambience of a room. Back in the garden, she fooled herself that she would spend just a minute placing the remaining cut stalks in the compost, but got caught up there in pruning and weeding.

Her husband assessed this activity as a form of addiction, relatively harmless, a religious necessity of hers that, like faith or fanaticism, might be contained but not easily undone, and decided to take on housecleaning as his duty exclusively.

For the rest of us, our gardens had grown ugly, hard and tired. The green no longer looked bright and fresh as in spring; it looked brown and dull. The green no longer soothed; it was accusatory. There was no softness, no moistness. The dull brown-green whipped and split. We watched through our kitchen windows, or stared out from under our verandas as the lawns turned to dust. The dust blew about in the air, drifted under doorways and through windows until we tasted dirt in our mouths and crunched grit in our teeth.

Once we left our houses for peak-hour commuting, the doors closed on all our domestic dreaming. We entered another world, the 'outside', where we stood tall for our journey; we were energised, briefly, with movement. (Throughout the day we would have to crank our energy up.) It was then we felt the polish of our bodies, the newly ironed. We smelled the clean. We were immediately excited by this potential. We were light-headed, giddy; our heads were puffballs, our hearts cotton-wool, as if suffering the recklessness of an indiscretion.

But recognising the seduction of surface gloss, we knew this was too easy. We were used to a day that was timed, ruled by someone, in a series of flexitime sheets and leave records.

Word from Human Resources was that Lou's flexitime records were The Time Sheets from Hell. She flapped them past me on her way to Casey's office. Their surface was textured with intricate calculations for leave for quarter and half days, for continual variations in starting and finishing times, with crossouts with pen and blockouts with corrector fluid.

We had to be somewhere by the time on another clock. In our cars, on the bus, train or tram, we sat in a passivity of shock and disbelief which we tried to hide from ourselves.

The tutu I bought for the office was black.
The first tutu I ever bought was for my daughter, at a community fete. I saw it and wanted it immediately, but thought I'd better check the price first. The woman on the stall didn't realise its rarity and value, as it was the only tutu hanging on the racks — and sold it to me so cheaply a fellow worker was angry at her for missing an opportunity to make a good profit. My young daughter put it on over her street clothes, so as we walked home, people stared and smiled, until she became embarrassed.

The second tutu was again for my daughter.

There were several girls' white tutus hanging on a rack near the entrance of a ballet shop. They were factory seconds, on sale because the cut or sewing was faulty. The shop was in an old arcade. The entrance was narrow. The counter space was narrow. The shop was dark. The ceiling-high shelving behind the counter was full of thin ballet

slippers and pale flesh-coloured tights in plastic bags.

For work I could've gone for suits, shoulder pads, silk blouses, gold jewellery, or smart heels. But I decided on a cool, ambiguous and threatening look.

I put on a black T-shirt over the black silk shoestring tutu top. Under the tutu I wore black tights and Dr Marten's. I bought a black leather jacket and wore it to the office with the tutu. I had my hair cut grimly short.

On a bus I would have to weather a few hand-covering-mouth comments from schoolkids. But I would not have to worry about adults on peak-hour public transport.

Public transport induces passivity. A public but self-contained space carries a modicum of threat.

All passengers want to surround themselves with an invisible shield that they hope will protect them from contact with others. The passengers want splendid isolation, insularity in this public space. Some wear black wraparound Ray Bans, even in winter, and only give them up when forced to mid-season, when the weather makes a July morning bleak. Their heads are full of private reveries, or they're absorbed in their plans for the

day. Commuting in peak hour, they're in a state of shock — as if just covered in freezing water in midwinter — at starting another business day. They avoid responding to any public event, for reasons of personal safety.

I would've rested my bag on my knees and squashed in close to the window in a futile attempt to control the outstanding tutu. But I thought it might be easier to travel to work by rocket backpack. So in the street I picked up the handiest one off its charging pole. I strapped on the backpack, put on my helmet, pulled the cord — and shot up and flew at low velocity, just high enough to clear the traffic.

Commuters pick up dreaming tracks wherever they are. We had several dreaming tracks around the country. They formed part of the thicket of our lives, making branches and shoots, giving texture and density.

Isabel had partied in Melbourne nightclubs: Diamond, Goldfingers, Nemesis.

Casey had hidden with friends and lovers under a four-wheel drive in Darwin's cyclone. 'When we

left Darwin we stayed in Alice Springs for a while on our way to Adelaide. There was a forecast for rain, but it evaporated in the air before it hit the ground. When it rains in Adelaide I go out into it, not to be stupefied by fear of the unknown — a heavy, brief fall when it comes, if it comes.'

Nell had come from the lonely wheat-belt to a medium-sized city — large enough to accommodate adequate human contact, but not small enough to make her feel trapped.

Lou left a rainforest canopy to get away from her family and went south-west to the desert.

The moist, neat, green fields of the English countryside were Audrey's mythical ancestral home, though she'd grown up on the hot, flat, dry, yellow plains of Adelaide.

In Adelaide, my dreaming track was the Anzac Highway, another of the city's arterial roads which headed in and out to anywhere and to a specific place, as the statue of Colonel Light pointed out from the Montefiore Hill, a lookout over the city's fixedness. Light's arm and index finger pointed out to something and to everything, the way his grid plan of the city was the lived experience of its citizens.

On some roads, that came from beyond the hills and over them, the sea could be seen in the distance from the meeting of hill and plain. At the end of the long corridor of bitumen, it gleamed grey-blue, as if there we'd fall into the waters of St Vincent's Gulf, like the ancients believed they would fall off the horizon. To see simultaneously in a line of vision the hills which gave rain and the Gulf waters which formed a harbour was to understand Light's choice of the site of the city.

The hills surrounded us. If we'd lifted that canvas of painted scenery, what would we have found? The rest of Australia, which would have stood for the larger world, the true, the real world, as opposed to this particular city, this artificial creation, this illusion of order within boundaries and purposeful activity with limited scope.

The arterial roads were several: Port, North East and South Road. They were forever attached to Adelaide's city centre, leading immutably in and out, straight and flat, offering no variation or flexibility, no round and about, no up and down, no over and under. They ran horizontally and vertically, and crossed in the city's open squares.

The arterial roads were flat out on the plains before the hills which became like mountains in comparison, and straight like a particular mentality that attached itself to the punctuality of trains and buses, the predictability of weather in temperate zones.

Some of these roads were part of the country's highways, part of the holding together of the nation. They were named and numbered in a hierarchy: Highway One carried its own weight of meaning with the high arch of the H and the round fullness of the O and looped the whole of the island continent, acting like a lasso to capture and tame.

Swathes of bitumen, of stone and gravel, and measured strips of white paint looped and linked, their starting and finishing unable to be pinpointed.

While we were commuting, our heads were like an office window or a computer screen where we played out the vision of a drowning swimmer, and our lives appeared to us as present moments: odd moments from deep in our past appeared, apparently uncalled for.

By providing a long-distance view, a window relieves the eyes locked into the short focal length

of the computer screen. A window permits a particular phenomenon to be observed, or view of another world. A window permits a particular event to be accomplished. A window can be an opportunity, as in a window in space, an opportunity to launch a spaceship to Mars on the shortest possible route. The window of opportunity might be one month in six when the planets are in a particular configuration.

What are we doing when we look out of windows? We change our focal length to look out to something distant, so we can ponder, meditate and dream. We realign our world view, set it within a context.

Isabel thought of continuing to serve her once estranged children who made their money in the fur trade. She wouldn't take money from them; she was a vegetarian and an animal liberationist; she would look after their Siamese and take in stray cats.

Casey wished herself to be on a *chaise-longue* on the patio of a beach house, watching the waves roll in, while she was in fact planning strategy for her next meeting with Barry.

'When I first met Barry,' she said, 'I'd been dealing with men like him for twenty years. He'd been dealing with women like me for twenty minutes. He came up to me at a meeting and apologised that he didn't have his tie on. I must have looked insufferably smug. I think I let out a short, bitter laugh at his concern for things that didn't count, though I had thrown on a jacket myself. He realised his mistake in this unnecessary and entirely misjudged gesture. Anyway, it didn't happen again.'

Nell waited for rain to wash out the Torrens River near our office on the edge of the CBD. In summer it was a still stream in a clay bed, its height lowered by the lack of rain. She waited for frogs to spawn in the river and their potential spawning in the wetlands to be created near the road she travelled to work on.

Audrey would not remember her alcoholic and antisocial son nor her daughter who never saw her but to ask for money, but she thought with bitterness and revenge on her husband who had left her.

Susan checked out the people in other expensive, modish cars, noting the colour and cut of

jackets, the quantity of jewellery and make-up, the style of hair, the placement of the head, the shape of sunglasses, so she could practise and adapt that look of cool disdain and competence. At each successive set of traffic lights she painted a different part of her face: lips, eyelashes, cheeks. In the boot of her car were sets of clean, lacy underwear, pieces of jewellery, non-iron separates and at least two LBDs that could effortlessly transform her from nine to five to after five.

Sarah worked on fail-safe survival techniques for the extensive plantings in her garden: intricate sprinkler systems, methods of composting and mulching.

I usually carried flowers in my bag for my desk at work. I thought of a scene from a different job I had in the past in another city: roses in a box, pale pink, short-stemmed roses in bud, smitten with drops of water perfectly formed as if deliberately placed on the buds, given as a gift between two colleagues.

Scenes from the young life of my daughter passed before me, her energy at that time, that livewire, frenetic energy of play, that wiggly-wobbly squirmy energy, those true emotions expressed in

painfully honest looks and exact words of love, jealousy, anger, sadness. 'Can Dad come and live with me and you?' she asked. I thought of my own childhood and made notes in my journal.

I'd think of arriving at work, where first thing I'd make a cup of tea, fill a vase with water and put the flowers on my desk. I'd begin to think about having morning coffee in the tea-room. Do I have something to say, something to report, like 'show and tell' in a kindergarten classroom? Had I watched something on TV, read something in the newspaper, heard something on the radio? Had something worth mentioning happened in the garden?

Anzac Highway had its totems marking phases of the journey. If I was on the bus and lifted my head from the book I was reading, it was to get my bearings through these totems.

The Norfolk Island pines, standing stark and tall out of the bitumen, somehow more vulnerable than strident about life.

Holdfast Bay, the sign on the bowling club, reminded commuters of seafaring pioneers holding fast to... to what? The sight of land, the safe har-

bour of the Gulf waters, or to rigging in deep waters during a storm.

Further down the Highway, there was a sign for 'the old gum tree', site of the first European landing. Now with all the dignity of a drug addict, injected with concrete, located down an ordinary suburban street. It was a 'comic-book' symbol like re-enactments of landings on days of numeric significance.

The totemic images of McDonald's big yellow M and KFC's smiling old gent were enough to immediately plant me in the present. I was not, in fact, in an enclosed community, but linked irretrievably in sameness with any place anywhere on the planet.

The gardens along the Highway were not tender in intent — no cottage gardens seducing with babies' breath as they did in the backstreets. The gardens were perfunctory, of interest only for unusual individual items: spiraea bush, 'bridal veil', or Queen Anne's lace sprouting as weeds in spring, or kitsch topiaries made on oddments of wire frames that were the debris of domestic suburban life.

The peculiar generalised formality, the coldness, the lack of signature in the front garden betrayed nothing of the likely idiosyncratic cre-

ativity of the backyard where the spirit of place was — for example, a school of ballroom dancing housed in a backyard shed.

The absence of charm in gardens had to do with the lack of character in houses — no bluestone here, nor return verandas, a very few cottages and picket fences, bungalows in dull yellow concrete stucco, some newer town houses lacking passion, blocks of mean flats, and street trees, so unremarkable, unlike the Norfolk Island pines, as not to be located in memory, to be butchered in autumn on order by local councils, as if the Highway forbade desire.

Private hospitals, rest homes, funeral parlours, veterinary surgeries, as well as fast-food outlets, sited themselves prominently on corner positions on the Highway. The 24-hour medical centre rose, on a major intersection, like a phoenix from the 1980s entrepreneurial activity — specifically in medicine, when centres appeared first in Sydney, with chandeliers and grand pianos in the foyer.

The Glenelg tram appeared momentarily, hidden for most of the journey on the Highway, running alongside the Morphettville Race Course, as if it was idiotically in competition with the

horses. The horses, of course, did not appear at peak hour, nor racegoers either, that subculture of chequered hats and sports coats, with newspapers, binoculars and pocket radios, that I might strike once a year as a temporary invasion on the tram as a group of preoccupied, predetermined expressions, like the loud and sunburnt interstate and overseas tourists here for the Grand Prix. I watched other commuters board this Tardis.

Further on down the Highway, someone in a sales outlet for medical supplies regularly dressed a skeleton in the window, reminding Highway trekkers of the city's current obsession: tennis, football or cricket, summer sun or winter rain, the agricultural show or the festival of arts.

The Kelvinator factory was now a toy shop, but the clock was still on its modest tower, reminding the whole of Adelaide, it seemed, of their schooling at the Bay.

Le Cornu's — a palace to home-making, a fortress of retailing — was a monument to a local business family. It was a fact that much of the city was labelled for its famous families — the Bonythons, the Polites — the way a neighbourhood cat marked property and personal space. Like feudal lords would

have, if they had Claude Neon, or the De Medici princes of a small city-state or like graffitists.

The Keswick Railway Passenger Terminal was a forlorn theatrical space where nothing worked, neither the city's meagre suburban railway system nor the national ones, the Ghan from Alice Springs and the Overland from Perth. It was really a place of ghosts made so by governments running down a national rail system for powerful private interests to profit on the road.

The parklands, at a point of dissection, where West and South Terrace met, with plantings as sparse as in the bush but artificially ordered and with an infiltration of car parks, part of a ragged greenness that surrounded the city centre, were peopled, though not at peak hour, with netballers and tennis players, and rallies outside the Trades and Labour Council. An unpretentious rotunda sheltered winos near circular plantings of red and yellow canna lilies left unattended except when cut to the quick after flowering, then manured and mulched.

Small changes in behaviour — random changes, or chaos, being at the heart of matter — would alter our working day.

The traffic would be heavier or not.

Fellow passengers would be the same or different. I followed their lives at a distance, like postcards.

The perfectly groomed saleswoman in black, whom I imagined left the furniture in place in her dust-free house every morning to catch the early bus. The young woman with the flaming red hair, straw hats in summer and velvet berets in winter, in clothes chosen carefully for aesthetic pleasure, (re)making her person(a), her head weighed down in a book as if she was asleep. The office woman with a Bay tan and a gold golf bangle. The moustached man. The man in the Russian fur hat in winter. The three sisters as schoolgirls. The sight-impaired. The vertically-challenged.

Small things, like the detail of fine needlework, would plant themselves in our brains, making up a myriad of tensions that would lie like a network of overhead tramlines over our day, blotting out the sky, the light, encasing our hearts, holding them tight, while we were out there in the world, away from the succour of our homes, our private spaces.

All day at the office, small things would trouble us. What to do when. Whether to have coffee or

tea. When to have it. When to have lunch. What to have. What to say.

We expected any working day to be full of decisions, movements and gestures, full of self-talk about how to conduct ourselves, how to carry things out.

During the day, if we weren't travelling, we'd be dreaming of travelling: on holidays, to another career, home.

We knew we would wait for the appointed time to go home, and hope at least that we could renew ourselves there, so we'd be okay, again, to leave. We had not much more than one meal, an overnight sleep that was usually disturbed, and the condolences offered in small gestures by a loved one.

At the end of the day, we would take our commuter tracks home.

Anticipating meeting the very same people on the way neither saved nor secured but rather unnerved me, as if I was the plaything of the gods and goddesses, having my heart plucked and replaced, plucked and replaced, plucked and replaced.

We reached the CBD: a disparate collection of retail shops — vintage clothing, tobacco and hard-

ware — a Hilton Hotel and Her Majesty's Theatre. The centre of business with its electronic transactions of money, movement of paper, the play of power and the soft rush of air from silk, shoulder pads, business suits and briefcases.

At the city, a phase of journeying, of desire, had ended.

Be careful what you wish for, you might get it. A few years before this job, I had written an entry into my journal, among lists of five- and ten-year life plans; life goals; anxieties; affirmations; dreams and quotes; lists of books to read and items to shop for: 'Live by the beach'; 'Things change'; 'Homelessness'; 'There's no place to stand on Jupiter'; 'We have given away transcendence'; *Female Pirates: The Story of Anne Bonney and Mary Reid*; mirror, venetian blind cleaner, ink cartridge, fertiliser, CD: Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.

The entry said: 'Get a career'.

I forgot about that entry, and later I set my heart on a predictable flow of money that was enough to live on, and time to pursue my own interests.

Be careful what you dream about, it might happen.

Several years before this job, I had a dream in Sydney, where I lived at the time. It was a dream about having a job I'd seen advertised in the paper.

When I had a recurrence of the dream, I could only draw one conclusion, that over ten years ago I had dreamt this job I had now: a job in an office.

The office is a public place where you can't pick your nose, scratch your bum, squeeze a pimple, bite your lip. You can't stand on your head, or nap under the desk. You can't break into a tap dance or *pas de deux*. You can't sing. You can't cry or shout, curse or swear; fall into hysteria or uproarious laughter. In the office, you can't live in the back of your head, the poetic place. In the office you have to leave your dreaming behind, and live in the front of the head where all the analysis is done, where the facts of history, accepted as such, are plotted, where logic operates, where emotion is scantily represented.

Isabel, Audrey and Lou were the original family, the equivalent of the first nations or indigenous people of the office. With the exception of Lou who always arrived as late as permitted, Isabel and Audrey, along with Nell and Sarah, arrived at seven, half-past seven, switched on whatever had been switched off the previous evening — lights, computers, printers, scanners, photocopiers — and sat with their first coffee of the day in the office tea-room, to read their stars in the morning paper, to spread moisturiser on their hands and faces, when the other women arrived noisily.

'Can I see you about something in a minute?'

'Yeah, sure, just let me get settled.'

'Were you in the traffic on South Road this morning?'

'Did you see that movie on TV last night, *Desk Set*, with Hepburn and Tracy?'

They kept the blinds drawn, didn't open windows. They set a water jug in the fridge.

'A ménage à dix,' said Nell of the office. Nell knew of such things. She kept a menagerie at home: doves, ducks and frogs, an owl in a cage and mice in the freezer for the owl.

The public strolled along the Torrens Linear Park in the early morning or evening: people walking dogs or power walking, workers zipping along on bikes. Parents walked kids who waddled alongside or stared, dazed, from a stroller while they were pushed along. Others collected bamboo canes growing on the river-banks, or nasturtium leaves and camellia flowers, and lemons and figs from lone trees that transgressed the boundaries between inner-city residences and parkland and offices, the domestic and private, and the public world.

At grassy turning points in the river, families of ducks had set up home, and through the day swam out along its length. Colonies of water rats mainly kept hidden in the banks; occasionally a lone individual was visible by the thin line of the jet stream from a snout, or the soft but audible splosh of sleek wet brown fur sliding below the watery surface. Frogs bounced croaks off the concrete pylons of the bridge, letting others know about suitable water temperature for spawning. On branches and logs herons stood, doubled in the glassy surface of the river. Foxes skulked after dark

in the bush. Gum blossom provided nectar for honey eaters. Galahs fossicked in the grass. The grass grew and turned yellow. Skinks, further away from the river-banks where the human architecture began, darted with the speed of lightning into cracks in concrete paths and stairs. Concrete blocks expanded. Paint peeled.

Towards the end of my university studies I spent a holiday on a river. Not yet in the wider world of work, I was intense and introspective. A few row-boats were tied up on a small landing. I rowed every day with another young woman, about my age, an art student, and her younger sister. I wrote a poem about the river and gave her a copy.

New world!

I wish I was your old friend.

I do not want to deposit my rubbish on your banks.

You let me drift along your back,

and you proclaim yourself

in silence.

We mucked about in boats. We rowed, speaking now and then, listening to the soft slap of oar in

water, feeling the warmth of the late-afternoon sun and the coolness of a breeze, watching the light, and slid into shadow under willow trees to think about the grace of these trees partly rooted in the solidity of earth and partly in a floating world, their long branches drifting across the surface like the soft touch of a finger on skin, while the water lapped at floating vegetation, at mud, at gnarled root and tangle and thicket, at moss. The smell of rich damp, of spore, of aged, broken and rotting wood filled our nostrils. Think of arriving at Venice by train, stepping out of the station to be confronted by water and water transport, the wonder of it. Stepping away from solidity into a world afloat. Something like opening up a window. Wind fills the sails, the horizon beckons, your sight is set on the distance. Barges and tourist pleasure boats on the Thames; rafts, burials and ablutions on the Ganges; even the Bosporus, a cross between a river, a harbour and an ocean, like a busy highway. On the Torrens there are two small pleasure boats for tourists and performing poets, one or two gondolas, rowboats for competitive teams, and numerous recreational two-person pedal-powered boats.

My growing-up place, the Parramatta River, was salt water, feeding into Sydney Harbour and the Pacific Ocean. On a still night, the smell of salt was in the air. I walked down to the river and sat on its edge, listening to it lap against the sandstone embankment and watching the huge jellyfish, Portuguese man-of-war, pulsate with the flow.

The Torrens spread across the city's centre and the suburbs in a diagonal swoop. The city spread along, around and out from the river like the tracery of blood flow in capillaries and veins.

In the early days of the colony, drinking-water from the Torrens was strained through muslin and still caused diarrhoea and dysentery. In contemporary life, interstate travellers drink only bottled water. Residents see yellow-brown Murray River water coming out of their taps and breathe in a thick whiff of chlorine as the water runs out, like the smell of kerosene in the air near the airport as a plane flies in low to land or climbs to take off.

The rivers of this southern continent exhibit perverse behaviour compared with that of the rivers of the northern hemisphere which sets the

standard, because although the catchment area of a river can be big, its annual flow is still extremely variable. The land is so dry that the first rain runs off and does not soak in. Australian rivers are not reliable or purposeful, and therefore permit the mind to wander.

Most of the major cities are built on rivers — Melbourne on the Yarra, Perth on the Swan, Brisbane on the Brisbane, Hobart on the Derwent, Alice Springs on the Todd which is a dry bed for most of the year where even boats in a race are carried by human legs. Sydney is on the Tank Stream, a thin span of flowing liquid that found its home in the harbour.

The circulation of rivers is the surge of blood in our bodies. The life cycle of the body and the life cycle of the harbour.

A woman had to be a monk not to be caught up in the whirl of office activity and talk.

I had to negotiate my initiation when I came to work in the office.

It was a long time since I'd worked nine to five. I'd left full-time work and turned down

another job to do voluntary work I'd always wanted to do. But by then the economy had permanently changed.

It was a long time since I'd worked for a bureaucratic organisation. It was a long time since I'd worked in the daytime. It was a long time since I'd worked with men.

I'd worked with others before, as part of a small team. But often I was working alone, unsupervised, seeing my coworkers intermittently. There was very little paper work. There was no holiday pay, no sick leave. There were no memos; a few circulars and newsletters, a little personal mail. Once there was a worker's compensation form.

When I began to see coworkers more than family and friends, experienced day-to-day interrelations, the way men worked with women; experienced hierarchies, the slow grind of bureaucratic wheels, wheels within wheels, a superstructure of meetings and expert work groups, committees and working parties, mission statements and strategic imperatives, industrial awards and conditions, time sheets and service records, it was suddenly to be cast in a play whose plot was familiar but whose lines I had forgotten.

On the day I started in the office, the women did what they usually did to celebrate anything — they went to lunch.

I can't say what they thought of me that day. Though I suspected and might hazard a guess. That I would get on with my work.

But I'm already on shaky ground, and much beyond this is wild guessing, pure invention.

The office was very distracting from work.
There were five days a week, from eight to four, nine to five or ten to six, when private habits and personal suffering spilled over into public anxiety, tears and hysteria.

It was possible to be in the office a whole week and not work or do the absolute minimum. A person might be unselfconscious about being a do-little, but she would be found out if she was shillyshallying continuously, if she never pulled herself up short to realise what was happening. And such a woman would be gossiped about — even though those gossiping would have to be doing very little themselves — and she would be summoned to her supervisor who would have heard the gossip and decided to act, lest some permanent unravelling took place.

Gossip was the curette of the office, which many of the women had. Lou used gossip to unglue the office, to make things come unstuck.

With coffee cup in hand, she sidled up to a woman's desk, sat on its corner, cradled her coffee cup in her hands, kept her eyes cast down, as if ritually preparing for a confession.

It was disconcerting to have someone else build up information like honey in a cell. Asking questions, listening, but never revealing anything much. That is the duplicitous nature of the story-teller. The story-teller watches, asks questions, gathers information, invades the privacy of others, who willingly reveal information. But the story-teller never reveals anything of herself.

Lou used to be a journalist. Her by-line was Louella Iago.

We wondered what she did in her own life. She lived her life vicariously, asking people endlessly about what they did. She seemed to eat out all the time. There seemed to be ingredients in her home kitchen to make a cup of coffee and that was all.

She had left her family in the northern part of the country. Here she had anonymity, a suitable milieu in which to have the women tell her their

stories. They didn't know her, had no links to her. She seemed unlinked, like inserts of a computer file that had to be unlinked from their origins. The women didn't feel a weight of history behind her. It was as if she had no history.

She sucked the marrow from a woman's bones. She mashed a woman's story about, fed it to her colleagues indiscriminately; grounded it to dust, to a fine powder; blew it about at random, as she might someone's ashes from an urn. She regurgitated a woman's story to the world, as if it was public-domain software. In her representation, she assessed a woman's decisions and lifestyle, displaying these like museum objects, more consumable items.

Lou was particularly bored during periods of stasis, a lull in the workload, in between deadlines. She made things happen for her own entertainment.

The dry and combustible material of resentment and dissatisfaction gathered about a particular procedure or someone else's behaviour. The combustible material had begun as just one, almost casual remark and had grown with confirmation in a number of conversations. Lou herself had con-

tributed to its bulk. Then she struck the match, lit the fire and stood on the sidelines, as if it had been spontaneous combustion. With all the pleasure of a pyromaniac she watched it burn, while everyone else was taken up with the flames, the heat and smoke.

In the office the women couldn't discern what was happening for sure, but one or two of them might sense movement, strategies being adopted, lines of power being flung out.

Although Lou was quiet in the office, not ever taking up the central space to make pronouncements to all — her *métier* was the private conversation — she was nevertheless listening and watching from a vantage point in the office.

Over a period, Lou gathered a reputation, among the women who understood such nuances of behaviour, for causing havoc.

'She has a habit of creating white-oil situations,' said Sarah.

Lou was seen to be able to make fine judgements about when things had gone or hadn't gone far enough.

'She deals in "factoids",' said Casey. 'Facts that are widely believed but not true.'

The office was full of events, followed by talk of those events.

There were deaths in the office, of plants, pets, coworkers, friends, family.

With the exception of devil's ivy, spider plant and aspidistra, most plants died in the office.

We were so competitive with plants or floral arrangements that on some days in spring it was like the War of the Roses. Audrey brought in her artificially coloured carnations, and Sarah anemones, sweet peas and columbines.

Virulent mutated viruses spread in the office, among bodies and computers. Both illness and wellness flourished at different times.

Cards of condolences and congratulations circulated for signing.

There were engagements, kitchen teas and marriages.

There were births, planned and unplanned, adoptions and christenings. Motherhood imprinted itself on the lives of the women in the office.

'Ah! Don't sit in that chair, Nell! That's how Sarah got pregnant.'

'It's a real frock!' said Sarah of her pregnancy dress, a kind of pastel floral-printed cotton balloon.

Pets were placed in holiday care and grandparents in permanent care. Children left home — and were subsequently mourned. Husbands left home — and were subsequently cursed. Parents and parents-in-law came to stay and were loved, or viewed as potential bankrolls.

There were house sales, home buying and home renovations. The women talked for weeks about the progress of a veranda-room extension, a kitchen remodelling, getting approval from council, quotes from builders, laying foundations, choosing and buying fittings and fixtures. There was plumbing, painting and paving, roofing, tiling and guttering. Fences were erected and solar panels installed.

'Women who live alone let their grass grow long before they have it cut,' Isabel said.

Audrey headed immediately to the telephone to ring her lawn-mowing service and have her already short grass cut to the root. When the frontyard became a yellow-brown dust bowl, she blamed Isabel.

Besides having painted an eye on the portal of her front veranda, Isabel aligned her bed on the north-south axis. Casey converted a tiny room into

a meditation space in the house. Verity hung calico curtains. Nell had a dovecote and frog pond built.

'I don't have to buy a home entertainment system,' Nell said. 'My ducks are enough.'

Lou puttied and painted window frames.

Audrey had the capitals of the columns in her lounge room covered in gold leaf.

Susan had walk-in wardrobes built, and she bought an extra fridge — a bar fridge for the champagne she bought by the dozen.

Sarah built a greenhouse.

I had standard windows replaced with full-length step-through ones.

Buying sprees of material, household linen, gardening items, kitchenware, sporting equipment and jewellery were resourced with credit cards or by borrowing against savings.

The order book for stationery was precious compared with other material on the central desk, the one text that was inviting and intriguing. The stationery order book hummed in a low frequency as we passed by the desk. If we had a Geiger counter, its beep would have been signalling to us; if energy was visible, the stationery order book

would have glowed. When we walked by, it came within our line of vision and made us tarry there.

We imagined the stationery order book leather-bound and gold-embossed. It fell open at a bookmark, like a prophecy in which we would gain our message for the moment, our spiritual insight into the timeless mysteries, like the free words of wisdom from our daily desk calendars. We were waylaid there studying past entries — a stapler for Casey, Post-it notes for Verity, a hole puncher for Nell, white-out for Lou, a pencil sharpener for Audrey, an eraser for Susan, and envelopes for Sarah. I liked to order esoteric items like a staple remover and a rubber thimblette.

We always wanted to make a new entry for ourselves, as if it facilitated a kind of immortality in the office.

Group spending sprees became (in)famous stories that thickened the history (text) of the office. These were the ultimate development in our growing tendency to do things together, to move like a single animal. Sometimes you wanted to separate yourself from this beast, redeem your identity, and have a private life.

Shopping sprees were events ignited by the critical mass of female desire. We purged ourselves of desire by spending in one fell swoop.

When the opportunity arose for a spree, we went *tout ensemble*, abandoning ego boundaries. Energy would suffuse the group, commingle us, amalgamate us into a force, into floodwaters, making us temporarily overflow our banks.

A spending spree was a simulation of warfare.
If it was sale time in the city, Audrey played a leading role as a scout, an intelligence operative, well ahead of time, building up gradually, over a period, an intrigue, spicing our interest, feeding us titbits like aperitifs to rouse our hunger, reminding us of dates of sales, seeking out bargains and relaying to us lists of a splendid array of objects for consumption.

We scanned sales catalogues and made initial decisions about spending.

We were suitable material for an article in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

Very early on the morning of the sale, Audrey and Susan went ahead into the city. They stood, their noses pressed up against the huge glass doors

of a department store, at the front of crowds of anonymous shoppers, amid other department stores and boutiques, focused, exchanging last-minute plans, checking tactics, waiting, electric with anticipation.

The rest of us gathered in the office as guerrillas, and advanced in a convoy, to the areas located by the scouts.

We had our wallets primed with cash. We had credit cards and key cards. We had chequebooks. We had flattened backpacks and big striped carry bags emptied of contents.

When the doors of the department store opened, the scouts surged forward with the crowds behind them, knowing, like hounds in a fox hunt, the direction to take through the labyrinth of counters, departments and levels of floors.

The scouts pushed to the front of the crowd at a counter, or stood near a dump bin and waited patiently for an opening when they would manoeuvre in and gather favoured items and hold onto them while searching for more, waiting for us to join them.

We came, we split up, searching for the scouts. We called out to each other across a writhing sea

of bodies when we found something particularly special. We pushed and shoved. Decorum and manners, our good-girl behaviour, disappeared in the heat of the moment.

Isabel and Nell bought metres of canvas, linen and cotton, in smart checks and stripes, or with the elegance of plain dyed texture and the charm of florals, for curtains, soft furnishings and dresses. Casey and Lou bought pillowcases and sheets, in warm apricot, and grey. Audrey bought ornate garden stakes for her carnations, wrought iron ones in heritage green with fleur-de-lis tops. Susan bought towels, bath mats and face washers with soft thick pile in large measure. Sarah bought terracotta, hand-painted and self-watering pots, shrubs and roses in tubs, perennials and annuals in baskets and punnets.

We came away carrying our booty, returning to the office with backpacks bulging with cartons, weighty carry bags full to the brim on one arm and large plastic and paper bags swinging from the other, our eyes bright, pupils enlarged, with a depth of colour in our cheeks.

I bought a miniature low-spreading gardenia.

When the world economy began long-term changes like the unsustainability of full employment, the women expected rises in oil prices like the return of the seasons.

We knew we weren't automatons made up of the sum of techno-rationalist competency standards and training reform agenda. We didn't recognise ourselves in these profiles.

'Rising Imports Cause Deteriorating Current Account,' the newspaper headlines read.

'Susan, didn't you check the manufacturer's label on that designer jacket?' Nell said.

'Primary Produce Surplus,' said the newspaper headlines.

'Sarah, stop growing vegies and definitely don't bring them into the office for distribution,' Susan said.

'Developing Countries High Level of Debt.'

'The economy's not growing. We won't have pensions in our old age,' Audrey said.

'Isabel, cast a spell. Cast a spell!' Casey said.

'Stock Market Crash,' said the newspaper headlines.

'Why don't you train the World Bank in your colour-coded personal finances system, Nell — one

coloured leather purse for each item on your personal budget?' Sarah said.

'Now that I have a stopper for my opened champagne bottles,' said Susan, 'I'll get a computer.'

The women's microeconomic reform was the cost and administration of tea-making and X-lotto. The parallel in the economy was a shift towards market power and deregulation.

The women looked around the office for a rational agent making optimal choices and couldn't find anyone who neatly fitted the bill.

As well as for these shopping sprees, money had to be found for holidays — Isabel and I went to the coast, Casey to the desert, Verity to an island, Nell to a river, Lou and Audrey interstate, Susan overseas, Sarah to the mountains. There were holiday flats for Isabel and me, shacks and tents for Casey, Nell and Sarah, hostels for Lou and Verity, holiday resorts for Audrey and Susan. Hopefully there were X-lotto wins or wins at raffles, at the Casino or in Melbourne Cup sweeps. If there were no wins, there were money pools.

There were celebrations.

'Let's have a pink party,' Susan said, wanting to star in a revival of *The Pyjama Game*.

There was smoked-salmon dip and slices of smoked trout, borsch lightened with cream to the appropriate shade. Pink champagne in pink glasses with pink paper napkins.

Staff lunches and breakfasts were fuelled with Lambrusca, vintage red and homemade beer. Food was ordered in and food was brought from home. Malay and Thai laksas and soups, Indian and Indonesian curries. Scones, lemon meringue pie, lamingtons and peach Melba. Recipes were compiled for sauces and salads; pasta and pies; entrees, main courses and desserts.

Audrey was queen of the dessert cooks, the copy of her peach Melba recipe so old and so used, it was as soft as tissue paper, the print erased from folds that had formed white lines where formerly picture and text had been.

I was given a copy of this recipe memo by Nell who kept everything. The recipe had been deleted when the women did their electronic housekeeping, deleting and trashing files, and emptying the trash,

and Audrey only made a cursory check on this one to see if anyone required a copy. I missed out. At moments like these, Nell's bowerbird habits, her obsessiveness for classifying, conserving and furiously recycling proved its value. Once she had rescued newsletters from the recycling bin, placing them under several dictionaries and a world atlas to straighten out their creases. And once hung out some memos to dry when she recovered them from under the remains of a pot of tea in the rubbish bin.

The recipe for the peach Melba was filed on D drive as D:\femshare\recipes\pmelba.doc.

THE RECIPE

4 ripe cling peaches
4 tablespoons granulated sugar
½ pint water
½ vanilla pod
1 pint vanilla ice-cream
3-4 fl oz Chantilly cream

FOR MELBA SAUCE

8 oz fresh or frozen raspberries
4-5 tablespoons sifted icing sugar

FOR CHANTILLY CREAM

Pour cream into a bath and, using a sterile garden hoe, whisk until it thickens. Add caster sugar to taste and vanilla essence and continue whisking until the cream is stiff.

PREPARE THE SYRUP

Heat the water and sugar and vanilla pod gently in a pan to dissolve the sugar, then boil rapidly for two minutes. Peel and halve the peaches. Breathe in their perfume. Suck on their juice. Drink champagne from your best glasses. Remove peach stones. Put peaches, round side down, in the syrup to poach. This will take at least ten minutes. Allow the peaches to cool in the syrup. Drain. Retain some syrup. Brush the lips of your love with the juice. Meet their raspberry lips with your peach ones.

PREPARE THE MELBA SAUCE

Rub raspberries through a strainer and beat the icing sugar into this a little at a time. Chill.

TO SERVE

Place a scoop of vanilla ice-cream into a dish. Place two peach halves over it. Coat with a tablespoon of Melba sauce. Decorate with Chantilly cream. Feed your love and have your love

feed you, naked on a big bed covered with your best white linen.

All year round in the office we distributed produce that came from our gardens — lemons and mandarins, plums and apricots, tomatoes and pumpkins. We shared mulch and farmed earth worms. We gathered cuttings, seeds and seedlings of herbs — lemon grass and Asian mint — and flowers and flowering shrubs too. Love-in-a-mist, Queen Anne's lace, Iceland poppies and lavender. For couldn't permaculture make use of the flower for pollination, we argued, if decoration and aesthetic value were not the staff of life? Shouldn't we celebrate and share abundance when it was with us?

An aspidistra, long-suffering, kept itself alive, imprudently, in Lou's office, while Nell, in moments when she couldn't stand it any longer, crept in surreptitiously to feed, water and wipe it down.

On her balcony, Lou kept three or four terracotta pots — gifts of hopeful, well-meaning acquaintances — filled with dusty potting mix; the sad brown stems of long-dead plants; and the butts of cigarettes.

There were long-term and crash diets, natural and drug-dependent, for lowering cholesterol, increasing energy and losing weight; diets that combined food, restricted intake or limited choice: only fruit and water in the morning; no dairy; no vegies from the *Solanum* family. There was a fitness consciousness. We formed corporate cup teams in swimming, running and walking. We took classes in tai chi and yoga, aerobics and weights, relaxation and meditation, Feldenkrais and the Alexander technique. A steady stream of coloured belts were acquired in the martial arts.

'If I aim to be a black belt by the time I retire, I can't possibly fail,' said Isabel.

'Is that a joke about her age?' whispered Lou.

There was an expulsion of air, a measured intake of breath.

All of this was a further distraction, a distraction piled on distraction, from the real work: the production of documents which were piled on top of each other too, ready and waiting.

Time passed, filled with ordinary events in the women's lives. There were household thefts and eye-witness accounts.

There was always talk of cars in the office. Wasn't that how the women got to the office in the first place?

'I work for my car and my corgi,' said Audrey.

There were traffic accidents, and parking and speeding fines. Bus, train and tram strikes. Cars were bought and sold. New cars and second-hand. Car insurance, car breakdowns and car repairs.

We could talk of culture — books and CDs were recommended and exchanged; TV and films viewed and reviewed.

'After we watched the video of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* on Saturday night,' Sarah laughed, 'we were out in the garden Sunday morning pruning the fruit trees going "Once more into the peach, dear friends, once more".'

Each woman had her own portable radio tuned at a low volume to her station of choice. Isabel listened to religious programs, Nell to classical music, Lou to the news and talk-back, Audrey to middle-of-the-road, Susan to the arts, Sarah to gardening.

We had been educated largely in the arts and humanities, and partially in the sciences and business. We could be active in politics: there were

political campaigns, union meetings and environmental petitions. There were rallies, walks, runs and votes.

There were stories. There were secrets and jokes, and knowledge shared, exchanged and compared. There was gossip. There was outspokenness and silence. There were black looks, knowing looks. There was insensitivity and lack of subtlety. There was anger, frustration and recrimination. There was loyalty and advocacy. And forgiveness, forbearance and forgetting.

'There ought to be a hugs officer,' said Casey, 'like a first-aid officer. You could go to the officer when you needed one. Almost like an emergency service.'

'A life-saving one,' Isabel said.

'There ought to be a hugs policy,' Sarah said.

'Like occupational health and safety,' Nell said.

'Equal opportunity,' said Susan.

'Or sexual harassment,' said Lou.

A history specific to the office was recorded in our memory microchips, told in oral history at morning tea. Recounted at afternoon tea to recruits and visitors, to temporaries and casuals and contract workers.

The air was filled with sighing. Footsteps were repeated across carpet. Regular tracks. Incessant steps.

There was a closing and a locking. An opening up. A starting and ending. A renewal and review. An airing. A switching on, a switching off. A refill. A marking. A naming. A stacking. A diminishing of the stack. A restacking. A repetition. A cycle. A recycle. A one-off. As everything became part of the spin, part of the making of a history of office life.

Bureaucracy and routine had a soporific effect, lulling us into inaction while an array of smallish tasks — faxing a memo to a client about a deadline, recording time spent on a job — each of some merit and importance, accumulated in our mental, paper or electronic notebook list of things to do.

What were the available styles? Either we never put things off, never thought about them with distaste or anxiety, lived in the front of our heads and got things done on a (relatively) smooth and regular basis. Or, we put things off, living in the

back of our heads, on the right side of our brains, till we got to work one day, clear-headed and determined, and ripped through our lists all at once.

'Okay, I've done all my interesting work,' Casey said flopping down into a chair in the tea-room.

The major jobs like design, or prepress work: checking titles and pagination, giving the text the once-over from a bird's-eye view, flipping through the pages like hand-cranked animation. Then there were tidying-up jobs: memos about missed opportunities; sorting, labelling and putting away files, both electronic and hard copy, making them accessible for anyone's future use.

'All the piecemeal jobs, the fiddly tasks, the boring work on my desk — I'm avoiding them,' said Casey. 'I recognise the delaying tactics: sharpening my pencils, tidying up my stationery drawer, thinking of some obscure question to send to the women's spirituality discussion list.'

Late in the morning, huge clouds gathered, serious in their potency, heavy with their weight of potential, full and round with their load. The sky darkened. The air cooled. There was silence and anticipation.

Tree branches waved about; leaves rustled and were whipped off the ground. Lightning struck in the sky in an arc. Anxieties flickered in the traffic. A grey curtain, sheer but distinct, visible over the hills — a monolith floating in space — billowed and drifted steadily toward the plains. Thunder rumbled like forbidden power stalking in the distance.

It was only when I looked back that I realised I was following in my father's footsteps.

My father worked in print and publishing. Books of typology and printing techniques, black-covered and substantial like the Bible, lay around the house. And words to do with printing and publishing — point sizes, type styles, print runs, headline fonts, printing techniques and equipment — were scattered throughout his conversations about work like a light snow fall. They fell from his tongue like labels, like the Latin names of plants from a botanist.

Though he talked about these things, and his family of women listened, my father was a role model mostly through action.

Once I met my father in the street on his way home from work. I was going out to some social event. It was at the end of my first year at university and my exam results had just come out. I had decided to articulate — a rare occurrence — what had happened to me, because I knew it was a significant event. I had passed Philosophy 1, including an exam on logic and essay questions on the existence of a creator and the mind-body debate. He seemed surprised at and was humoured by the mouthing of the event. Proud too, I guessed. We had stopped briefly in the street.

Among my sisters there was expertise in calligraphy, image making via collage, writing, desktop publishing and editing.

The use of desktop publishing technology, the blurring of roles between publisher, typesetter, editor, writer and graphic artist, enabled one person, using a morphing methodology, to be many things and become a kind of magician, an alchemist of publishing, as much earlier in the industry: Baskerville had made his own paper, blended his inks and cut a typeface.

I remembered physicality in print production, writing by hand on spirit carbon paper to run off

on the spirit duplicator, typing out stencils to run them off on a Gestetner mimeograph, cutting out stencils and laying them on silk screens and squeegeeing ink through, photocopying, writing on overhead projector sheets, brushing the flip side of galley proofs or feeding them into a machine that striped them with glue, laying down galley proofs between blue-ruled guidelines.

But secrets still remained, rules of thumb, tricks of the trade: to write, to edit, to guide good design and layout, to serve the printer's capacities. Orphans and widows as single-word lines at the top and bottom of pages, like the use of 'maiden' in cricket for a first round; picas and points as units of measurement, like butchers, middies and schooners in beer-glass sizes; spaces below headings and paragraphs, like the specified size of a surgical incision or degrees of burning on the body; and margins and gutters for spaces around text, as boundaries and gullies in housing and roofing — and in the landscape. Other secrets: a confident understanding of elegance and simplicity in design, a feeling for the weight of a line, an appreciation of a legible typeface, an awareness of white space, a knowledge of line length, point size, type style and alignment for readability.

Imagine walking into a painter's studio where the artist both lives and works, breathes and dreams, and see before you a large, open space of light: paint-spattered tables covered with tubes and pots of paint and bottles of water, brushes and rags, and paper with brushstrokes of rainbow colours; linen canvases stretched and stapled over wooden frames, and stacked on the floor and piled in and on cupboards and displayed on walls, in finished and half-finished states.

The office gathers dust and debris, odd and out-of-date notices, dying plants, broken furniture and becomes an indistinct place.

But the printery was akin to the painter's studio. Compact offset presses with rounded bellies, more serious and wise than cast-iron stoves, sat heavy and fixed like their names — Wallenberg, Kolhberg. Not computerised, they spoke of the past, kept across their heavy metal surfaces and within their mechanics a chromosomal link to their non-motorised, hand-cranked ancestors. In their heavy squatness, their bodies sank and settled onto the floor with the memory of heat and metal plates, lines of letters and rollers squeegeeing ink. The full rounded baroque shapes of these older printing

presses in navy blue and black contrasted with the computerised presses with their push-button screens, or elongated, streamlined bodies neutral in colour.

In the past, the need for moveable type stands out as the symbol for the formation of desire. The revolution in paper making was brought on by the desire for paper to be clean and strong. In the evolution of type, metals and alloys had to tough enough not to damage the punch engraved with a letter in relief. How to ink the forme which held the type to make an impression once the paper was placed between the platen and the 'bed'. How to print the letters uniformly; to speed the process to print more and larger sizes of paper.

The desktop-publishing magazines glowed with a pearly combination of narcissism and enthusiasm. Reading like sacred texts, they spun their prophecies of new and startling developments encrusted with a layer of magic and mystery, as if the authors were latter-day explorers, conquistadors, using their own heroic language, favouring particularly anything with capital letters, especially in combination with numbers (OS2, PS/2, XLT7720, 50 MHz), just as

archetypal symbols were used in fairytales. They believed themselves to be on the ~~bleeding~~ cutting edge.

People wrote to the desktop publishing magazines as they would to the agony columns of tabloids, seeking answers to their problems with software: 'What can I do to protect myself from viruses?' 'I've crashed, so how can I get up and running?' 'How do I let the world know about my home page?' The magazines were solution-orientated, framing computer users into a dependent community with question-and-answer columns and 'hot tips', with themselves, the magazines producers, as forever on top of the technology, knowing, confident and competent: 'Don't even think about free access.'

Each of the women in the office toured the magazines as they were placed in their pigeon holes, marking with Post-it notes or highlighter pen their tracks through, their discovery of something, a current obsession: good design, typeface aesthetics, copyright, workstation configuration, hardware changes, software upgrades.

The print-based book was once a precious object consulted in buildings made for that very purpose,

till readers required portability, to ~~surf~~ read at any time — in their beds, on their chaise-longues, in their gardens.

Like the history of alchemy, the history of the book will become an arcane text that we will dip into by chance and marvel at. We'll wonder who dealt with this paper-based artefact, how it came to be made, and what use it was put to.

Reading a book on the tram will appear to us like riding a penny-farthing does now, like attempting to fly with wings of wax. It will make us think of the era just after donkey trails and homing pigeons. We will mostly not be going out to work, but working in the home office. Those of us going out to work will be doing so with individual low-flying, low-speed rocket backpacks.

Some of us will keep printed books as antiques and curios, much like contemporary buyers of books in hardcover.

Susan could've been one of the Italian aristocracy during the coming of printing, who refused to have printed books on their library shelves and would have only illuminated manuscripts. Susan bought only hardbacks, stacking them, according to guide-

lines given out by one of the up-market home-decorating magazines, by size (a serendipitous clash of colour causing her mild, but temporary, distress), sitting weighty bookends discretely here and there on a bookcase, occasionally stacking some books horizontally, for an air of informality and to convey the idea that she actually read them.

Verity didn't buy books. Why would she, when she could borrow from a library free of charge?

Why should she pay to swim in a municipal pool when she could use the beach for free, or stand in a shower of rain? (She did neither, but that's beside the point.)

Lou shoplifted books when and where she could, and accumulated overdue and forfeited membership notices from libraries. When she returned books, if at all, the page corners were turned down, the pages were spattered with pen marks for emphasis, and ink stained the spines.

Some of us will open printed books for the texture and smell of the paper, the flutter of pages flipping over. We will mark the difference through our fingers, noses and eyes, of endpapers and flyleaves.

We'll come upon the book as we do now some Victorian bric-a-brac whose original purpose we can only guess at. We'll forget the time before software; we'll forget its origins, lose even our rudimentary knowledge of it; we'll forget there were people ignorant of it and those trained to write it. Software writers are already high priests and it can seem they were born into this work, blessed and chosen.

We have held pen, brush, stylus, feather, quill, reed; we've held paper, clay tablet, papyrus; we've held bamboo, bone, stone covered in ink or ochre; we've held palm leaves, hemp, tamarisk wood and mulberry bark, cotton and silk; we've held a roll secured by twine, string, thong, silk cord; a whirling book, the leaves stuck together along the outer edge, and a butterfly book, the leaves bound together along the fold and able to flutter.

The *Book of the Earth* is shale, a sliver coming away from its base as a thin shaving. The *Book of the Tree* is paperbark uncurling from the trunk like old skin.

Minoans texts left to us are clay tablets inadvertently baked hard by fires meant for total

destruction. For the rest, the clay was unbaked, crushed and reconstituted with water, and recycled seasonally.

At work we hold a key pad and a screen viewing a model of paper pages. We throw a switch to send a message and a text comes down copper wire, coaxial cable, an optical fibre carrying a pulse of light, a hybrid cross of these, or microwave and satellite beam.

We will reduce our worry about the devastation of forests for paper, as we would have once the slaughter of deer and calf for their skin to make vellum for the book.

Due to the speed of change, we'll become increasingly experienced in surprises.

We had been in the haze of heat and dryness for so long that when the rain came we responded as if under hypnosis.

The skies burst open as if by a prayer — our prayer. A prayer said long ago secretly and separately in each of our hearts, now in unison, repeated like an old joke, like one of our tea-room stories.

We sighed a mutual sigh, a sigh of sirens, a harmonic sigh, a sigh that echoed sweetly and quietly back into time, into the cosmos. It was a sigh of wonder, a sigh that gave thanks for a share in grace.

On that day, Audrey wanted to put an end to it all, to make a final grand gesture, to make things clear-cut and straightforward, to order and cut short process, and to produce product quickly and simply.

'Poor deranged creature!' said Lou.

Later, Audrey sat in the tea-room, her eyes cast down, her mouth in a scowl, her permed hair neat and stiff, while Isabel told stories. If Audrey did catch another woman's eyes, her own eyes blinked quickly and her head twisted slightly, all in disapproval.

In one of her past lives Isabel was a gangster's moll. She met Eddie, the gangster, when she kept a pet shop.

At home she kept a household of geriatrics. The number of pets she had didn't diminish with

the death of her Great Dane. It was replaced well before by stray and feral cats. But the cats were on their last legs too.

Eddie was happy to keep the pet shop for a while. The shop was a good cover, and a way of winning the beautiful but naive Isabel's heart. Eddie would move onto bigger and better, a jewellery shop. Eddie would teach Isabel about the preciousness of jewels, but she couldn't teach him a fondness for animals. Animals wouldn't do what Eddie wanted.

How could he command goldfish who in their watery medium would only hear the muted echo of his orders? Animals wouldn't bring him money. The pet shop didn't breed minks, chinchillas or Russian blues.

Isabel had a python, Nawab, in a glass box. One night Nawab escaped and took a slow tour around the shop. Isabel and Eddie came home late from nightclubbing, and the python went for Eddie. It clearly sensed something about the man. After all, he did beat Isabel; he went out with other women; and later, he would sell the mansion they owned together and blow most of the money away on the jewellery shop.

Isabel was able to get the python back in its box. Nawab swirled around Isabel's arms, her breasts.

Eddie visited Isabel out of the blue, years after their life together had finished. She stayed up practically all night with him, like they used to, eating in top hotels and visiting wine bars, and she came in to work, never having gone to bed, looking slightly out of kilter.

Eddie asked her, when he looked at her watch, why she was wearing that rubbish when he had bought her expensive jewellery (she kept it in a bank safe-deposit box) and promptly bought her another (which would go in the safe-deposit box). She replied that she didn't need it. She didn't go anywhere like they used to. She didn't go anywhere at all, but she didn't tell him this. It was on the tip of her tongue and she just caught herself, which she usually didn't, except when talking about the darkest side of her past life. If she did wear the watch it would be stolen, she said, according to *The Advertiser*. Robberies were on the increase in Adelaide. Crime was in fact decreasing, but bad news sold newspapers. Hadn't the homes of two or three women from the office been broken into

recently? Hadn't their neighbours been broken into? Didn't they themselves have all their things stolen once?

They were set up, Isabel claimed, by rival gangsters in the underworld, someone Eddie had offended, which he could do easily. Or, he could have set it up himself. Was there insurance he didn't tell Isabel about? They were just about to leave on an overseas trip. The house was big. Everything was stolen, every painting, every stick of furniture, every piece of jewellery, every item of clothing.

Isabel no longer dressed like she used to. She had left the boutiques she shopped at for business clothes and after-five wear, the nightclubs she'd partied at, the beautiful and fashionable people she had known, the low-life. She was not the person she had been. She was not going to be walked over and Eddie would just have to accept that.

Isabel had lost her money, along with her heart, to Eddie. On this trip, perhaps Eddie's last, she said he looked older — had less hair, more fat.

Isabel took her dog and cats to the vet for cures; to the pet parlour for grooming and to the pet motel for holidays. She paid for her dog's grooming at the

pet salon, but cut her own hair with a home hair-grooming kit.

She used to take the dog for a walk when she got home from work. Her apartment was in a salubrious suburb. She had her Chrysler Valiant; her neighbours had Mercedes and BMWs; she had Bwana, her Great Dane (after a series of Alsatians, Doberman pinschers and Rhodesian ridgebacks); they had their miniature poodles, schnauzers and King Charles cocker spaniels. Bwana had attacked the tiny dogs behind huge cast-iron gates. But they, almost stupidly, attacked back. Isabel often had to comfort Bwana.

On her workstation partition Isabel had hung a mandala. Small china figurines of fairies, elves and goblins stood on her desk near a wooden crucifix, a silver ankh, a star of David, a heart and anchor, beside a handful of crystals and bottles of aromatic oils. She was building up protection, setting an impenetrable aura around her desk.

Audrey clicked her tongue over de facto relationships. Audrey held her beliefs even though her family unit was as dysfunctional as anyone else's: a son who drank heavily, a daughter who didn't speak to her, a husband who'd left her.

'Guilty,' Audrey judged Lindy Chamberlain. But Audrey disagreed with the Queen Elizabeth judgement of her daughter-in-law Princess Di as 'a tiresome girl'.

In Audrey's house, Princess Di ruled. Audrey had the breeding history of Queen Elizabeth's corgis and swore that Princess Di, her corgi, came from the same line. The dog moaned when Audrey was on the phone too long. Princess Di sat behind the side gate during the day, looking out, surveying what she could see of street events.

Audrey fed scotch fillet and red-eye steak to the corgi.

Though she was a vegetarian, Isabel cooked the liver of chickens and the hearts of lambs for her cats. She averted her eyes and held her breath while she cut the raw, strong-smelling flesh.

Susan gave mascarpone to her Russian blue.

Nell put mice in the freezer for her owls. She gathered snails for her ducks.

Casey chained up her goat so that she could only eat grass, and not the cosmos, the daisies, the marjoram and thyme, the roses and the broom.

The love-in-a-mist had self-seeded so freely in Sarah's garden that she let her rabbit chew off the flower heads at her leisure.

Sarah couldn't persuade Lou to convert an empty fish tank into a terrarium. It sat in Lou's living room, perfectly empty, except for a trace of scum marking the former water level. But Lou did fill the seed tray of her budgie, Pegleg (a permanently broken leg), which exercised itself by swinging upside down on its perch.

Susan played pool with Blade Runner (an empowering name for a brain-damaged, senior citizen, woosy cat).

Casey had a balsa wood jigsaw puzzle of a dinosaur hanging from her office ceiling. Was she thinking of Barry?

Delicately pinned to Nell's noticeboard, so their three dimensions could be savoured, were a starfish, and a pipefish with a slender, elongated body encased in a bony armour, with an equally elongated tubular snout that made it look like Alien. Was she thinking of Big Daddy?

When Audrey went to the vet, Princess Di's name was highlighted on a computer screen, the dog's

detailed history flickering out at Audrey. Not even at her own specialist was Audrey accorded such treatment. There, out came a well-thumbed, discoloured, creased and slightly grubby manilla folder.

Princess Di, like Blade Runner and Bwana, was geriatric. No-one had baby animals in this office of mature women. Every cat, dog, canary, duck or owl was on its last legs.

'I can't believe she's twelve years old,' Audrey said proudly of Princess Di, as if she was solely responsible for a unique phenomena.

Much to Audrey's displeasure and vexation, Princess Di was not affectionate. She didn't rush to sit at Audrey's feet in front of the TV, though Audrey pampered her. The corgi ignored her, and pined for her absent husband.

Audrey's husband was unaware of his only other moment of rebellion before he actually left her.

Audrey had asked for a pair of his trousers to send to the drycleaner. She asked him more than once. He continued to tarry in response. They were his favourite and he wanted to work out his own timetable for their absence.

Finally she retrieved them herself from his wardrobe and put them promptly in the ceiling of the house. She would wait patiently for his realisation that his trousers were missing. Revenge was all the sweeter when it was a long time in coming.

But he never mentioned missing the trousers, knowing the fuss she would create in response. Though the trousers meant something to him, they meant much less than the trouble they might cause.

The marriage broke up. He left the house.

Returning the trousers to her husband was for Audrey out of the question — unless he came for them himself. So the trousers remained in the roof, full of the potential for sweet revenge at an as yet unpinpointed moment in a long-distant future.

'Who could blame him? What was wrong with him that he hung around so long?' Susan said.

He wanted a quiet life, a life in a small cottage, pottering among the gerberas, cross-pollinating for variation in colour and petal shape and number. Audrey wanted him to build palisades and pillars and turrets and terraces onto their bungalow.

Princess Di remained pining for her master.

'It'll be back,' said Audrey bitterly of a document circulating in the office.

In our office the circulation of documents for correction, electronically and as hard copy, was recursive and exemplified Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence, the belief in reincarnation, and the concept of grafts in literary theory, as document parts were cannibalised and braided into other documents and rose like Venus in a new birth. Their former lives were hardly recognisable now, traces only, grafts being covered over as the documents circulated continuously.

This was the very nature of work, the nature of our lives. Our lives were unpacked, unfinished, eternally in renewal.

How excited could the women be over incidents surrounding circulating documents, when an event might be a change from lower case to caps, the deciphering of an illegible hand-written word, the insertion of a comma?

Oh for the terrifying and impossible, that there might be a product without process — if we could evolve into beings communicating telepathically.

Most of the women wore an animal totem. Isabel had cat earrings. Lou had a brooch of a black silhouette of a dog, its teeth bared in an aggressive pose.

Audrey wore a windcheater appliquéd with Scottish terriers in tartan. Sarah had a row of geese brooch, and farmyard animals printed on her tights.

In the office, Audrey had pictures of Princess Di on her desk. Most of the women had pictures of their pets — rabbits, cats, dogs, ducks, owls, goldfish, frogs, birds, a goat. Beside them were family photos.

When Audrey finished typing her document, she opened her desk drawer and lifted out a new set of fine nails and a small craft hammer.

She nailed to the paper single complex sentences and whole paragraphs of three or four simple sentences and some individual words of substantial length representing abstract concepts.

The document had to be posted in a padded bag for the protection of the post officer and the recipients of the document.

Isabel thought of Gabriel, her own personal source of strength, then quickly checked an infor-

mation source on the Net, Catholic Online Saints Page[1], and selected 'Patron Saints'[2].

'Should we enclose a holy card of St Francis de Sales with each document delivery?' she suggested. 'He's the patron saint of writers.'

Lou gagged on a repressed, haughty giggle and a swelling of disdain. Audrey audibly hissed, turned red and steamed like a kettle on the boil.

When the document reached the authors, they didn't know what to do with it. They were disconcerted, even intimidated, by this very new and unusual form of word processing.

The words and paragraphs looked very fixed. But because writing, especially before stabilised in printed publication, was made for unwriting, especially through word processing, they couldn't live with what they had currently written — they had to undo. So they had to get for themselves their own hammer and use its claw to yank out the nails. They pulled out the nails to rearrange paragraphs, delete complete sentences, substitute words. But they lost their resolve in mid-process, and with fear and trembling, hammered nails half-heartedly into the text,

[1] http://www.catholic.org/saints/saints.html

[2] http://www.catholic.org/saints/patron.html

hoping mindlessly that they had caught the changes. They should have made a final check. But how could they on such a text, what with the extraction of nails, physically moving text and banging nails back in? They hoped desperately that something had come out right.

When the document came back in its padded bag to Audrey, she had her gardening gloves on. She cut open the padded bag with gardening shears and lifted it out.

The nails were loosely attached to the paper. Whole pieces of text had drooped around their insertion points, held flimsily as they were. With even the slightest movement of her hands, or puff of her breath, the letters were lifted off the page on small gusts of air and flew onto her desk. Headings, whole paragraphs and phrases slid from the paper onto the floor.

Audrey went into a rage. The letters on her desk looked like small dead insects. She swiped them off with an all-purpose cleaning fluid, then got out the office vacuum cleaner and sucked up the text on the floor.

'She's like my goat,' said Casey. 'Although it's a different form of behaviour, it's still an extreme

reaction to change. Say I'm about to move the goat in the backyard — another patch of lawn needs mowing. As soon as I loosen the chain, she shoots off at high speed in a direction opposite to the one I intend to take her, going from ground zero to 100 kilometres in one second flat, taking my arm from its socket. In Audrey's case, she's just as hard and fast, but she digs herself in.'

Verity was not mean, punctilious or officious. Missing her coffee mug on a Friday at the end of a working week, she decided to confront Casey about it. It was hard to associate Verity with an over-concern for the whereabouts of personal items in the office. The level of concern for personal items was, of course, symbolic of something else.

Among some of the women there was a near hysteric need to place their hands at will on these items, inanimate but functional, created through the human management of machines that moulded and cast, stamped and assembled. These items, at least, were at their command.

The women, suffering from a wobbly sense of their own worth, and needing the respect of their

peers, were diverted away from generative thinking about tasks and future directions for the office by grasping at a delusional but more immediately available form of power. So they thumped about the office in trench coats and heavy boots, crumbling camaraderie, laying waste the inner creative forces of their colleagues, guillotining any potential. They set up rules and regulations before anyone had even started out; tried to keep everyone in lock-step, no-one ahead of them; tried to keep all information to themselves, no bits held by others, so they wouldn't have to be subjected to revelations by others.

Verity, true to her name, had a moral code of her own making. She was loyal to bloodlines, above and beyond loyalty to government and employer. She most often worked out ways for government and employer to serve her, for example finding mildly transgressive ways of capitalising on her tax returns by claiming work-use of her car.

She was unrestrained in her generosity to her kids. It was her way of surviving the pull of the office, being drawn into its swirl of emotions and concerns, as if the office wanted to be her family.

She eventually had to curb her generosity — the kids weren't leaving the nest as they should

have been, but eating the food in her cupboards, taking the shopping from her bags, the notes and coins from her purse.

They demanded designer-labelled clothing instead of chain-store. She had sent her children out into the world, and they had come back contaminated.

Verity left home and bought a one-bedroom flat, a space where her kids couldn't enter with comfort, where they would want to break free.

She was interested in a low-key life in the office. She tried to make herself small and unnoticeable. She dressed simply. She determined to remain quiet. Almost invisible.

These resolutions didn't always hold sway. What held sway was the rhythm of office life. At some moments she was caught in animated discussion and analysis of her favourite topics: books, child-rearing, and the speculative: could you predetermine the sex of your child by eating apples before conception? She would wrangle with and harangue coworkers about her rights within the complicated bureaucratic rules of time, leave and pay sheets.

Verity didn't realise at the time what was happening, caught up as she was in the light and

energy of the talk. But always afterwards she felt drained by this ephemera and had to muster what energy she had left for her real family. She decided again to be quiet. She looked down. She put her finger to her mouth, tidied her desk.

She gathered stationery into neat collections, sorted pens from pencils and into colours, much the same as she hung her washing on the line, by item and colour, when she was under stress. The larger metal objects like the stapler, hole puncher and scissors were in a corner of the desk drawer. A pencil sharpener was particularly valuable to have on call; nothing was more comforting for a person requiring order than to be able to sharpen a pencil at will in the fatuous belief that one could then work harder, swifter, smarter. Post-it notes were in the three sizes required: large square, small square and thin strip. Her coffee mug was clean, labelled with a 'V' and placed on a corner of her desk. These items would be locked away in her desk after work and whenever she went on leave.

She controlled the entrance to the filing room for documents. She was the gatekeeper. It was a large room with rows and rows of stacked and labelled files where several individuals could work

easily together, efficiently retrieving and replacing files. But Verity had settled in her mind a particular equation:

ANYONE OTHER THAN OR AS WELL AS ME IN THE FILING ROOM

=

CHAOS

She rushed toward anyone stepping over the threshold from the office into the filing room, ushering them immediately out, taking them by the elbow in a parental fashion, saying in a theatrically serious and rhetorical tone, with a nodding of her head, 'No, no, no, you can't come in here. No. No. No.'

When things were out of her control, there was nothing she could do except leave the job and look for another simpler one. Like a museum attendant. What could possibly go wrong in such a job? What could possibly be demanded of her? It was a job made for a simple life. What possible impact could technology have on it? A job that would avoid altogether the vagaries, the unstoppable ramifications of change that would hungrily take up the energy she needed for her family. A job of silence in which she could sit, or walk, and watch and think. In which the only noise was the scuffing of shoes, muffled laughter, murmurings.

Verity had held back from confronting Casey, the culprit under suspicion. Like a town crier, she had made public announcements in the office in the open central area:

'I'm missing a coffee mug marked with a big V. Has anyone...?'

She stuck notices up on the board:

'If anyone's seen a coffee mug marked with a big V, could they please...'

When we heard the announcement, most of us shuffled items on and in our desks, to avoid being caught red-handed. But responses, of any kind, had not been forthcoming.

Such was the intensity of Verity's search that I even began to suspect that I had taken her coffee mug myself. So I opened my drawers, and as I sorted through items, shoved papers aside and scattered pencil shavings, I let her peep over my shoulder and into the drawer. Although I was pretty sure of my innocence of its possession, I was nervous because in the past I know I had been guilty of casually picking up the pens and pencils, the scissors and paste, the sticky tape, the erasers and coffee mugs of others, with a casualness close to immoral and radical unconcern.

Isabel had proffered holy cards of St Thomas, the patron saint of thieves, and St Anthony, who finds lost property, and suggested short prayers to them.

Verity had been patient. She had endured. She had done all she could within reason to recover the coffee mug without actually accusing anyone, and, in the best tradition of school principals, had provided an opportunity for the culprit to replace the missing mug anonymously. But nothing had happened.

Now was the time to act. It was Friday in the office. It was time for a confrontation.

How did Verity know it was Casey? I didn't know or even suspect, perhaps caught up in my own imagined guilt, even though Casey had a reputation for having valuable documents, awaiting timely production, smothered, long hidden under other pieces of work on her basically untidy desk.

Casey could have easily had Verity's coffee mug. She could have easily 'borrowed' it, thinking coffee mugs, particularly plain white ones, weren't precious items.

Verity was open and assertive in her own way. She had the workers' sense of their own rights, and obligations. She entered Casey's office.

'Casey, could you go through your drawers again because I think you might have my coffee mug.'

Without many words exchanged on either side, Casey knew Verity would never give up. It was a case of all importance set against a total lack of concern and mild amusement.

So they both started hunting.

'This is my coffee mug, Casey.' Verity held it aloft. Eyeballed Casey with it. 'You see,' pointing to the V.

One of the benefits of the coffee mug heist was that it provided one of the all-time great tea-room stories.

Lou had said at the time, 'I feel a story coming on.'

The heist contributed to a character profile of Verity, that, like fingerprinting, dental records or DNA testing, was most telling about her. However, it was a picture that remained static, as if she was pickled or freeze-dried. Long after she left the office for a job as a museum attendant, new staff had this picture of her encapsulated in the words accumulated into the narrative that was the great coffee mug heist. But the picture remained fixed at that point in history, liked a cultural practice transported to a new

world by an emigrant population when in its country of origin it was lost in time or completely transformed. Verity grew and changed elsewhere outside office life, but within it she remained pinned to the wall like a mounted butterfly.

Other repercussions? The great coffee mug heist contributed to the acquisition of a labelling device and thence to the plentiful and systematic supply on demand of office stationery. And though never becoming an item in the induction package about office procedures for new staff, nevertheless what became part of the subtext, the unofficial part of office procedure was the clandestine but widespread practice of labelling of personal items and the storing away in locked drawers of said items while their owners were away.

Because it is a city at odds with the extreme, where extremes break loose from time to time, autumn suits Adelaide. It's a city made for lunch.

One autumn the women took the path hand-drawn by Nell and that several of them had reconnoitred: the path flattened and fenced by council workers, past the nasturtiums and the lemon tree,

away from work to the bridge and the duck-feeding facility.

OFFICE MEMO

Can we say that autumn is particularly good, if not legendary in Adelaide?

We want to take advantage of the weather and have a picnic on a nearby grassy slope of the Torrens, in the Torrens Linear Park.

Bring crusty or dark, sour bread; a selection of cheeses and meats, olives and tomatoes; figs and apples; dips of yoghurt and cucumber; strips of smoked salmon; halva, walnuts and pecans; light wine, pink lemonade and spring water, strong milk coffee and sugar.

See you there.
Nell, Sarah and Susan

They tore bread from loaves to toss into the water below and watched whole families of ducks, some showing the bright gleam of a large single turquoise feather, as they fluttered and skittered toward the bread.

Many of the changes that took place in the office were not lost from history because of the memory microchips of the women. The history texts of the office were held in the heads of the long stayers.

In Sydney, while I was in between travel and the next job, I lived in a squat where the ghosts of former occupants, the moods and emotions of former householders, sailed through the house, through holes in the roof, through paneless windows, open doorways, rooms without furniture.

We opened the windows in the office to get some fresh air: enough for the ghosts of history to slip through, if the ghosts could find their way to the windows. They might be caught by the maze of office furniture, workstations and room dividers. So they couldn't escape. The air would become thick with them, with the strong emotions of an accumulated past.

Casual and temporary staff passed through the office regularly, brought to work for periods of overload, kept on if they showed themselves competent at a skill needed by the office at the time.

At some point in the life of the office Casey had sent around a memo to note the importance of welcoming new staff.

'I know you'll make them welcome, show them the ropes,' Casey wrote. 'And there are a lot of ropes!' she finished off.

A lot of ropes... to hang themselves with?

Forget the induction package. Welcome to the assessment committee and be prepared to have your worth assessed as a worker, a woman, a friend, a colleague, a mother, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, a wife, a lover. Be prepared to feel... big and respected; small and insignificant, a waste of space on the planet; dizzy and amusing; boring and stupid; unreliable and manipulative; competent and useful; inadequate and unhelpful.

Some would fit in, endure and prevail, understand there were rope tricks, perform the tricks skilfully. They stayed on. Why? The conditions of the job were good: the pace of work, the content, the hours, the pay. There was nothing else around. They fitted in immediately. They were eventually accepted.

Then they were welcomed into the family, like orphans, another small figure hanging out from a

window of the shoe of the old woman. And being taken to the bosom of this foster family, they struggled to remember and hold onto their own, their original blood relations.

Like an acid spill, they had to be neutralised. Their individuality threatened to dissolve. They forgot their talents.

Casey could've been earning more money as a cyberqueen in a private computing company; Isabel as a shaman or story-teller; Susan and Lou writing beat-ups in public relations; Audrey as a florist.

Some put on airs. They didn't keep their talents or ambitions quiet. They made wave motions with their tall poppy-heads and disturbed other egos, threw them out of kilter. They set a known order skew-whiff.

Some applied for jobs in bigger organisations, in another city. (What was it like in the outside world? in another office? We had forgotten. Sometimes it seemed such an intimate world in this office, such a discrete and entirely unique set of circumstances, the way it was when earth came into being as a planet, *the* planet to sustain life, that it seemed it couldn't be like this anywhere else. Except at X-lotto time, when we never won. Then

we realised other office syndicates, just like us, must be doing this too.)

There was a set of multiple definitions for sinning in the office. Something surprisingly small and off-the-cuff would prove to be a mortal sin that banned the culprit from heaven and sent them whirling through the levels of the inferno, if they didn't work quickly on damage control. The woman who trod (literally) on Lou's toes one morning in the tea-room, who talked continuously about her computer course, and, finally, as if it were the last nail in the coffin, said, 'I never pick flowers from the garden for the house.'

At this remark Sarah was open-mouthed, Audrey tut-tutted, even I had to mentally put a black cross beside her name.

Now and again, Audrey, Isabel and Lou talked about the distant past, the women who had sailed through the office. The woman who used to crawl under her desk to sleep. The one who arrived and left on the same day. The one who got up from her desk and danced in the office. The one who took Barry home at lunchtime. And the lady who lunched.

When the lady who lunched arrived in the office, she was something quite new.

'An eccentric,' Sarah said.

Wasn't Sarah the woman who used a spirit level to check the straightness of her standard rose plantings? Sarah understood crossbreeding, hybrids and new releases in the plant world; she understood the delicacy of some annuals and the hardiness of some perennials.

At the back of our heads was the question of what the lady who lunched was doing in the office, when she didn't need the money. There was a sense in which she had come here to gain a foothold in reality.

The lady who lunched crossed over from boutiques to chain- and department stores. From lunches with white linen to lunches in brown paper bags. From tea-leaves to tea bags.

Lou steered clear of the lady who lunched, deciding she was so wacky that she might actually be dangerous. Did Lou believe that the lady who lunched could, just possibly, go right off the deep end and wield a knife in the office? But mostly Lou thought she made herself unsuitable for normal social communication. We should have paid more attention to Lou.

Susan had business conversations with the lady who lunched about her outward appearance — her Italian leather shoes and boutique dresses, her expensive haircuts.

The rest of us largely kept the lady who lunched at bay; she was like a piece of jewellery we wouldn't wear to the office; we weren't about to share our version of reality easily with her. She didn't fit in with us — we held her under glass. Later Casey would say that being in the office was probably the happiest time for the lady who lunched.

The lady who lunched brought her own silver teapot and kept it in the tea-room cupboard. Morning tea became truly ceremonial until Isabel read the tea-leaves one day and abruptly became unusually circumspect about what she saw. The silver teapot drifted to the back of the cupboard.

The lady who lunched flattered Audrey, not falsely either. Perfection recognised itself. They were spotless, lintless, creaseless, crisp women. When the lady who lunched opened up a file on screen with all the 'View' settings selected, she noted the perfection of it, and she proclaimed, ah, it must be Audrey's.

'There's not an extra, unwanted space anywhere. All the indents and tabs are ordered. All tables are laid out generously. Page breaks are sensibly placed, and all the four-point spaces are inserted correctly.'

The lady who lunched had a son who, it was said, had some links with drug dealing. The lady who lunched was spurned by her socialite friends for breaking the rules of decorum.

Isabel's past life, in another, bigger city, as a gangster's moll, still, on occasion, inserted itself into her present existence. Some time before, over morning tea, the gangster's moll offered the lady who lunched a hired gun to get rid of the socialites hassling her.

Of a man bothering Isabel herself in the past, she said she told him, 'If you don't stop bothering me voluntarily, I'll get someone to make you,' and she never saw him again.

The son of the lady who lunched got headlines in our small city-state when he was gunned down/turned a gun on himself in a house/street shoot-out. The lady who lunched turned up for work at the office the Monday morning after her son's death on the weekend in the media-circus shoot-out.

We bought her a bouquet of white flowers: roses in bud, daisies, tuberoses, carnations.

In the end, Lou was right. Perhaps not on the details.

One Monday morning the lady who lunched didn't turn up at the office. She didn't turn up anywhere. The lady who lunched had wielded an instrument — a knife, a gun, some chemical substance — on herself, outside the office, at home, in her private space.

Audrey lost a temporary, a transient ally. She had lost her husband and her children too. But she had her corgi; she had her gold-leaf-topped columns; she had her artificially coloured carnations; she had the office. She would survive.

The lady who lunched left the silver teapot in the tea-room. We never thought of returning it to the family. We began to think that it wasn't out of place in the tea-room.

Among the office supplies of tea, coffee, sugar and washing-up liquid there was also a tin of silver polish. It was a great stress-reducer to take ourselves into the tea-room and polish the teapot. On occasion, for one reason or another, someone could be found, alone, in the tea-room, quietly

polishing. Sarah, Nell and Isabel shared a taste for herbal teas, and we would find them sipping some brew that calmed, energised or purified, all of these only enhanced by brewing in the silver pot.

What would happen when the long stayers had left the office and the teapot remained? Its history would be lost. It would be perceived as an icon.

Late in the afternoon of the picnic on the Torrens, Isabel took the silver teapot from her basket, hidden beneath a tea-towel. The women grew silent. Isabel took out a large thermos flask of hot water. She put tea-leaves in the pot, poured in the water. The women waited their turn. They looked at the river or watched the business of insects, played with grass stems between their fingers or toes. They had a sip of the hot, dark brew.

The women took photos of each other. Later, the photos were pinned up on the noticeboard in the office, a visual accompaniment to the collective memory of the history of the office life.

The history of the lady who lunched had interrupted that of the office, briefly, one trajectory crossing another. And the history of the office continued,

without the lady who lunched; we continued, like the tides, the change of seasons.

The office had a life of its own, not dependent on any one individual, that would come to an end, perhaps, only if all of us, *en masse*, didn't turn up.

The constant chatter was electronic, through email and voicemail, and paper-based through memos, from mouse-to-mouse and mouth-to-mouth. There was an unfolding of events, and the ideas about these events transmuted, keeping pace with the rhythm of the unfolding. Talk would take place at desks, behind screens or in offices and then in diagonals across the central walk-though space.

So that linked as the women were in a computer network, in an emotional web, the gossip became a character in the office, a many-voiced conversation acting as one force.

Neither the pulsing of a microchip nor the shuffling of paper seemed to threaten the story-telling characteristic of the tea-room. The women dealt every day with such a volume of texts derived

from other people that they felt the need to create their own.

'No wonder it's called a Postscript printer,' said Lou, 'everything we deal with seems to be an addendum.'

'Oh, it's a long story,' said Nell when asked for an explanation of a summarising description of an event in her life.

'Well, you can't say that and not tell the story,' said Sarah.

'No, in other words she means "Fuck off",' said Lou.

'No. In other words, I mean it's a long story,' replied Nell.

In the tea-room, conversation had the dynamic of competition. The women could disregard each other breezily in conversation, interrupt and override each other. Individual women asserted themselves, forced their way into the conversation. This was the common tactic among the women. They took up the challenge.

'The Peking duck at the Nanking Cafe is the best in the city,' said Susan, with sophistication, and it would cross none of the women's minds to challenge her.

'Try lavenders and hebes. The bonus is you'd have a colour-coded garden in purples, pinks or whites. And there's always roses, surprisingly tough for such delicate-looking flowers,' Sarah said, and all the women felt secure that something would survive in their gardens.

Sometimes it was a long while before a woman found an opening for her own story in a morning-tea or afternoon-tea session.

'What did I want to remember to say when I crossed my fingers?' Isabel mooned.

Casey read from newspaper articles about the triumph, or further oppression, of women. 'She's sitting for her law exams while she's pregnant, working and mothering two other kids.'

'When I'm in the shower and I look down at the drain hole, I don't know whether it's cobwebs or grey hair,' said Casey. She continued, 'I don't have time to clean the bathroom. I've grown old in this office'.

They told of small samplings, the mundane and the routine.

Stories were repeated over time and often within minutes of a previous telling.

'Just as I pulled up at the curb, the cover came down on the automatic teller — I could see it through

the passenger window. I couldn't believe it!' said Susan.

Story-telling was interactive and communal. In any one story they told, the women cut and pasted parts from a number of other stories. They inserted one in another or separated them to make a number of brand new stories.

'What a bitch.'
'Uh... I never use that term about women.'

'Read out my stars.'
'"Travel is highlighted this month".'

'Are you making tea?'

'Why does he do it! Every time we sit down to tea, in he comes. We should have a cup of tea ready. It's like this is what we do all day.'

'The name "Graham" always reminds me of brown corduroy.'

'She's a cold fish, and I'm not the only one that thinks so.'

'You have to return your office keys to him. He has keys from offices that are no longer there.'

'He probably has the doors too. He's got them at home and every night he locks them and every morning unlocks them.'

'I've done a forced migration of worms from the vegetable to the flower beds.'

'A diaspora of worms.'

'An ethnic cleansing.'

'I won the "Pelargoniums in Unusual Containers" prize.'

'Oh yeah, what did you do?'

'There were the predictable boots and toothbrush holders. But I set one in red jelly.'

'Has anyone got the death notices?'

'We put pieces of apple in the trap. They're so noisy at night! We're just not sleeping. All that heavy breathing...'

'Vampire possums! You should put garlic and a crucifix in the trap.'

'The cats have bells and beg at the back door.'

'Hare Krishna cats!'

'He says she was difficult. Everything's fine now she's gone.'

'That's because men can't cope with strong, competent women.'

'Women can't cope with strong, competent women.'

'I love that film. Burt Lancaster's Starbuck. He tries to call Katherine Hepburn Alessandra, and she's called Lizzie. Wendell Corey calls his dog Dog, and he's called File!'

'I was born in the year Blue Poles was painted.'

'I don't get angry very often. But when I do, I explode.'

'They hate each other's guts.'
'It's a strange thing to say: "They hate each other's guts". Is that because guts are offal and they're really unattractive?'

'Oh, look, forget it.'

'He's my PMT pincushion, my emotional rallying point.'

'"Pejorative" is a word I've always wanted to use, but I've only ever used "derogative".'

'"Putative" is a word I've always wanted to use, but I've only ever used "pejorative".'

Occasionally we had visits from theatre companies who performed shows around the city for workers in their lunch hour. Once we had an offer from a travelling story-teller.

We were happy to pool our coins and sit for one lunchtime with our sandwiches in the tea-room and listen for an hour to an old fable, a revamped fairly tale, a ghost story, a story from life.

But the story-teller couldn't perform.

She couldn't find the beginning of her chosen story. She was sure she hadn't forgotten it.

She opened her mouth, hoping that movement of lip and tongue would get her started, would set her story free. There was a clearing of the throat, an intake of air across the lips; there were a few garbled sounds, strange noises, not resembling our known language but more like the

music of discord, and then silence. She knew something was wrong.

'I can't tell a story here,' she said.

She sensed that this was place full of stories; that there was no room for hers.

In the tea-room her head had become an echo chamber, filled with many stories, or a many-voiced story, she couldn't tell which. At one point she said it was like the humming of bees. She left not long after she arrived, holding her head, as if in pain, slightly dazed.

The women entered the business world via a series of windows, opening them up initially through icons, a file manager, a menu selection.

A computer window framed the women's view of text and graphics. The window might only show a portion of what they viewed, but it was easily and readily adjusted by scrolling.

The women could maximise or minimise their views at will. They could open several windows and view them side by side as tiles on the splashback of their kitchen sinks, or set them stacked behind each other like their dishes in the drainer. They

could shift between these, plucking one from below to place it on top, opening and closing, inscribing themselves on both, one after the other. In the future they could look straight down on a stack of planes and move around and behind as in a third dimension.

They closed down each window, one by one.

The view from my office was of a large, neat square of grass and sky. This was the window view I had dreamed about.

People from another, larger world moved into and out of the window-frame.

The window framed part of a flight path. Occasionally an aeroplane, shrunken in the distance, sailed silently across the thin opaque membrane of grey-white air.

It was not a view of the whole world. It was a snapshot capturing one small part of a 90° view. But within that snapshot view, bright green blades of grass pushed through the dark brown humus; gulls landed from the sea and galahs gathered to feed; goal posts were shifted; soccer stars were made; adolescents shared secrets beneath lone saplings; children chased kites or tried to catch

balls; golfers improved their swing; students, homemakers, other workers made tracks, heads bowed or looking into the distance, dreaming of the near future, of the late afternoon or evening, the nighttime meal, rest in bed, of rising again to repeat their tracks.

The chronicler as an onlooker, as an observer, sees most of the game.

This chronology is more or less events in a more or less linear time frame. But much more than that is a miswriting, a misreading, a misinterpretation. The condition of telling one story is that others are not told.

I am circumscribed in my interpretation of events in the office by my own participation in them. I may be prejudiced. I may be moved to exaggeration — even fantasy — in an effort to entertain.

These are the reasons for tolerance on the reader's part of any oversights, inaccuracies, inversions, revisions, (re)interpretations and/or (re)inventions on my part.

Need I be anxious about my trustworthiness? You, dear reader, will be on the lookout: measuring, picking over — fingering, as you would items offered

for sale in a market — what you will accept and what you will reject, weighing up, setting in balance against your own experiences, your own understanding of the world of work.

Now the chronicler throws down the gauntlet! She issues a challenge.

> 'Hear me skinks in the expansion joints of the concrete blocks; ducks in the River Torrens, frogs. Hear me Verity, Audrey and Isabel. Hear me Nell, Sarah, Lou, Susan and Casey. Hear me nasturtium seed, lemon blossom and grass root... Tell your story if you will. Do not begrudge me my story. I agree: I am sure I have distorted. I admit to perversion. Tell your story. Mine is here to set against all other versions. The way is open for... Barry, Big Daddy... the office walls, the river, the city...'

Barry was a man with pre-menstrual tension. Casey decided it was to our advantage to chart his cycle, so we could work his mood swings to our advantage. There were lots of wall charts in various offices, particularly in Barry's whose job it was to

have wall charts, charting the motility of staff; the production of documents; the indexing of jobs for the day, week, month and year; the installation of deadlines; the orbit of money; the gurgitation of the mean temperatures of the air-conditioning.

So another wall chart in another office, especially one disguised in a secret code to simulate just another wall chart, would not raise any eyebrows.

When any of us went to meetings with Barry, or made requests, or had discussions, the day of the month and the response was noted. When we established a regular pattern, we made requests for things we wanted on the days we could predict he would be positive. When the wall chart predicted that he would be negative, we would avoid important meetings, discussions and critical requests.

Casey changed her screen saver monthly, depending on the date she had calculated for the day Barry would begin to menstruate.

The computer screen saver was only one segment of our identity, to which we added other segments through opportunities offered in an electronic office: voicemail security codes, computer messages, log-on and email passwords.

Film titles from Hollywood were used: *The Rainmaker*. Lovers' nicknames. The holy days in the Lenten calendar, or feast days of the Roman Catholic church year: The Assumption. Shakespeare's women: Rosalind. Great operas: Samson and Delilah. Elizabeth Taylor's husbands (first names only): Eddie. (Audrey had to explain to the younger Sarah who Fisher and Reynolds were.) Plants in a perennial border working from the back row from tallest to smallest: foxglove.

The screen savers were like street graffiti: 'Eternity' or 'You control the creaminess'. Susan scanned in the symbol of the goddess. Nell typed in the name of her latest rose purchase: 'Rosa Mundi'. I had the text, 'The office as a boat', in light blue 8-point type, sailing at a medium-slow speed across a dark blue background.

Barry swung between inane, self-serving aphorisms about management practices by money-motivated entrepreneurs from the U.S. — 'Make your customer believe he's [sic] the winner' — and a quote from Taoist writings: 'The way of the superior man [sic] is rare'.

Casey thought of slipping vitamin B, recommended by all the women's health centre pamphlets,

into Barry's coffee fourteen days before he was due to menstruate. Susan remained impassive as she was on HRT. Nell suggested calcium, evening primrose oil, vitamin E, iron or ginseng.

We lined up all these capsules like game tokens, as we did for ourselves of a morning on our kitchen shelves, and prepared to dump them into Barry's coffee.

There were some failures while we made the chart, worked out the twenty-eight-day cycle for prediction. But we had successes and as these increased in number, it went to our heads. We became reckless. Nell thought she could get extra time at lunch to go home and feed her ducks and Sarah to water her pot-plants.

Susan was our wild card. We suspected that times of the month would bear no weight on Barry's response to Susan.

To be successful in corporate life was to be initiated into complex games. It was to adopt specific rules.

Susan had brushed her hair back off her head. There was no frizz, no loose or straying hairs. She could have worn it shiny and smoothed with gloss. But Susan was a redhead. So she left it unglossed.

She realised the smartness of subduing its flame. Her hairstyle said business; it said no nonsense. It said power.

She wore short, tight skirts and tailored jackets, in cool ice green, bright lolly pink or sober and powerful black. 'The way to a happy life,' she proclaimed, 'is seven outfits for the week.' Shoulder pads, if she wore them at all, were reduced and discreet. Whole bags of large shoulder pads that had formerly made the shoulders of her jackets look like airport runways were now gathering dust and taking up valuable space in her wardrobe drawers.

Susan flirted, flustered around the office like a flibbertigibbet, a foolish virgin, some low-life female creation of Jane Austen's. Her skills were dazzling, for she was as adept at playing the wise woman as she was the fool. She was a changeling, a chameleon, a woman for all seasons.

Whenever there was a social gathering in the office, she made sure she sat near the men. At celebrations she squeezed herself in beside the men at crowded tables, not moving down the length of the table to where there was a space among the women. She cornered the men in corridors. She directed all her conversation to them.

Susan was bilingual. She was equally at home in the language of deferring to higher authority, of competing and winning, as in the language of caretaking and connection, reflection and self-analysis.

Susan had the skills of timing, negotiation, communication, research. And she had the commitment to individuation and to be male-identified.

She fluttered her eyelashes at the men, hung on their every word, laughed at their jokes ('Flattery gets you everywhere,' she said), all but patted their bums. She drank with them on Friday nights.

Susan discouraged us from contact with the men: 'Oh, he's hopeless,' she'd say of Barry.

The main business show was made up of equal opportunity guidelines and sexual harassment policy, which set the tone in the office. But the side-shows of inappropriate behaviour could be caught now and again. They were odd, unpredictable moments, like the spawning of coral. To be a witness was to be in the right spot at the right time. These moments were increasingly rare.

Valentine's Day was Susan's opportunity to give Barry a personal gift. This was another step to secure her future.

Barry wasn't Susan's kind of man. He presented no challenge. He was too easy to manipulate. Barry was on the Mr Bean end of her sliding scale of masculine phenomena, and she hankered after Mr Darcy at the top end.

She bought Barry a box of luxurious cherry liqueur chocolates, the cherries in the liqueur in the centre of the chocolates as red as pulsing hearts.

Casey walked into Barry's office. She was in pursuit of a request on a day that the wall chart said he would be positive. Susan was popping one of the chocolates into Barry's mouth, open and waiting before her. Maybe the aroma of chocolate and the fumes of the liqueur had gone to their heads. Susan did a quick turnabout and said the chocolates were from all of the women. But none of the three people in Barry's office believed her.

Things did actually look like they were getting out of hand. Barry used cherry liqueur chocolates as a motif in his next office memo, making some kind of connection between productivity and desire. Fortunately, things remained at this literary length. Liqueur chocolates were never mentioned outside of this one instance, nor did the memos again

feature literary tropes. We took this as proof that at least the vitamin B was working.

Excitement for Barry, who lived to file, was the event horizon of his acquisition of an electronic organiser. In a meeting he asked Big Daddy, wanting to assess its Ks of RAM: 'How big is yours?' Unusual for Barry, but on this occasion he had the grace to turn red with embarrassment.

Barry forever won the day in meetings.

His first method was the use of his satellite phone. Barry had already moved beyond the cellular mobile phone — a phone for losers, as far as he was concerned. Barry, action man.

He came to a meeting dressed in his satellite dish. His wife had been a milliner and was returning to the profession as hats came into vogue again. She had made clever use of the kitchen colander, choosing one with its drainage holes placed around the sides in a decorative flower pattern. This was upturned on his head and fitted with antennae.

When a phone call came during the meeting, the antennae bristled, a humming noise started up until he opened a small, black leather bag, a cross

between an old-fashioned doctor's bag and a school lunch box, from which we almost expected him to take sao biscuits wrapped in grease-proof paper, a shiny red apple and a small bottle of milk. In a corner of the bag provision had been made for a mini bottle of spirits and a glass tumbler. Out from the bag came a phone with the heavy black handles. Into it he slung statements at compatriots, Barry clones, in different time zones across the globe. The ubiquitous lunch box, the phone, the satellite-dish headpiece, all said that Barry was about more important business than we were; that he was connected to more important people than we; that his time was worth more money than ours.

He second method was 'the initialisation of brain death'. He did this by droning on. By being incomprehensible. By spiritedly spraying jargon about. By making a non-judicious use of repetition. By a judicious use of speed and convoluted sentences. This methodology was a way of silencing opposition, because no-one could find their own entry point onto his monologic freeway, a freeway full of Barry clones speeding along, absolutely insensitive to anyone else.

The conversation of the powerful, the successful, the achiever, the controller was the conversation of the front of the head: businesslike, unemotional, clear, logical, tactical. It was the conversation of the tie and business suit; the conversation of the shoulder pad.

Men liked talk with clean lines: reports, information, figures and statistics. They liked a talk with dualism and binary opposition. They liked to lecture, to state a case and defeat the alternative, to demonstrate their difference and superiority. They liked statements, commands and orders. They wanted to set limits to discussion, to get things done.

Suits were the language of men. If you didn't dress in a suit you weren't understood; you weren't even heard. Without the grammar of the suit, the syntax of the tie and business shirt, the punctuation of the fly at the crotch, the men didn't see the women. They saw the women as a blur, or they looked through and past the women; the men didn't hear the women, or they might hear them but didn't understand them: the women spoke a kind of gobbledegook.

There was a message in Barry's drone. There had to be. Barry had to cover his tracks. No-one could claim that they had never been told anything by Barry. But the message was hidden in the drone, nested away as in a series of Chinese boxes. This was because almost always the message was unpalatable to us. It was usually a policy or practice against our better interests. And here it was, nested so far into his drone that he lost us, as he had planned to do, before we realised what he was saying.

Barry usually worked by a projection into the future based on a descriptive analysis of the women's past and current positions:

> The convergence of the combination of quality assurance and equity requirements having arisen essentially from mechanisms for recognition of perceived best practice options and further social reform agenda and forming a context characterised by a complex mix of factors as determinants which not unexpectedly impact on a far-reaching range of stakeholders, the obligation of reintegration arising as well not unnaturally out of unprecedented quanti-

tative and qualitative changes occurring at a corporate-wide level have provided such understandings that a determination has been arrived at not without significant consultation amongst staff at critically significant points in the organisation to consolidate further sustained performance levels...

'Never underestimate Barry': Casey repeated this mantra to herself.

Barry ruled in the kingdom of the long-winded. He held sway in the tower of Babel.

Inevitably, it was not long in a meeting where Barry was king before everyone's neurones were snapping, their dendrites shrinking and drying off at the ends, like fern fronds in hot sun and wind. Their brain circuitry broke as if there had been a power failure. Their lights went out; their systems went down. Up there in their brains, everything was dead and dull. They could hear — but they had lost their ability to interpret. They couldn't think, even to put two words together to interrupt, like 'Please stop'.

Big Daddy knew business. For him, suits were the lingua franca.

But the collar of the business shirt was stiff. It rubbed Big Daddy's neck and made red marks there. He was hot in summer, when he could easily be wearing something that draped softly, that fitted loosely, something that was gathered, even ruffled or laced, something in pink, chartreuse, turquoise or tangerine, mustard, maroon or bottle green.

We noticed big Daddy's socks. He seemed to have an amazing number of pairs, in a staggering range of hues of all the colours he needed.

'He probably stands in front of his wardrobe's open drawers at home of a morning and gloats,' said Casey.

'He's created sock heaven there,' said Susan, a lover of sock varieties herself. 'It'd be like a drug. He'd get a hit every morning.'

'He'd have his first orgasm of the day,' said Lou.

All Fridays in the office were black. All Fridays in the office were the 13th.

The week built up through Tuesday and Wednesday.

'Tuesday's a mountain,' said Sarah.

Perhaps Wednesday was a plateau and Thursday the downhill side.

But the week didn't in fact ease off Thursday and Friday, but rather built up to a crescendo on Friday, just when the women's spirits for productivity at work — or was it only mine, only my psychological weakness — were flagging, and they were looking forward to the relief offered by the break of the weekend.

I aimed not to be in the office on Fridays. I determined to be out of the office on Fridays, out of the pull of the vortex, the black hole at the end of the week, away from the death-wish syndrome that led to rank weeds and grey headstones.

For a while, I drank every Friday night, vomited into gutters, was hung over for a full day, a day that disappeared off the time sheet of my life with no trace of lived experience. For a while I reinvented the lost weekend, caught myself in a time warp, a whirlpool, and had to lift myself up and out by my bootstraps, defy gravity, forge a projectile out of Fridays after a full week in the office.

I said to Sarah, 'All the really terrible things in the office happen on Fridays.'

And later, after further terrible things happened on Friday, Sarah agreed and repeated to

me, 'You were right when you said, "All terrible things in the office happen on Fridays".'

The death of Bwana, Isabel's Great Dane; the great coffee mug heist; the announcement of the death of the lady who lunched — all occurred on a Friday.

Casual Days were on Fridays in the office.

We had a visit from Big Daddy on a Friday.

Big Daddy instituted Casual Days (or Dress Up Days — DUDS — as they were known to the office staff). He saw himself as an advanced New Age manager.

Casual Days in the office were disastrous, in a fashion sense.

It was really just a case of him, and Barry, wanting to be in the spotlight, wanting to be stars of a musical comedy, or a costume drama; maybe they just wanted to dress up; or maybe they wanted to flaunt their otherwise repressed subjectivity as cross-dressers.

On Casual Days... well, everyone could dress down. Mostly this was aimed at the men. Dress down should have meant chinos, jeans, T-shirts (of quality, preferably designer label). But Big Daddy

came in a red and gold-embroidered coat dress of a mandarin, and Barry in short, puffed pants and hose, looking like a tennis-ball version of a beach-ball King Henry VIII, an individual pork pie compared to an family-size meat pie.

Big Daddy's Friday afternoon visit was announced by a brief phone call from his secretary to Casey who then made the announcement to the office.

The air in the office was charged like air in a digital printing press. The revolving drum, electrostatically charged, broke up the air surrounding it into ions and electrons, in preparation for the development of the latent electrostatic image.

Casey called us to gather in the central area, in the walk-through space.

We responded like concentration camp inmates: we grew silent and gathered by shuffling ourselves forward.

Big Daddy came into the office tense and stiff.

Big Daddy's visit was totally unexpected. Something we were totally unprepared for: most of us were? some of us were?

I admit that I am not privy, like an omniscient being, to everything that went on in the office.

Among some of the women there was knowledge. Who the women were and the extent of their knowledge was never made public. Knowledge was divided into the cells of the honeycomb, as if each cell contained a different variety of honey, made by the same process but coming from different sources, tasting different, meaning something different.

Lou knew. Like a fly on the wall, Lou always knew. Of course, she was the instigator.

Who had Lou spoken to? What, together, had they spoken about? I wasn't there and hadn't spoken to anyone who was. Why had Big Daddy responded as he did? It was a history that needed to be researched, like the causes of a world war. A subject for a doctoral thesis.

It was Lou who wondered why we had to hover round Audrey's ego, her flower, her core of being, tiptoeing, lest it break.

Lou confronted Audrey, 'What is your problem?'

Audrey turned on her heels in a huff, while we continued to do her bidding like worker bees for their queen — the resplendent source, the longest surviving. We flapped our wings incessantly like honeyeaters, cooling any heated air likely to inflame her.

On occasion Lou had morning tea with Barry's secretary; she whinged to him; he whinged to Barry; Barry whinged to Big Daddy; and Big Daddy whinged to us.

It didn't take long in the meeting to sense that Big Daddy was out of control. Big Daddy clearly hadn't thought through what he was about to do. We surmised that he acted on the spur of the moment, more than likely when he was upset about something else, some stressful event or a series of such events that had coloured his day or week.

Audrey was agitated, though few of us were aware of it until she cried out, flustered and in tears, before Big Daddy had named her, before he had pointed the bone.

She cried out, 'I knew it was me. I knew it was me,' like a quiz-show contestant, winning, or losing, as if she possessed the art of prophecy, already knowing that this episode was entirely disastrous. It was not an outcry in artless exuberance, but in distress.

Big Daddy said he'd received complaints about Audrey. He concluded she was a disruptive element in the office, adversely affecting working processes and productivity. Big Daddy had received com-

plaints from several sources, and he was tired of it. He had chosen to do it in the group, because, he said, he thought the group knew and understood.

But no-one responded with criticisms of Audrey. No-one concurred with Big Daddy. Was he expecting support, and disloyalty and treachery from the women? Whereas the group protected and saved. On that day we would never have done otherwise.

'I've realised I've worked most of my life in unjust conditions,' Casey said. 'I used to think it was me.'

A history made and formed could never be completely erased. Like fossil records, if we dug deep enough into our memories of office life, if we scraped back the layers of our emotional lives triggered by a variety of incidents in the office, there would be laid bare the records of this particular incident; as if, with our elephantine memories, we never forgot, and, like addicts or feral human beings, returned to old ways.

At best, public and working life were in transition, shifting between something new and these old ways.

On the days I consciously composed myself to present a public self, even this didn't work. People saw through it.

What is it like when you get up in the morning? What do you see in the mirror? What is your reaction to what you see in the mirror? Do you then begin to develop the mask to transform your face, like the passage of a cloud across the sun?

Some masks are inept and reveal too much.

After a recent haircut I looked fresh and young, bright and cheerful, even when I seemed to be dying inside, curling up and cracking like a dead leaf, when I seemed to be full of hate, when love was low in the office.

The office seemed to generate hate. I was glad I loved my lover, that my lover loved me. Tenderness was reaffirmed, absent from the office.

Over time I would make adjustments to office culture. In the office I needed to be bilingual. It was much easier when I realised this. In the office I had an ascribed role to play. Others had their roles. There was a constant shift between two paradigms, a breaking down of dualities and binary forms. It was much easier when I realised this.

Some time toward the end of chronicling the life of the office, I was eating an evening meal of tom yum soup in a cheap restaurant in Rundle Street.

Eating alone, I read. I read that 'the universe is microcosm and macrocosm, and in this duality all things exist simultaneously shaped by subatomic and cosmic laws'.[5]

Cafe society seemed to have sprung up lively and cluttered, overnight in the city. There were other streets of cafe society across the suburbs, equal in number to those purveying cafe society in bigger cities. Sydney's Oxford, Victoria and Norton Streets, and Melbourne's Brunswick and Lygon Streets.

The food in this restaurant in Rundle Street, though cheap, was not nasty; it was food that had distinct and delicate flavours. Simple and full of fresh ingredients. In the small bowl of tom yum soup, coloured from chilli to the hue of dried blood, fresh coriander, prawns, cucumber, mushrooms and a slice of lemon were to be found.

The owner's son sat in the restaurant to do his maths homework. And the owner was there, working

[5] Aldridge, Greg, 'Immanent Departures: Poetics of Immanence' [A review of an exhibition, North Adelaide School of Art Gallery, 25 February-18 March], *Broadsheet*, volume 23, number 2, 1994, winter, page 29.

all day, always emotionally on an even keel — a matter-of-fact woman who understood the benefits gained from no frills, as if a restaurant was truly a service to people who wanted good food but not to hand over a fortune for it. A woman whose private life was her public life, whose leisure and work mixed. She served her customers and she served her family; the food that fed her customers fed herself and her family.

This evening meal in a public place is a time when you are thoughtful, because you are in a public place as an observer. It is possibly that you are alone; possibly that you are in one of those fully populated city streets flanked by hotels, wine bars and cafes, bookshops, and shops full of *objets d'art* for the body and the home. And there are many passers-by, the soft light of the night favouring them, their huddling in the cool air making them seem vulnerable. At night, seeking sustenance, they look busy, involved, even rapturous. They are mostly young, mostly students and artists who can afford a kind of casualness behind their purposefulness.

Possibly it's the time. Out in the world, at dinnertime, midweek, when usually you were in the

domestic space. But it's dark; it's night; you're amid strangers, and you are paying for service. You have come in for sustenance yourself. And this has led you to think.

In a cafe you overhear a thousand different small conversations, not necessarily knowing what is being said, but surmising the gist of things, the cafe being an eavesdropper's paradise, an observer's Eden because of the crammed tables, because of the plate glass windows.

The cafe's a place of transmutables. There is the addictive drug of coffee. You can write — a letter, a journal, an assignment — and still be part of the action. You can be creative in a created environment. If you go into a cafe, you're not alone; what you're doing forms part of the ambience, the interaction. It's like sharing a communal house, being part of a family.

In history — or is it myth? — the cafe has been the place to write stories.

I haven't written this history in the office. I've never thought to do that. What would it be like to go into the office and write this history? The Internet and email invite, even more than the phone, a kind of story-telling based on the gossip

mode or the monologue of character. Currently, as I write, the Internet and email are undisciplined spaces, available for stories before they are edited and categorised for delivery. But such a freedom, a chaos, an anarchy of language doesn't accord easily with the office space. The very walls hum with the structure of a bureaucratic language, a way of speaking that is highly manipulated, giving the appearance of one dimension, being unemotional, factual and objective, in which varieties of truth are massaged out of recognition. Perhaps the office suits story-telling! Many story-tellers hire office space for their work.

In a cafe you are led to think speculatively. Other, similar times when you are led to think in such a way are those magnificent spring days, when you have come out of hibernation, and the warm blood flows and the limbs begin to flex and move gently as if for some time in spring you were in a daily callisthenics class. And the lighter clothing you can wear is so much the embodiment of all of this movement and flux. The softer lighter materials of your clothing blow gently around your body; breezes drift across your skin. And you can sit in chairs outside the cafe and come so much

closer to the life passing by that you've been observing.

And it struck me that what I read was exactly what I wanted to say about the office, about the lives of the women in the office.

We dealt with office business like a journalist would dailies in a newsroom, aware, really, all the time, in our peripheral vision, through the office doors or windows, of the bigger processes going on behind, ahead, all around us, which affected us and which we embraced. We knew the horizon, the boundary lines set by our work but also what lay beyond.

There were open moments that some of the women were prepared to leap through; they saw a window opening in the distance and prepared and positioned themselves ahead of time to step into a fourth dimension, the hologram of their life.

They would establish what security they could, with gusto, but not injure their spirits. Their current self-definitions were dropped like safety nets, and they swung over the abyss, heading for a new self — for who they wished to become.

What happened to dinosaurs? Dinosaurs changed. Dreamed something else and became it. Transmuted, transformed. Exchanged scales for feathers. Transcended extinction. Became birds.

We spent lifetimes in the office, significant phases of our adulthood, going through maturity, midlife crises and menopause. We shed former habits and beliefs, reinvented ourselves, traces of our former selves informing the directed creation of our current selves.

Audrey looked to religion for her retirement, without acknowledging Isabel's (positive) influence, and kept a statue of St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, on her dashboard, expecting to keep one step ahead of the peak-hour traffic, as if she was superwoman on wheels.

For herself, Isabel kept up martial arts, steadily working her way through a series of coloured belts.

Sarah would become a prize-winning amateur horticulturalist, interviewed on gardening programs, her garden photographed for gardening magazines. 'She's gone leaf-mould mad,' Casey would say.

Nell, in a dramatic career move, began a course in parks and wildlife management. 'Any vegies ready?' she asked Sarah. They were for her

first assignment in biology. 'I have to study the respiration rate of carrot tissue.'

Susan qualitatively and quantitatively increased the elegance of her appearance. There were always more suits and perfumes to discuss and consume. A series of invitations continued to arrive in the mail.

With the aim of self-publishing, Lou began to write a manual on her own brand of creative journalism.

Casey networked herself to the world, to regenerate as a mutably gendered cyborg. As a telecommuter, she sped down the highway from her one day in the office to the *chaise-longue* on her patio, keeping herself on track, navigating by the white lines in the road's centre, accompanied by the hum of optic-fibre cable laid there underneath, to her beach house where most working days she set the cable humming herself with reconstructed text, while she attuned her own consciousness to the roll of ocean waves.

So that the women, once they accepted the disturbance change brought, and dealt with their initial reactions, prepared to live with the uncertainty, going with the forward movement of the office.

It rained like it never rained in Adelaide. It rained like it rained in Melbourne. It rained like it rained in Gippsland: no-one could tell where all that water came from. In the early morning the sky could be blue; by around midmorning clouds drifted across the vastness; by late afternoon it looked like the end of the world.

It stormed. It pelted rain. It pelted sheets of rain. It pelted hailstones. It rained shattering windowpanes, continuous, countless slithers of glass.

Across the CBD, computers were switched off. City workers moved to windows or opened doors to stand at doorways, in porches and under arches, in those architectural spaces at halfway points that provided protection from the opening skies, but at the same time let them smell rain, breathe it into their lungs, let them feel the cool on their skins.

There was a quiet moment in the office, full of small movements that were steady and smooth in execution by each woman. A moment magic with synchronicity. They put their pens down, cut short phone calls, lifted fingers from keyboards, turned their gaze from computer screens.

Water tumbled over the wall of a dam. Floodwaters spread from a dam in a fan shape across the

flood plains of the northern and western suburbs. Immense volumes of water filled the bed of a usually small stream. Water flowed in waves from the Torrens' till its actual rising, its ever-increasing depth was hard to ascertain. But the Torrens Linear Park fulfilled its design promise: the floodwaters were moving at a great rate towards the Gulf.

News reports were delivered histrionically, hysterically: the flooding a spectacle for some reporters in helicopters.

In the office, the last things to be switched off were the women's individual transistors, now that they themselves were the best interpreters of this present event.

'Oh, Saints Brendan and Erasmus!' Isabel said instinctively. 'This time we might really take off!'

'Yeah,' someone replied. No need to record a single name for history. For the response — the recognition of correctness, the recognition of a mutual fate willingly shared without question — was from all, all of the office, all of the women, expressing a communal desire.

The women had come out from individual offices to stand in doorways. They faced each other. Looks, glances passed between and among

them. Knowing looks, knowing glances. Nothing was said.

The office shook.

'Oh!'

'Ah!'

But there was only a momentary concern for danger, replaced by the thrill of anticipation. The women went to the office windows either to convince themselves of the storm's reality, or to have a front-row seat to view their future, full as it was of present moments.

The floodwaters lapped at the office floor, made the office buoyant, shifting it from its foundations. The office slid quickly, smoothly, quietly, all of a piece, from solidity to a fluid, a floating world. Into the swirling waters, nearer now to rich damp and gnarled root, to tangle and thicket, to fern, moss and spore. To decomposition, recycling, rebirth, regrowth.

The office seemed stationary, moving only from side to side, swaying, gaining equilibrium, settling on the floodwaters. The women were thrown to the office floor. Thrown to one side of the office. Thrown to the other.

Casey yelled out, 'Spread out equally so we balance the building.'

Then the office began to take off, move ahead along the river's course.

The women looked at each other across the office.

'What ho, me hearties!' Isabel yelled.

The women pulled the flyscreens from windows, pushed out the safety grills and waved madly at Big Daddy and Barry, returning from a business lunch, figures pacing beside the flooded river-bank, trying to keep up with the floating office.

'Bye, bye Big Daddy! Good luck. You'll need it! See if you can manage without us!' cried Audrey.

'Bye, bye Barry. Bye, bye,' yelled Lou.

'You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone!' Casey sang.

'Shoo, bop, bop,' sang the women.

Figures in ties, shirts and pants, turned toward the river, paced along beside the flooded river-bank, paused and pointed at the floating office, keeping it in view.

The women looked out to the swirling waters of the Torrens just ahead, white water in swell as it had never been, but might be, on Tasmania's Franklin perhaps, in a mountain valley, under a

waterfall, and between sheer cliff faces where shouts and cries of excitement echoed and bounced frantically like the rush of foam itself.

A few women hung out from the windows as if off a catamaran and were held solidly by their hips and thighs by other women, as if by rope stays, yelling and whooping, while others tied tea-towels to the window-frames, flying them as signal flags and emblems.

Outside, on the river-bank, with coffee cups, pens and paper, with folders, briefcases and laptops, office workers stared out to the river where a whole building and its contents, human and inanimate, sailed mightily and safely like a marvellous ocean-going liner. They pointed and waved and ran the length of the balconies to keep the office in view.

The women gathered glasses and coffee mugs, and champagne that had been in the fridge for months — left over from a Melbourne Cup lunch, Easter or Christmas. They toasted the bewildered figures behind the walls of glass and stone; toasted the figures at balconies; toasted the madcap who rushed down as close as they could to the river.

As the office sailed jauntily, with purpose down the river, the women toasted themselves in a circle in the central office space. They pushed open the front door, and Audrey stood full in the open doorway, the river opening up before her. The women brushed out Audrey's permed hair so that the wind blew through it. Her bosom, thrust out, pointed courageously toward her destiny, the destiny of the office of women. She held out a glass of champagne, toasting the river.

Some women kept watch on landmarks, recalling, in among them, the ones from the autumn picnic. Past the nasturtiums, the lemon tree, the bridge and the duck-feeding facility. Past the picnic's grassy slope. Slipping, plop, down the small waterfall. Past quiet and respectable suburbs with park or gardens, valley, downs, field or gully in their title, past suburbs of cream brick, arched garden walls and terracotta tile, where fencing was outlawed by local council decree. Crossing the women's dreaming tracks, heading straight from the city to the sea. Past reserves, ovals and playing fields, school buildings and club rooms. Living out now a version of Colonel Light's dream of sailing between the city centre and a harbour.

Across Adelaide, trips in private vehicles would have to be re-routed or abandoned. Vehicular motorised public transport would be unsafe because of water-affected brakes and the inability of commuters to board or alight. Workers would be unable to attend their places of work — besides, they would have house repairs to perform.

Past the airport road, Nell's dreaming track, the sliver flying machines like toys in the near distance; the windsock blowing horizontally — like the women, and the tea-towels, from the office windows; the tall observation tower like a minaret, a place of command for worship.

The airport runway, low-lying and near the planned wetlands, was flooded and would take days to dry out.

In the distance beyond the airport, were the hills, the roads snaking down to the plains, outlined by a twist of fairy lights, only one of a few indicators of this city's shaky status as a metropolis, and the city, its toy buildings as a hand-painted scenic backdrop.

Past caravan parks and holiday facilities. Now closer to the sea. Past the sailing club with a lifebuoy carrying the club name at the entrance and

the shed doors open wide to reveal boats stacked like cans and packets of food on supermarket shelves. On, until the yellow grainy sand, the foam and grey-blue waters brimming.

The last thing anyone, anyone could remember was someone, someone saying, 'Hey, ahead, the Gulf waters...'

The office was a boat. They had sailed down the Torrens to the open sea.