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SMALL ECSTASIES

MOYA COSTELLO

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Moya Costello is a writer, teacher, editor and occasional broadcaster. She has had short fiction published in various magazines and in anthologies, including *Frictions* (Sybylla Press 1982), *Transgressions* (Penguin 1986), and the *Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature* (1990). Her work has also been broadcast on radio, in particular on ABC Radio's "Science Show", and a number of her scripts have been produced for television. A collection of prose, *Kites in Jakarta*, was published by Sea Cruise Books in 1985. She grew up in Sydney and currently lives in Adelaide.

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Bathing

I HAVE A BATH once a week. Usually on the weekend, or Friday night. I have a bath in the evening as the sun falls below the line of the horizon. The clouds puff out and turn pink as if from embarrassment, and, just before dark, the sky becomes a monochrome of white light. Dusk fills the bathroom. The bath water is infused with soothing herbs. A glass of alcohol sits nearby, on the bath's rim. Porcelain and glass tinkle in a sweet conspiracy. Classical music drifts through from the lounge-room disc player. I step into the bath and enter the world of water. The heat sends messages via the sensors of my skin. My body glows and sweats. Steam rises in barely visible billows and fills the vacant corners of the room. The wall-mirror mists over. I sink down to shoulder level. I swab my face intermittently with the washcloth, warm and damp like a muggy afternoon in the tropics. Later, I lather soap perfunctorily over parts of my body: neck, shoulders, back, breasts, underarms, arms, belly, buttocks, thighs. When I rise from the water, like something born from that element, I run a cold shower, flicker my body under it *en passant*, then dab dry with a towel. My body has become fluid, retaining the weight, the symmetry, of liquid water.

Cardies

for Jenny Pausacker

DID *AUSTRALOPITHECUS* wear them? Did we really have to wait for *Homo sapiens*, Lord Cardigan? For fundamentally, cardigans are so democratic. We wouldn't wear anything else. It's best to describe them through their opposites, jumpers. Which are too much. Jumpers are good in mountains, and cardigans wouldn't go there. But cardigans do whatever cardigans do, perfectly. Cardigan is the uncommon use of the word comfortable. (Most understand slippers.) Even without pockets, cardigans are more than okay. I particularly understand both cardigans and jumpers in red. (If we had no food, would we then not think about cardigans?) Unlike naive woollen gloves, cardigans are knowing. Their purpose is not to be attractive to others, although participating in a twin-set they can present a kind of elegance. The ones we bought in op shops, just arms length and flattening our chests, made us look like waifs. The ridiculous pink angora fluffies of the fifties never suited me. An aberration I thought, an abuse of their essentially practical nature. Sublime in their temperature control: open for the circulation of air or wrapped around our bones. The girl who always wore the white one to Sunday mass. My sisters and I scorned her for it, though she didn't know. When really, she had the right idea. The way cardigans, especially long ones, go well with single women. That's why we wear them deliberately. We think of literary women of the twenties and the thirties, even if then the cardigan was the suitcoat made in cardigan style. Virginia and Vita. Edith in *Hotel du Lac* wanted to look like Woolf. Gertrude must have worn one. And Alice B. Toklas. Even Sylvia would have worn a fifties cardigan: short, just to the waist,

with pearled buttons. We wore handknits as children. The only thing I've ever knitted is a cardigan. In winter cardies are the most comfortable woollies around the house. I've dreamt of evening cardigans, those with beading, from Hong Kong. I've come very close to owning one of these. Cardigans don't try to please anyone but us. They're a second skin. Cardigans remind us of ourselves.

Yep! Something's Happening Round Here

YOU'RE AT THE BUS stop (this is where you always are) when you spot the holes in your socks (while noticing they're discoloured from the time you stepped in the yellow mud of the roadworks: an absent-minded gesture on your part — lately your life's full of such gestures, although, you remind yourself, the socks have long been discoloured from the dye of your red Bloch tap-dancing shoes [*sans* taps]). The bus is late (it's always late, or early, but never on time — being on time is such a rare event that you gasp, your heart leaps when it happens). You could go back to the shops and buy a new pair of socks (you've had time enough now to do this twice over), but you're aware that even this is not a simple decision because there are certain contingencies to consider — like everything else you need; and in an attempt to sort these items of need into priorities, you realise you cannot afford any of them — even the socks. You cannot rely on your income nor on the bus; what you can rely on is the uncertainty of their arrival. The bus is late; you're wondering if it's coming at all. You begin to think that you've imagined your bus, that all of your bus trips have been a dream, that they've been a huge hoax, a cruel joke by some malevolent force — you don't know what, that you've spent all of your time, like the characters in a play, waiting for ... for nothing, although by now, through practice, you have some fundamental belief in the activity of waiting. You decide it would be pointless to console yourself with a new pair of cotton socks, even if you could afford them, or indeed anything (it's been your practice to console yourself with consumption), so you may as well spend the remainder of the day — continue to ruin it

completely — in totally nasty moments (and beat the malevolent force at its own game). When you get home (you continue with optimism to believe that you will), you'll ring your tax agent — because the tax agent won't ring you (even when you ring him, he won't speak to you; he'll get someone else to speak to you — you're such a small fry compared to the big cheeses of business corporations: what is he doing with you as a client anyway — why don't you just disappear?). You'll ask if you really have to pay that provisional tax bill, since it's hanging there in your brain, floating like a fish unwilling to be hooked. The reply will be bad — very bad; you will crumple — another collapsed heap in a series of depressing deflations: you're popping more often than corks at Christmas. You'll work out exactly (you will, not your tax agent — what do you pay him for?) for the Taxation Department (they will disagree with you) when the black cloud of the tax bill will pass, the forecast being overcast for some time, for the rest of the year in fact and into the next. And you sit here and watch yourself, an observer of your own inflammation. These things that happen to you are as significant as astrology, especially because they appear to you to be synchronised: they happen to you all at once. They are like a black cloud you hope will pass; it's a phase, you say, like the moon — this too will pass. For example, the casserole dish you've had all your life — that is, all your adult life, your conscious life (have you, do you have, a conscious life? maybe that's the point!) — this casserole dish broke. It couldn't have been premenstrual tension — you have to face it: the bleeding's come and gone; even premenstrual tension doesn't go on forever (but this does, this). You broke the casserole dish when you baked a cake in it, when you should have been baking a cake in an actual cake tin, which you did buy, once the casserole dish broke — you thought you couldn't afford cake tins (improvise, you said — when improvisation has never been your strong point). Quite soon you'll be out of wine

glasses too — yes, they're breaking well: great little performers, wine glasses — no worries there! You remember that you've bought underpants and the waistband of these has collapsed already — what can you do against this sort of thing? (No, you can't afford it. You can't afford expensive underpants nor revolutionary acts — you need your energy for all the small things, like living through the lateness of this bus.) Recently you ran from one bus in an attempt to catch another and greeted the gutter in a fall. This fall was your first experience of worker's compensation, even though you've been working for years (maybe it was the kind of work you did). You were experiencing everything you always wanted to do, including making a worker's compensation claim. You were hospitalised, rolled down the corridor in a wheeled bed to X-ray — just as in the opening sequence of "Ben Casey". An emergency telephone call to a loved one was made for you; the young doctor was male, an intern; there was a consult with a plastic surgeon: would the scar on your face — your fortune — ruin your future? You were living a TV soap, an unrehearsed script, a "Twilight Zone" experience. Recently you've had root canal work too — unbelievable, surprised to say, but there it is: you've had root canal work. Beyond the bill, you wanted to thank the dentist for the experience: how your conversation would now be changed: you would be able to talk about, even introduce root canal work into the conversation with confidence, the kind that only comes from personal experience. For the duration of the root canal work, you tried to relate to the dentist (you've tried to relate to your tax agent — you want to make all business relationships personal: you want a tax agent who loves you for yourself), for you thought all things were possible, but this was not. A bus comes — a bus which is not your bus. But you will board the bus which is not your bus to move, be on your way, somewhere, you don't know where.

Topographies

... responses varied with the vegetation

Humphrey McQueen, Suburbs of the Sacred

Kensington, Melbourne

IT IS EVENING. From high up in the Housing Commission flats someone is yelling, "Shut up, I'm going to kill myself. Shut up, I'm going to kill myself." How everyone is turned away, as in Brueghel's painting of Icarus and Auden's poem about Brueghel's painting. The voice drifts down through the air like the haze itself that is the light of evening. It is evening. Not morning, when I struggle to wake. Not late morning, when I'm working well. Not midday in the bright light. Not afternoon in the intense heat when I long for rest. Not night, when I head for safety indoors. But evening, like dawn, when for a time there is no time, and from high up someone is yelling, "Shut up, I'm going to kill myself. Shut up, I'm going to kill myself."

We turn off the television to listen at the wall that joins the two houses. A woman is crying. A man speaks abusively. Is he drunk? Is she drunk? Are they rehearsing a play? They sing opera, come and go at odd intervals in taxis, their garbage full of exotic food like tinned French cheese. A topography of the suburb builds up in our heads with domestic violence a likely feature. We telephone the police. The telephonist, indifferent, takes details in this serial of episodes.

In summer at 5 o'clock in the morning it is already light when next door a woman screams and heavy footsteps quicken through the hallway. We stir, kneel on the mattress under the window, and lift the corner of the blind. There are voices, a car engine breaking, the flash of a blue light at regular intervals. Two

suited men, thickset and short-haired, run to the house. We try to sleep again, then rise as a radio voice announces a dawn chase of escapees from the local gaol. We are all but inert, a Chabrol film audience, uncomprehending and full of dread.

We run to the front door. There are two sticks with spear heads and flaming rags pinned in the wood. As if seeing mangoes in winter, I am confused. There is no smell of fuel. The door does not burn. There has been a mistake. Something troubles us like a stray bullet in the vicinity of crossfire.

When ahead of me from the midnight train, a youth, drunk, on the platform, tells an old man he would have thrown him off the speeding train but that the old man had said hello, I pause to think about going on to the next station, see the platform fence easily climbed, imagine knocking on the door of neighbours who refuse to believe, refuse to open sensing a threat, are men too. When all is quiet, suddenly there are quick footsteps I will not believe in. In protection I raise my hands to my head, and see his companion raise his hands to his head to avoid seeing. There are big detectives taking down a statement. Next day there are smaller detectives checking information with questions. I have my photograph taken. My photograph is somewhere there forever in their files. A nightmare I'm escaping overtakes me.

At night in the house with his young child sleeping in the next room and drifting off to sleep himself, he wakes bolt upright to interrupt a burglar breaking in through a back window. He yells in a deep voice and gives chase. He wonders where he is.

I come home in the middle of the day. A broken window and the doorlock smashed. The house, next to still, just settles after the rush of air from a swift exit. Surfaced in gold maple leaf, a

papier-mâché box from Srinagar sits open, its contents distributed on the table for investigation — trinkets of travel, sentimental value. In the bedroom the bed linen made madly awry by someone careless.

On Christmas Eve a man is speeding in his car shooting wildly into the streets with his gun. Returning from bingo, two pensioners are attacked and have their purses stolen. An Anglo-Australian gang beat up an Asian youth. News reports are the tracers, our consciousness spattered with the fallout of explosions.

And thereafter forever we wake up in the house at night at the slightest sound, imagine shadows that move; our hearts, blanketed by the dark, thump in the quiet, and our ears, alert, prick like animals in the wild. In the streets we carry weapons, or place them beside our sleep. Later, and much later still, when we have moved from that place, we speak of violence, of men, of civilisation as scrappy decor.

Adelaide / Melbourne / Sydney

I'M HERE. In the middle, somewhere. I might go to Perth. But only for a holiday. Perth is the place to go to be far away from Sydney and still rate a mention.

Here they already talk of "the East" as though completely other, and Sydney gains a mystic aura it never had in Melbourne. Setting your watch back on the borderline confirms all your suspicions.

When it's summer in Melbourne, you're swimming in council pools; in Adelaide, in the bay at Glenelg where everyone grew

up. And the jetties of St Kilda and Brighton are things that sound English.

You've become a stranger now to Sydney's surf: you swim with the Italians in Bronte's rock pool; obey the warning signs about jellyfish at Queenscliff and Manly. And the southerly change will remain forever your most heightened experience of grace.

When it's winter in Melbourne, young women wear coloured tights: it's like Paris! Or Italy in autumn, when the mellow golden light is the mustard-coloured plaster over the brickwork of old villas.

Meanwhile, all year round in Adelaide they're queuing for buses.

As for Melbourne, the Broadmeadows train will remain forever your most heightened experience of terror.

In Sydney, the 500 bus, your home route, is named amongst the city's most scenic, and the ferries lie forever beyond nostalgia.

To cross against the lights is imperative in Sydney; in Adelaide it's a crime against civilisation.

Meanwhile in Melbourne, sheepskin moccasins multiply! But in Adelaide you want to mother the punks. Women's netball gets TV coverage, and the Aborigines camp in Victoria Square.

Melbourne is intellectual and active. In Sydney you hone sharp your survival skills; otherwise, it's a great place for a holiday.

Glenelg, South Australia

UP AND OVER the hill where the blue goes on forever, almost, like the dream you've had of perfection in everything, old people sit looking out from park benches or play with grandchildren, picking over shells or bathing feet in shallow salt

water, in a scene so tender it's impossible to simply accept, like the baffling clarity of the day early in autumn; and the houses sit, as heritage sites in other cities, but here suburban and functional, so much so that you check, just to reassure yourself, kitchen windowsills for household objects and note garden seats placed in private corners behind high fences beneath overhanging branches amidst colourful blooms. And none of this will be yours forever, as you inevitably think, at this moment, of the sordid business of real estate and the agents who, if they could, would carve up that blue. And you might try to think, in an Eastern way, that your head can alter any space or condition, but overwhelmingly you realise that poverty is your permanent state, and quite suddenly you understand the allure of Lotto and think how you will manage the anxiety, the heartache, for all of your life, of momentary pleasure.

Flinders Ranges, South Australia

WILPENA POUND, I repeat to myself, as if, like Downer Lampshed, it was the name of a woman. Two hours out of Adelaide, on the way to Port Pirie, the lower Flinders Ranges slope up gently from flat country like A.D. Hope's "outstretched paws" of "stone lion worn away". Out of the landscape pokes Pirie's lead smelter smokestack. The vegetation's changed. Here it's much more like the desert. Here, at ground level, it looks as when I fly overhead. Problems of scale make it difficult to see — it's an inability to read, to interpret the signs. Millions of years ago we would have been swimming underwater here now where we're landsliding, eating up a highway. Roadside grasses flap incessant adulation in our jet stream. We straddle a lizard, fat and sleepy on the bitumen's hot surface. Baby locusts, forming

black strips across the roadway, bounce or crackle as the car crunches over them; their brittle bronze sheaths line up along the windscreen wipers and give off a smell of burning. A kangaroo, limbs stiffened and pointing to the sky, waits for airlift. An eagle and a hawk circle above in the hot blue air. At Melrose we're just below Goyder's line, drawn across the state's map, the wheat-growing equivalent of the dingo fence — above the line rain fell infrequently. The road-map is pot-marked with the denotation: "ruins". After the turn-off for Quorn we stare straight into the ranges; now no longer running parallel, they begin to surround us like a mouth's soft palate: we head towards their heart. At Rawnsley Bluff, outside the Pound's walls, we are medieval pilgrims at a fortified city's gates. All day we climb one wall to St Mary's Peak. Goannas sunbake; wild goats mountaineer opposite walls. At the Peak we look down into the basin, the womb of the Pound. While on the outside, beyond the walls to the north, there's another range that lies in a gnarled curve like the sweep of a crocodile's tail recalling ancientness with reptile memory. There's a large expanse of glistening white. All the great lakes — Frome, Eyre, Torrens, Gairdner — are salt. I "read" from the road-map's point of view. The Stuart Highway continues into deserts — the Great Victoria and Tanami; and the Highway's tributary tracks: Oodnadatta into the Simpson, and Birdsville and Strzelecki into Sturt's Stony Desert. Further beyond, there's the Gibson and the Great Sandy. To the west, there's the Nullarbor (no trees) Plain.

Adelaide, South Australia

THIS IS THE COUNTRY where daphne and gardenia will not grow; here on the alkaline soil of the plains that flatten out

like supplicants at prayer before the high-rise of the hills where a poet said "the future stops"; the hills which showcase the seasons like window displays in the mall: fog in winter and fire in summer; where Japanese maples glow in autumn as they were meant to, and gardeners, unbridled as conspicuous consumers, plant azalea and camellia without restraint.

This is the country where almond and olive shoot like weeds; where daphne grows in pots of acidic soil and gardenia is kept under glass against nights as cold as the desert, against high summer's hot winds as dry as the desert sand.

This is the country of furry-skinned fruit whose stone hearts, if ripening late, set hard, free of flesh, bled dry of juice. The soft flesh and sweet liquid of early ripeners is soon a memory. This is the country where black seed and soft skin travel as tourists.

This is the country of rain that spits; rain so rare, so short in duration it's easy to miss. People complain about regular rain; they think of crisis; they have no sense of averages.

This is the country of hardness and salt, of clay, white lakes and balding scrub edging out to broken shell and shard.

This is the country of grids and tracks, where the sun sets on the line of the horizon in a light washed of colour that might signal blinding revelation did it not immediately trigger a fluid and easy amnesia.

Land

I TAKE A TRIP TO THE CENTRE.

I had always thought of the centre in awe. The rock couldn't be the exact physical centre, but it seemed suitably so in thought.

The rock and the desert — the rivers not emptying into an inland sea: though there is Lake Eyre filling every several years, and fossils from the sea dating from millions of years.

I travel up with my friend. On our arrival we hear stories of all who have come here; they arrived on holiday and stayed. That morning we consider staying: there is an invitation in the warm air to let everything drop away and let the land and its meaning rush in to fill the vacuum.

On the way to the rock, we camp in the white sand of the Finke River bed; gum trees are growing here and I imagine it in flood. (On the way back, we boil a billy in the red sand of the Palmer.)

Jimmy comes to our camp. He comes from Thursday Island; in Adelaide twice, he got lost, "Too many". When I think of the name of the place I come from, it conjures up an image of buildings — impossible to attach meaning to this; I have nothing to say.

I feel like a fish out of water. I grew up on the coast, on the edge of the land of the island. I expect to walk out of the Yalara complex and find the ocean, but there is only the red sand of the desert.

From the centre, the whites take themselves off for hundreds of kilometres to a beach at Broome.

My friend has bought a painting of the landscape she comes from and has hung it on her loungeroom wall.

On the rock tour the missionary says that initiation ceremonies are heathen; that there is no colour problem, only one of conduct and cleanliness.

I write postcards back. All say the same: there is
red soil, blue sky,
purple rock;
pink parrot, yellow spinifex,
black crow.

Intimacy

To J.L. Borges and A.B. Casares

A Brief Narrative

I ASK HOW YOU ARE, expecting you to say that you're no longer holding up. But you say, "Okay", simply, like that's what's expected too. We make love in the shadow of nuclear arsenals. Intimacy seems strange to me — so close, I can smell the chemical of someone else's skin.

A Change in the Household

SIGNIFICANT AS TV, the computer joined the household in the early 1980s. Much like a new resident, it disturbed the routines and relationships of the regular householders, until, after some months, relationships realigned around it and settled into new configurations.

Thea could have been a phantom wafting past the open doorway of Oliver's bedroom. The air shifted and settled, but nothing else was disturbed. Even if she went in and gave Oliver a hug, she made no impression. She could have been Oliver's dream. Oliver remained facing the monitor, tapping out on the keyboard with his free hand one or two further commands. The computer's sensitive and understated response was immediate.

Shut down, the computer's phosphorescent screen glowed in the dark, setting itself protectively against the long blackness of night until Thea, disturbed in her sleep, threw an old sheet over it — to keep the dust off, she said.

When Thea and Oliver moved house, they considered size; the computer was given a room of its own.

The computer swelled out into its allotted space, reproduced and multiplied, augmented itself with additions and accrued equipment: a black box that shone red and green traffic lights; floppy disks that sat stacked like Rosetta stones, smug and enigmatic, coyly revealing their vulnerable coded surfaces between thin plastic wafers, taunting with the possibility of their destruction; printers that buzzed and sang off-key, then spurted out long sheets of paper that trundled down the desk, lay in folds that spilled over other folds and advanced across the floor like waves on a rising tide, seeking out and filling emptiness in the

room, in the corners where spiders meditated on territorial rights.

Now when Thea entered the room unthinkingly on some small personal errand, she had to tread carefully as on a rocky foreshore where paper was piled on more paper and manuals and books which slid plane against plane, like a fault line, as she stumbled across: the plastic tubes of ballpoints cracked; the lead points of pencils split; square stocky rubbers rolled under her arch.

Quietness and stillness settled on the house when the computer was active, as if there was sickness or sleepiness within its walls. Oliver curtly forbad the throwing of electrical switches on the fan, the washing machine or heater; admonished the thrusting of body weight, however accidental, against the computer desk or the filing cabinet nearby. Thea closed doors gently, imagined herself tiptoeing, drawing curtains, dousing lights.

Hour after hour, Oliver stared into the face of the monitor, as columns of bright green figures marched up and off the top as more rolled on from the bottom, just like the buckets of water and mops which multiplied in the face of Mickey Mouse's utter helplessness when, as the sorcerer's apprentice, punishment was visited upon him for the sin of ambition.

In conversations that Oliver held with other users, the exchanges were staccato, like the intermittent play of fingers on the keyboard, a talk of terminology where participants threw down units of knowledge as they would cards in a game of Fish. Phone calls from other users blossomed late at night or early morning like rare cactus flowers.

The computer was a child in the household: presence and absence. There, it was all consuming; gone, it didn't exist.

Oliver was lost for a while when the computer went away for repair. Thea looked askance at him when he stroked her back, rubbed his nose up against her cheek and kissed her forehead,

until she associated one thing with another. Oliver sunned himself in the backyard, dug over the garden, looked to household repairs, discussed bush trips, thought of dinner guests, mentioned film nights and political meetings. When the computer returned, the gully traps of affection emptied as suddenly as they flooded.

He did release himself gradually over time because of physical impairment. In spring he might sit and read the weekend newspapers in the sun, and stay out much longer than planned. Away on interstate conferences he relaxed like an uncoiled spring, far from the call of other users and the lure of the weighty presence of the machinery itself.

Oliver had assumed the availability of knowledge and, a duck taking to water, had taught himself.

In reaction to the computer's ineluctable logic, its neat and blinkered approach, Thea revered intuition and untidiness. But she drew breath and leapt into the deep. She swept aside tutorials and started a real job. And familiarity — that constant proximity in a private space — bred confidence. Knowledge was not a mysterious gift but available with practice and persistence. Thea threw a few switches and completed small projects — she designed and printed newsletters for community groups, organised mailouts, drafted articles — and she still dug over the garden, hung out the washing, met friends for discussion, and attended meetings.

Her confidence had needed boosts with each new task before it spread like syrup soaking into different areas of her life.

Oliver said, "I think I can do everything and find out I can't," and Thea replied, "I think I can't do anything and find out I can."

Clean Linen

ON FRIDAY NIGHT I pull clean linen from different stacks in the linen cupboard: sheets and pillowcases, tea-towels and a tablecloth, towels, bathmats, washcloth and handtowel. I hold the clean linen up to my nose and breathe in. I am reminded of the sun. There is the residue of warmth, and the faint smell of soap powder, a flat smell compressed and captured by the stack in the closeness of the linen cupboard. I change the linen on the bed: the bottom sheet stripped off, the top sheet becomes the bottom sheet, a fresh sheet tucked in on top; pillowcases stripped off pillows, pillows stuffed into clean pillowcases. The timing is important. Sleeping in clean sheets on Friday night is an act of quiet celebration. I flit from room to room. In the bathroom the week's damp and musty towels are whisked away. Over the racks clean towels now hang stiffly in a state of potential. Briefly, there will be the pleasure of a dry bathmat underfoot. In the kitchen I replace dirty tea-towels and the tablecloth. Each carries maps of stains that I scan like a distant landscape for knowledge of the shape of life in the past week — the history of the days and the nights. Some stains are temporary abrasions; some are permanent features. Occasionally there's a potholder and an apron to be dispatched too. I dump the dirty linen in a linen basket or in a heap on the laundry floor. Later I might sort the one heap into several piles, distributing by weight, or type — all socks shoved into a pillowcase. Colour is a constant for segregating. The next day there's a quiet satisfaction in washing, in following load with load — a tempered journey out of disarray into tidiness, a neat moment in time. I bring in the linen from the clothes line,

folding items over my arms, almost rolling, rather than from corner to corner. I restack it in separate spaces in the linen cupboard. With the change of linen I have set the world in order. I mark the pace of time and change. I wash away history and listen to it gurgle down the drain.

Who's Jayne Anne Phillips? or Twelve Months of Titles

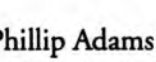
THIS WAS THE PROJECT that I set myself: for a year I would collect titles from which to generate stories and not (as usual) vice versa. Finding a title after the event is an art in itself. I usually struggled for it.

Before the project began, I had successfully written one story from a title — "The Japan Project". By coincidence, later in the year of the project, SBS television began a series called "The Japan Project".

Further to coincidences, Steve Evans said that the proposed title for his poetry manuscript, once he'd thought of it, began appearing everywhere — on record albums, even on other books. He also said that when he thought of a particular title for an as yet unwritten story, "The Hijacked Wedding", he went to a wedding exactly like that.

This reminded me of Frank Moorhouse's "White Knight", which I had heard Mr Moorhouse (Frank, Baby!) read years before. When I told Steve about the story, he said he'd just read it in Moorhouse's book *Forty-Seventeen.*

"Narrative Maps" (a postmodern title), from ABC television early in the year, was the first title I consciously noted down. Then I realised that if I was disciplined about this project — that is, noting the titles and their source — a story about collecting titles for stories (a postmodern project) would write itself.

In the newspaper Phillip Adams () had an article in which he asked why didn't novelists get themselves jobs writing titles. This idea needs further investigation. (May I suggest *moi* as an editor for *The Faber Book of Titles*?)

Marion Halligan is an author who is very judicious in the selection and creation of titles for her books: consider, for example, *Eat My Words* as a title for a book of essays about food. (Bonjour, Marion!) And so is Carmel "Titles are one of my favourite things" Bird. Kerryn Goldsworthy credits Bird with giving her the title *North of the Moonlight Sonata* (for the book and the story).

"Great titles" — once a possible title for this story — came early in the project. But I opted for "Who's Jayne Anne Phillips?", which came about because of a letter from Barbara Brooks, friend and writer, where she said something like "Is this writing like Jayne Anne Phillips?" (derogatively?) about a story of her own that she included with the letter. And I had to ask when I wrote back, "Who's J.A.P.?" (I discovered for myself when I looked up Barbara's story in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Australian Short Stories* and saw on the cover flap a list of Faber authors — among them was Jayne Anne Phillips.)

Jeff Williams, friend and partner, gave me (via Luigi Pirandello) "Twelve Titles in Search of an Author" (for this story), and "Brief Respites" for another story, sometime in the same hectic week, at night in bed. A title from him with a similar tone to the latter was "Small Ecstasies".

In a newspaper article Sandra Hall said that Kazuro Ishiguro takes a phrase out of his text for the title. Then on "Books and Writing", someone else talked about the same phenomenon amongst new British novelists. Ho-hum! See the works of Australian women writers — Anna Couani, Pamela Brown, Joanne Burns, Jill Golden and Ania Walwicz — especially the last three for single word titles: for example, "Pockets", "Fat", "Boat". (In *Dear Writer* Bird comments on "Milk" by Beverley Farmer.)

Again in a newspaper column, Elizabeth Swanson (Hi, Lyn!) hailed confusing titles, saying *Aspects of the Dying Process* by

Michael Wilding was not for Kubler-Ross fans, and *A Politics of Poetry* by Dennis Altman was not about poetry (except, perhaps, in the broadest sense). When Carmel Kelly and I launched our book of short fiction *The Waters of Vanuatu / Kites in Jakarta*, I said I hoped librarians and booksellers would not house it in the travel section next to *South-East Asia on a Shoestring*.

On "The Science Show", Richard Dawkins said he was a connoisseur of titles. He quoted a favourite — "Clams and Brachiopods: Ships That Pass in the Night", by Stephen Jay Gould. And on the same day, Jeff reminded me of *Tucked Away*, a title I thought of for my first book, on my first and only LSD trip in 1979. It has never been, may never be, used, but even so I had the full vision, cover graphics and all.

Of course, the titles I gathered had to do with more than this story.

I thought of *An Evening with Chartered Accountants* as a title for a stage performance that was to have nothing to do with the actual content, which was to be several interlinked monologues by women. I liked its perversity, but essentially I didn't have a strong belief in it as a project. (About a year after this project [by coincidence?], I came across "Why Accountancy Is Not Boring", a comic skit in *Monty Python's Big Red Book*.)

There were several potential titles for fiction about adult literacy throughout the year (I was consciously trying for one). *Human Interest Stories* was a derogatory comment about the way tutors in the adult literacy community talked of their students, made by one of the fearless leaders — as if talking with concern about people was somehow "wrong".

There was *One of the Gains* from a story by Barbara Brooks, "The Bangalow Story" — or *Small Gains. An Envelope of Air*, from *Divine Women* by Luce Irigaray, was too perfect, too challenging, and needed to be left as it was with no story behind it — a story written around it but not with it. Likewise, *Cooked*

in the Hearts of Stars from Carl Sagan's TV series "Cosmos", = my students, or our lives. *Agency*, from Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee's *Making a Life*, might be suitable for a story about collective power, like *Forged Clamps*, from a factory sign in Melbourne, about oppression of various kinds (seen on the way back from a visit to Jenny Pausacker, who gave me "Cardies", which I have dedicated to her).

Other Everythings came from Jeff, and *The Wing of This Star* or *Eternal Maiden Flight* both came from Kris Hemensley's "Regarding Presence". There was *English*, as in *History*.

There was *Gale Force Winds* which I wanted adult literacy to be, when it was a summer breeze; or *The Life of This Star*, or *The Process of Becoming, The Subject in Process, The Process of the Subject Becoming*, or (now I think of it) *The Subject Becoming*. David Suzuki gave me *Everything's in Motion* on ABC radio's "The Science Show". (Peace and love, David!) And *The Life of the Heart* came from ABC television.

There was *The Story So Far*, and *Indirect Speech* — a deconstructed postmodern title like Berni Janssen's *Possessives and Plurals*; and *The Seeding of Life*, or *Cooperative Phenomena*, from ABC television's "The Virgin Earth", and *Angelhood* from my yoga teacher Michael Volin.

I was looking out for titles for books for children. *Fashion Daddy* came from my stepdaughter (or her father?). It's an in-family joke, though once I wrote it down I saw that it had strong possibilities for a children's picture book: a daddy going from hippy to executive, and everything in between, which would be very humorous, especially the business shirt, but all of it really.

I love lists, and when reading *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"* from Umberto Eco (Ciao, Mr Eco!) I came upon *A Theory of Lists* — a book he's going to write (has written? read?). From the same book by Eco I got *Books Talk amongst Themselves*, which

I've already used as an opening gambit in a book review, but not as a title, which it still could be. I imagine it for a picture book for children about literature, books and writing.

Other titles that found a life as subtitles were "History Is Written by the Victors" from ABC "Radio Helicon", and "Responses Varied with the Vegetation" from Humphrey McQueen's *Suburbs of the Sacred.*

I wanted to write something about vegies for children — a story or picture book about fat cucumbers hiding underneath their floppy, spiny leaves etc., but failed to "discover" a title.

However, there was "Socks Don't Mate" as a potential short story or picture book for kids, after I did a wash in which only single socks survived, followed by a fruitless search for the missing match. And another, "Beds That Don't Bite" from Jeff after the bed bit him. And then there was *Tim and Tony: The Terrific Twin Triffids* — a picture book saying that triffids were essentially misunderstood. When I looked up the spelling of triffids in a library catalogue, I came across another book by Wyndham — *Trouble with Lichen.* Wow! So I came up with "Struggles with My Strelitzia" (as in *Travels with My Aunt*), and this could do as a humorous article for a gardening magazine (and compiled into a book of gardening essays entitled *Dig My Words?*).

Late in the year I started a manuscript for children with the title *Wacky Daddies*, which is a title not in this story but was confirmed and continues to be confirmed as a great title by those who hear of that project (which is like writing lists of things to do in your diary and then doing other things and adding them to the list and crossing them off as well).

I thought of "This Alternative Life" after a discussion with friends, Ali and Gail, and in the presence of my ever-diminishing bank balance. (I've since written a story with a title that's not here but that has a theme I imagine a story named "This

Alternative Life" would have.) My diminishing bank balance owed much to difficulties with paid employment, and at that time I saw *Looking for Work* by Susan Cheever, her first novel, after I read with much enjoyment *Home before Dark* about her father John Cheever. Not a great title you might think, but when you see it on a book after a day of forecasted disasters for work, you think: what a great title!

I thought of "Covering Letters" for a story as a result of editorial work selecting fiction and poetry for broadcast on public radio. Then there was an article in the newspaper about closet scribblers and unsolicited manuscripts. Again, because of such synchronism, I thought I should write a story using the letters from writers, my rejection slips / letters of acceptance to them, and rejection slips / letters of acceptance from publishers to me put together in some sort of illuminating sequence.

The Habit of Inventiveness came as a textbook title for tutors engaged in facilitating writing groups.

Jeff gave me "Accidents and Incidents" for a story about ... I don't know what. Something like *Infidelities and Other Accidents* by Ian Kennedy Williams, which is a title I don't agree with, unlike *Desire and Other Domestic Problems* by Jan Hutchinson; so maybe for a series of pieces that set science in a personal context — accidents, incidents, synchronism ...

I had a crop of three from the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week: "Impossible Country", from a session entitled Hometown — Australia; "Sojourner" from Manning Clark during that session; and "Decomposition" from Helen Daniel's *Liars*, which came out around that time (and reminded me of Disband, the name of a band that poet Gig Ryan was in some years ago).

As time went on, I began to get worried that I hadn't put enough effort into the project, so I became desperate for titles. I found "I Require a Pilot" and "My Boat Is Burning" on tea-towels with flag signals and knots for boating hanging on a

sailing friend's kitchen wall. I thought of "Ballast" and then "Balloon" as a result of these, and with the strategy of enigmatic single word titles still in my mind.

I thought of "The Transitional Hat", but I didn't know where it came from (though I may have been reading Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* at the time), nor what it meant, or what it would be for. About midyear I looked ahead to the end of this project and thought of "No More Titles Allowed". Even so, the titles I discarded (and perhaps never mentioned in this story) were in the minority.

Late in the project, I discovered that the author Harry Harrison had said that when you throw away a good title, you always get a bad one. (See ya, Harry!)

Everything's in Motion

AT THE END OF HER OPENING ADDRESS at the conference, the speaker left the dais and said she would finish with a song to be played over the sound system.

In the assembly hall the audience waited expectantly while the speaker gave a nod to the technician. There was a brief silence, and then the slow, low but loud piano pulse before Bette Midler sang "The Rose", a song about transformation. The speaker had previously talked of research into adult literacy. In one case study a student had begun to have dreams of flying, shortly before he left adult literacy classes. He had begun to think of himself as literate.

The conversation started about where Cath had bought her clothes — she always came to class looking good. Or something had happened at her workplace or to her family — particularly her child. "My little boy wanted to come tonight and I said, 'No, you've got your own school'."

Cath loved to talk, and most students did. Lots of lesson time was talk. Often students came to class preoccupied with the cares of living and these had to be aired, because without clearing away this debris no learning would take place. Students would tell their own stories. And Cath did, to new tutors and new students too. In the retelling there was always some new material, since the story was never fully told first go or at any one time. She started off the class with a rush of conversation, as if hoping to stave off reading and writing.

We had been working together for about three years, two hours a week, but how far had we come?

Some students told themselves with voices in their heads not to become readers. To become a reader was to become a new person, not recognisable to the old perhaps. Better the devil you know.

As a child, Cath had been wrongly placed in a home for mildly intellectually disabled children. The details of who placed her there and how she got out were hazy. She was wary of any students who might be intellectually disabled. "Is that one of them from the homes?"

She checked if the rest of the class knew she couldn't read. "Anyway, it doesn't matter; they can know that I can't read." Bravura, or an attempt to lift the weight of the trauma from her shoulders?

"Look, they don't mind; they're all learning stuff."

"Yes, but they can all read, can't they?"

"Some of them need help with reading. Others are learning spelling because they have difficulty with writing."

"Anyway, I'm not embarrassed; they can know."

"But you can read."

Research had shown that two hours of class time a week was not enough. I emphasised the need for her to work at home.

At home Cath ran the house, cooked and cleaned, and saw to her little boy, after working all day.

Her husband drove her to class. But when she said to him that she'd like to make a start on buying a home by visiting the bank, looking at real estate agents' windows, checking the real estate pages of the newspaper, he laughed at her, saying, "You won't be able to do that."

In class we did everything: phonics; writing down her own words as stories; relaxation and visualisation. It was like shooting arrows, one after the other, in all different directions, in the hope of finding a target.

"I'm going to read," she said, "if it takes me years."

"I know you are. You're reading now."

Sometimes in class I wanted to place my hands over my heart because I thought it was about to drop through my chest. It could have been slowly bursting its cavity, and I had to gather the thick liquid, viscous as oil, slipping like a jelly, and push it back into the soft rubber contour.

When Maria was a child in Malta, one of her teachers wanted to adopt her. And she wanted to go with him and his wife. It would be like living in a secret kingdom of books and music and discussion. But of course, her parents didn't allow it. Ever since, she has searched for this place.

On coming to Australia, she missed it again. She was on her way to her first English class with her relatives when they stopped at their workplace — just to see if there were any jobs going. And there were. "Much better to take a job if it's offering than take an English class," they said. She took the job in the chocolate factory, not speaking a word of English. The incomprehension, the world of silence, the frustration tore at her heart. The English classes drifted away like a dream. For twenty years she maintained a heavy accent and fractured English grammar, until she was at the doctor's and he asked her how long she'd been in Australia. When she told him twenty years, he laughed at her.

In New Opportunities for Women courses at tech
women learn they deserve a better deal from
teachers who receive casual rates of pay,
unreliably, monthly, without sick or holiday pay
without paid preparation and travelling time
with no desk, office, permanent space or tenure

When I heard this extract from Annee Lawrence's poem at a reading, I sighed so heavily in recongition that members of the audience turned round to check out the source of the noise.

My colleagues were mostly women. Mostly married with families. Mostly middle-class. Mostly un-unionised.

Staff of a program were never all at one place at one time. A program had to be deliberately designed to combat their isolation.

In one program I taught in, staff meetings stopped when tutors demanded paid meetings. But there was no money. The coordinator felt too guilty about holding unpaid meetings.

In another program, the coordinator overcompensated. She held term meetings at her house where she made half a dozen ice-cream cakes for afternoon tea.

Mike said he'd never tell any of his workmates that he was going to class. "They'd laugh," he said. "If I told them about English classes, for spelling, writing and reading, they'd wonder what I was on about."

Mike gave himself two years. But in class he would stick close to rules and rationales, reading about them for ages, copying them down, avoiding launching himself into the language.

When students asked to start "with the basics", they were on a search for the Holy Grail.

Some students were on the brink of leaving in the first few lessons. Other students recognised this.

"It's all right coming here," said Stan. "You're nice people. I know this place. There's only a few of us."

He had stopped outside the doors of the big city college. He stood at the entrance, saw the students milling around, the offices with big signs on each side of the corridor, and left. "I

kind of got the shakes," he said. "No way I'm going in there I thought, and I left."

Poem Poem
I'm reading a book.
I like books about people.
I'm reading more.
I'm understanding what I read.
I read whole stories in my wife's magazines.
I read the new car manual.
I'm more confident now.
I understand a lot more words.
My spelling is better. I can spell the whole list.
I wouldn't have passed if I hadn't come to this class.
I wish I'd started this years ago.
I have to come here.
I can feel my brain working.
They said, "Why don't you write about the family?"
Once I hadn't written anything; now I've done this story.
I wrote a letter.
They want my story.
My son's teacher read my story to her class.
I wrote to my girlfriend.
I wrote to my dad.

Ray had interests in astronomy, photography, and computers. When his father died, a small inheritance enabled him to pursue these in a bigger way. He bought a small telescope, a camera, a hand-held spelling computer.

Ray was buoyed up by the success of his manuscript about the stars, which was submitted to an adult literacy publishing project. And so, with his father's illness and death, he began researching and writing his family's history. He recorded his

father's memories on tape, researched the detail in the library, and, with his inheritance money, travelled to the country where his father grew up.

He took short trips for pleasure too, with the Pensioners' Club. And wrote these up. Then he volunteered to be minute taker at meetings. But half the members of the Pensioners' Club voted against him as minute taker, because they thought they wouldn't understand his notes. He said he'd never put himself out to volunteer for anything again.

But he brought the minutes to class. We worked on them together. He typed them up at home. He continued as minute taker after a trial period.

Paul was renewing himself, living the metaphor of the gum tree, or the snake; shedding old skins. He made quiet decisions about himself. He didn't panic if these decisions didn't instantly come to fruition.

He came to class regularly; didn't say much. He went on the Pritikin diet, took up running and read Robert De Castella, wrote a book review for the running club's newsletter, acted as an official in club races, wrote reports, and became a trainer.

He left class. He controlled his own destiny.

There are things that are not quantifiable.

If you followed individual students and saw if they found employment; if their employment improved; if they were healthier because they were more confident; if they went on to further study; if they read a book, wrote a letter, filled out a form; if they had a story published, sat for an exam, spelled six words without a mistake; if they began to think for themselves, think about their future; if they began to think about the world; if they decided to end adult literacy classes; if they were metamorphic, amalgamable, unboxable, undescribable, not numerical, not

computer-checkable — then, you had to deal with overflow, with something organic and growing, spiralling and never-ending, with the absence of lock-steps, and their learning wasn't less for all of this, for all that it was not quantifiable.

I never asked Andrew about schooling. He could have been kept in a cupboard in the dark. Once, when he was learning to drive, he'd stepped back into the motor registry office to look for his wallet after the written driving test, only to find the men laughing over his attempt. It was all backward pressure to talk about his history when everything now was forward into the future. He set his own course through the study material, said what he would and would not work on. He devised his own language exercises. He wrote letters, three pages now, where they used to be one. One hundred words in five minutes where it used to take thirty-five. He wrote letters to me, answering questions, enclosed in an envelope. I answered his questions and set more of my own. The letters were about learning, learning for adults, about friends, family and work. He wanted the talk that education could provide. He feared verbal intimacy, because people put him down. He drank large cartons of milk coffee. He took up bonsai.

"Look at where they've come from, how far they've come, and the fact that they're still going," said another tutor. This was in one of my despondent moments.

The image, the metaphor the students used for themselves was important. Now I realised the image I was using for myself: a stiff toy soldier. I was moving along an imaginary road like this: stiff and inflexible, judgmental, anxious, desirous of control. The stiff toy soldier fell over, awkward, and had to be hoistered back up to a vertical position with pulley and tackle.

I consciously substituted another image — a bubble … no,

an ethereal blue light, a mist, a kind of ectoplasm that floated down the road, bits of which floated off and rejoined the whole further on down. An image of no control. A kind of joyous bouncing motion down the road.

Frank

THIS IS A SHORT HISTORY OF MY FATHER'S LIFE. A short history of parts of my father's life. The history begins where I've decided to begin it: with a retelling of what Frank told me. I'm calling my father Frank, because that's his name.

Frank becomes a footballer.

At school Frank was trained by the Christian Brothers to be a footballer. Under their tutelage, he played against all the western suburbs schools.

This was a first-rate toughening process, further evidenced by Frank's brother Jack. Jack was normally a quiet man, but his eyes glazed over when he played football.

Frank played in the 5/8 position for Canterbury Rugby League, first grade, before he was sixteen. He had to put in three months training to a big bloke's one month. He was really too light (hence the 5/8 position).

He left the game early too — it was physically dangerous for him to keep playing.

Frank's working life takes an unusual turn, affecting the nature of episodes in his life as a footballer.

As a young man during World War II, Frank was drafted into the army. In a commando course, a sergeant said to Frank, "Attack me. Go on, come at me and try and kill me."

Frank attacked the sergeant.

At the hearing, the captain said to Frank, "You almost killed

the sergeant." (The sergeant was still in hospital.) And Frank replied, "That's what you trained me for."

Under the Manpower Act, operative during the war, the railways requested labour for essential services. Frank joined the railways. The alternative was a protracted prison sentence. So Frank laboured on the railways, and the railways posted him to Junee in the west of New South Wales.

In Junee Frank played football. After he walked down the main street of this country town, there was nothing left to do. Besides, this being a country town, he got time off the railways for football training.

The following episode in Frank's life as a footballer is based on a text written by a friend and drinking companion, Richard McDermott, plumber. McDermott wrote the text so Frank wouldn't repeat it endlessly as oral history. Half-joking, half-serious, McDermott circulated the text amongst other friends and drinking mates as preventative medicine for his own sanity.

It was the '44 season, and when Junee played Cowra, Frank expected to win.

Cowra was playing on its home ground, but the home ground was a hastily mown strip, bare in parts except for the odd pat of cow dung. The goal posts were forged from saplings.

The oddball locals toed the sidelines. "Weak as piss," said one of them of his own team. His felt hat was turned down, and he had a bumper between his thumb and forefinger. He grunted at Frank, "They're weak as piss."

Except for the Aborigine in its line-up, Cowra looked as promising as its home ground. And though the Aborigine had a large head and spindly legs, he also had odd socks and moth-eaten boots. "Heart like a caraway seed," growled felt hat. "Not worth a knob of goat's shit."

Frank won the first scrum, gathered on the burst, and deftly

passed to his support. But there followed a black flash, a flurry of arms and legs, and the inside centre screamed in pain from a broken collarbone. Five minutes later the Aborigine tackled the full-back, who was carried off the field unconscious.

From then on, to avoid being tackled, Frank kicked the ball anywhere — even in his own twenty-five — to get rid of it. The game finished: Cowra 32, Junee 0.

Frank breasted the bar of the pub after the game. He wore his bravest face, yarned and joked with all. The locals were passing beers through the window to the Aborigines outside. Prominent among them was the footballer. Frank was half-frightened to go to the toilet, having to pass him along the way.

From his place at the corner of the bar, felt hat grinned, "The trouble is we can't take him away on games — he wrecks the opposition's town."

The role of social and cultural politics in the premature ending of Frank's life as a footballer.

At Junee Frank had won the Maher Cup, the trophy for country players. Called the Old Tin Mug, Old Pot, or Win, Tie and Wrangle Cup, it was the icon of country supporters, the Davis Cup of western area rugby league.

So when Frank was transferred to Mudgee by the railways in '45, a local journalist made a story of it: "Maher Cup for Mudgee."

Frank couldn't think what he'd done wrong when a group of men in suits met him as he stepped off the train. They were officials of the Mudgee Rugby League Club.

For as long as anyone could remember, Mudgee had never won a season. But when Frank became coach and captain, the history of the town's team changed dramatically.

He used two six-footers he'd seen playing handball with strength and dexterity on the back wall of Mudgee Catholic

Church. As coach and captain, and a Catholic himself, he could redetermine the composition of the largely Protestant team.

At one match there were over two thousand spectators — mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and second cousins — to see Mudgee play and win a match on their home ground.

Frank drank at two pubs in town. He had a single drink out of politeness in the one that was full of analysis of the game by people who'd never played. But he stayed drinking at the other pub where the hardheads said of the opposition team, "Make them eat dirt!" And Frank replied, "I just want to win."

On the selection panel for Mudgee Rugby League there was a wealthy squatter who wanted his son on the team. Frank could see the boy had no heart, and you needed heart to play league.

When Mudgee played against Lithgow Workers and lost, the squatter pointed the finger at Frank. Even though Lithgow Workers, of the ammunition factory — a team of desperadoes: thugs, criminals, army cheats — had never lost a game.

Payment for players and coaches was introduced after the war. Frank recommended professionalism to the six-footers, but they were from the landed gentry: what they could make at football was playlunch money.

Frank prepares to be a husband and father.

League could be a brutal game, and now Frank was moulding himself into a husband and father, he decided to quit.

He was engaged to a woman whose father had captained Balmain and had played for Australia against England.

He returned to Sydney to be married. He joined the public service as a clerk and, as one of his colleagues puts it, invented flexitime.

A personal memoir of my father.

Frank took us away to the beach every September school holidays. He packed only what was needed: "a sandshoe and a galosha", while our mother packed away linen, underwear, T-shirts, and several sets of our homemade shorts-suits.

There was no one Frank's equal for booking the absolutely best holiday bungalows. They were unglamorous, old-fashioned and right on the beach, at sleepy spots on the verge of discovery, along the central and northern coast of New South Wales: Ettalong, Tuncurry, Forster, Port Macquarie. He had an instinct for keeping just ahead of developers. We can never return to those places now saturated with development.

At Christmas time he printed T-shirts for himself with messages like "Be Frank" on the front and "I'm Frank" on the back. He displayed the T-shirts to guests who arrived during the day, and he pointed out his greeting cards, received and given. Guests laughed uneasily, wanting to appear to understand and not understanding these in-jokes.

At these celebrations he sang "My Canary Has Circles under His Eyes" looking like one, birds being the regular household pets, though there were two dogs over a ten-year period. Escapee canaries and budgies, captured in the backyard, counted as his mates.

His presents were perfunctory: something from Coles; or else, perhaps, a transistor, from the back of a truck. My presents were perfunctory too: what could I get a man who didn't want anything? Not because he had everything, he just didn't want anything. Greeting cards and T-shirts with messages gave him pleasure. I bought special shaving soap, books and tapes: the "My Word" series in print, *A Fortunate Life*, Frank S. singing "I Did It My Way", Don Burrows's jazz, Don Bradman reminiscing; and once, tools: a stanley knife and a rectractable tape measure.

But Frank didn't have hobbies. Mother would say, "I replace the tap washers; I fix the fuses; I hammer and nail." It was all she could do to get him to paint, or mow the lawn. Instead, he took bets for an SP bookmaker, and privately dealt in football results.

The history continues as told to me by Frank. Football and, to a large extent, parenting are now behind him. He becomes a bookie's mate.

"There are a lot of mugs in racing," Frank said, shaking his head and looking into the distance.

At the pub where he took bets, there were men he preferred not to deal with. But some might insist, if they thought they were on to a sure thing.

A bloke insisted he wanted a bet on My Philanderer. To prevent him screaming to the police, Frank said okay. The bloke started to move away without putting down any money. "No steak, no gravy," said Frank. If the horse had lost, Frank would be left trying to chase the money.

Frank sat drinking with his mates, listening to the race, telling them why he took the bet. My Philanderer won, but the bloke came up looking low, saying he was sure The Philosopher was a hot tip. The Philosopher came in fourth. All Frank's mates said they were sure it was Frank's shout.

Frank hated the pedantry of the radio race commentators. "My prognostication for the fifth at Randwick ...", one started saying. So Frank thought he'd try it on at his club with one of the blokes. "Er, Bill," he said, "what's your prognostication?" Bill, with his ear to a transistor and a pencil and form guide in hand, panicked, scanned his form guide and asked anxiously, "What? Prognostication? What race is he in?"

Once at the races with Frank, Mother said seriously, "Oh, Blue Hydrangea!", spotting a name on the form guide. "Mine's

flowering now; I'll have a dollar on Blue Hydrangea." The horse is 20-1, it's never won a race since birth, thought Frank, why doesn't she stab the form guide with a sharpened pencil in the dark? But the horse won.

Frank usually settled up with his bookmaker at one of Sydney's clubs. He hardly ever stayed, though the bookmaker might insist he have a drink while money was exchanged and pocketed in the corner within a group of big men built like Darlinghurst detectives.

During raids, staged like theatrical events in local pubs, the bookmaker had a pensioner clearly taking money: someone without a criminal record, who welcomed a bit of extra cash. The police would come in and lay their hands on him. The bookie would pay his fine and give him something for his trouble.

All day on the day that Fine Cotton was racing in Brisbane, Frank was taking bets. The rush was suspicious, so he rang the bookie: "Do you want to take the bets on?" Frank asked. The bookmaker said yes, take the money, but recommended that Frank not bet himself: the horse wasn't running to form.

Though the substitution of a good galloper was supposed to be a secret, a trail of rumours snaked its way down the coast. The instigators backed it themselves and had others back it for them. Everyone knew about it from Brisbane to Thangool, Fiji to New Guinea.

The instigators were found out, and the bookie won because he didn't have to pay up. And though the bettors complained to Frank, they weren't going to the police.

Frank gave betting up when he landed at the club one day and there were more big guys looking like they smashed glass and ate it for breakfast. But this time they were the bookmaker's protectors.

History is written by the victors.

There was a clampdown, sometime in the late reign of the

Wran Labor Government in New South Wales. However, in Queensland, the head of the TAB still took thousands of dollars in bets on credit, completely against the rules. And in the pages of the newspaper, Frank saw a big photo of a man dancing in a dinner suit — the same man who, when in prison, had been found printing form guides to his horse stud on prison equipment; now there he was photographed in the social pages, dancing at a charity ball.

When Frank recognised inequity, he pointed it out to his children. But like men of his particular generation, who were Irish-Catholic, working-class, Labor voting and left-wing, in his own life he remained immune to ambition and to the value and power of money.

Home Maintenance

Cultural Exchanges: "Coronation Street" vs. "Neighbours"

"WHERE I GREW UP, houses were attached; you could hear everything by holding a glass tumbler up to the common wall, which we did. You stepped out the front door and hit the pavement. Australia was an absolute luxury — a separate dwelling with a garden."

Real Estate

I CAN'T TALK ABOUT THE HISTORY of home making. But I know of two specific cases, so similar that they could represent the sweep of history, though I wouldn't want to say that.

One man was telling of his family history: working-class, his father worked all his life to buy a house and had a small superannuation pay-out to cover all the years of his retirement when he finally owned his own home.

And another: a woman whose parents spent all their time pursuing the ownership of a house. The dream of owning their own home consumed them. Weekends for years on end looking at real estate. And they bought one. But the obsession never really left them. Looking for shelter was a way of life.

Socialism and Home Ownership

"RENTING HAS BECOME REALLY difficult now," she said. "You have to wear your best clothes, gather references, and put up with appalling treatment by young male real estate executives."

She said she could have bought a house years ago, after working full-time and when houses were relatively cheap. But she was a socialist; she didn't want to be an absentee landlord.

When she decided to buy the flat she was renting, the real estate agent all but laughed in her face. He lied to and insulted her: "Don't worry, we'll be selling to investors, you won't have to move."

"I wish I'd told him I was a stockbroker," she said. She worked with a woman who had only just left university, and was now buying an eastern suburbs unit with water views; all she had to do was say her father was a doctor. "Doctors and lawyers — into the bank manager and money starts moving like a landslide; there's an immediate response — no questions asked." She was wondering what she had to be, or do, or how much she had to earn, before she was treated with respect.

For some time my partner and I eschewed money. Capital and private ownership were morally tainted. But my partner, in a precocious childhood, had examined then destroyed the anatomical structure of insects and blown up home garages with chemical sets. We were used to suburban life; we would buy a house.

Friends (who were all home owners) said "Don't buy. You're burdened for life." We were friends when all squatting together. The squats were dwellings in areas zoned for freeways designed by town planners who didn't think of the city with a living heart — men for whom people got in the way.

We were all on some alternative running track, until they

dropped out and waved us on from the bleachers while they did real estate deals.

Put a brick through
a real-estate agent's window
and it bounces back
and cuts you.

John Forbes

I could never treat real estate agents as friends, even if they did visit their aged mothers in nursing homes. "Real estate agents replace lawyers," pronounced my partner, "as the first to go, come the revolution!"

We stumbled away from rent increases, quarterly inspections, and requests for repairs, repeated and ignored. We exchanged our bête noire — the real estate agent for the bank manager. We lurched from tenant jitters to a chronic condition: floating interest rates in high seas. There were words — mortgage, default, repayment, equity, market value — live with static electricity. They flickered instantaneously like light bulbs in a row, making us blink and jerk.

I couldn't stop thinking of the bank officer as a motor mower. He probably had kids. He was probably nice to them. But I was bound to think of him as a motor mower, on its lowest notch.

The Shower Curtain of My Dreams

"I'M NOT GOING TO LIVE in Belsen," said my partner, when I suggested window coverings to be four years away.

A huge list of things to do, buy, fix, adjust, maintain, clean

clear, seal, and paint, brainstormed and prioritised on a roll of computer paper, which could have functioned as a semi-permanent window covering, hung on the frig door and had grown in size so exponentially that it did not remain magneted there without causing severe physical impairment and emotional distress.

I insisted that impermanents, portables, and personal effects were to be prioritised well below fixtures and fittings, which were well below basic maintenance. Forever, like a highway stretching into the distance, I could see an outpouring of money — not on accoutrements: built-ins, spa baths, pools, extensions of any kind, pergolas, pavers, sky lights, solar panels, kitchen remodels, dishwasher or microwave, video or compact disc; but on plumbers, locksmiths, electricians, pest exterminators.

For a while I cleaned as if I were still living with quarterly inspections. I raided corners for spiders despite the fact that they were not this house's problem. Blocked drains, words I'd never used in a personal context, now entered my vocabulary. I was comforted though, the way one is upon being initiated into mysteries. Though our house had fleas, trailing ants, wrigglers in the rainwater tank, unaligned locks, broken sash windows, warped cupboard doors, dripping taps, leaking roofs, and high trees punctuating the house, we retaliated with the golden rule: "Our house has position!"

I dreamed about systematising cleaning jobs within an allocated time by rotating indexed cards. The nightmare was that the cards kept flipping over, themselves increasingly grubby with each turnabout, while the actual tasks remained undone.

I understood the fascination with home decorator articles. I participated enthusiastically in conversations about lighting fixtures, bathroom fittings, paint colours, laminates, and carpet pile and fibre.

On Sunday mornings I no longer listened to current affairs,

but commiserated with the woman in a gardening talkback program who was going on holidays at hydrangea pruning time.

We bought the house in late summer. The birds stripped the grape vine while contracts were exchanged. We tizzied up the noble pear tree with tinsel and hung wind chimes on the rotary nearby; the birds stayed away; we harvested the pears. I thought of freelance articles, full of original, resourceful suggestions, to be sent to gardening magazines to raise finance for the mortgage.

All my conversations turned green, concerned with the heady issues of lime-loving plants and sap-sucking insects. I slept, whispering to myself: herbaceous, pendulous, deciduous / capensis, berberis, euonymus / gypsophila, gardenia, calendula / lilium, alyssum, japonica.

Home Decor

THE HOUSE CARRIES GHOSTS of people, of emotions, both past and present. Rooms fill with memories. The house casts shadows from history: shadows of anxiety, disappointment. We must celebrate more in the house, you think.

You paint the house, recreating it in an image that is not you, but created for you by someone else. And when you look at the rooms, it is with X-ray vision. You see them as they were in the past.

Sometimes you're at home in the house, sometimes hemmed in by the stated boundaries of what's inside, what's outside. At the same time as wanting to be enclosed by the house as by a shell, you want to break out, break open the walls. You want a house that opens up, but yields protection.

So you tidy up the house, your clothes, your papers. You clean the frig, the carpet. You change the linen. You go out to the garden to dig. Movement stills the shifting shadows.

Soon you find you no longer leave the house. You no longer answer the door. To speak at the front door you have to be your public self in this private space whose very corners you have knowledge of. Inside the house you are composing yourself, creating yourself in smoky dreams, and only you can read the signals.

Suburban Dreams

HER MOTHER IN THE SUBURBS, a dream of Mogadon, a death of streets in bright daylight; her facelift left her black, bruised and punch-drunk like a prize-fighter; she kept hidden in the house for days, for weeks. Her father sat potted, a long-suffering aspidistra in the corner, dimly lit. Her brother drank, and she herself, thin and brittle, anorexic, imagined rolls of fat on an emaciated midriff.

Shelter from the Storm

ON SCHOOL DAYS, when school finished in the afternoon, I loved coming home; I absolutely loved coming home.

Home Is Where the Heart Is

OUR LOVE CRADLES US, we rock together. Our love cradles us against, cradles us to, say yes, these things are possible, they're near, these things are us. We are. Against the things that savage, we rock. This is all, this flicker, one thousand times. Against, to.

Various Actions, Capricious Forms

BELUGA IS THE NAME of the caviar, not the vodka. Absolut is the name of the vodka. She saw it when she directed her eyes across the bottles of spirits: gin, rum, vodka — Absolut — and stopped at the price. Okay. Once in a decade. Once in a lifetime.

She is dreaming the celebration of her fortieth birthday. She will serve shooters of lemon vodka over lemon sorbet.

The recipe: marinate the rind, without the pith (she buys a zester), of a lime, lemon, mandarin, or grapefruit in vodka for five days. (She lays down the vodka bottle on a bed of ice in the freezer.) Pour a shooter of the vodka over lemon sorbet in a tall glass.

The drink becomes a memory of tangy ice on the palate, of smooth liquid glass down the throat. (She first drank this in Sydney in a bar, in Kings Cross.)

Sydney as icon now. The city of memory is out of sync with the city of present tense.

She speaks of the city in fixed phrases. (Think of the way you speak of your "homeland".) The fixed phrases include: "physically beautiful", "surrounded by water" and "the price of housing".

She has some pieces of art jewellery bought in the city. When others comment on a piece, she tells them, "It comes from Sydney," meaning "an exotic place", like Tangiers or Istanbul.

She is now a tourist in the city of present tense, a tourist in the city making itself over for the tourist.

She visits family and friends all over the city. They live in

clusters, in cells in the honeycomb of the city. She travels as a medieval pilgrim through village life: the inner city: Glebe; the inner west: Drummoyne, Dulwich Hill and Marrickville; the eastern suburbs: Bondi.

When she says to him, "My homeland is Sydney, but I can never go back because I couldn't afford a house there", he laughs, this man who's been examining the notion of homeland.

Now when she visits Sydney, she thinks about where she could possibly live if she came back. She could only afford a single room, a studio, a hovel. "You always say that when you visit," says her friend, "but you're not coming back."

Sometimes late at night on the bus in Adelaide, I look up from my book, try to see out through the window into the dark, and know I don't know where I am, even though I'm on my way home.

The tracks of my heart are laid by Sydney's 500 bus route. Walking straight up Lyons Road to the city bus stop, I catch the city bus — the bus that crosses three bridges en route to the city surrounded by water: the Iron Cove Bridge with the asylum sprawling in a Gothic menace down to the water's edge, through to Rozelle, Balmain in the distance; the bridge at White Bay, the container terminals, the old CSR sugar refinery and the fish markets, Annandale and Glebe in the distance; Ultimo and the Darling Harbour Bridge, through to the city.

Sometimes on the Adelaide tram that travels in a straight line from the city to the gulf waters at Glenelg, the suburb named as a palindrome, or on the Anzac Highway that for most of its distance is a straight line in this city of grids, I look up and know I don't know where I am. I'm on a grid heading for I don't know where. A nameless driver is in control. We could keep going into the gulf waters, or leap into a fourth dimension.

During the day, on a street corner, I look up and don't recognise the white light. I don't recognise the architecture: the Gawler sandstone bungalows low to the ground, stretching horizontally, as the plains themselves do in response to the hills.

When the eighties ended in the Gulf War, Christmas, New Year, and that summer were dampened while we waited for news of the American decision to invade Kuwait mid-January. Desert Storm.

There was nothing to do but look back ...

The suburbs of Sydney where I grew up in the fifties and sixties were safe, neutral, calm, monocultural.

This is where I live now — I moved back to the suburbs. In the mid-eighties I moved to a suburb of Adelaide. It's monocultural still.

But Chinese-Australians live next door. Mr Fong grows beautiful fruit: bountiful lemons which hang generously over our side of the fence, and early-ripening peaches with cosmic nectar — Wiggins, an old variety that we searched out among the nurseries in Adelaide and planted ourselves.

It's the way Australian suburbs used to be: everywhere are quarter-acre blocks. Most people have roses and hydrangeas, vegetable beds, fruit trees, and grape vines; some even have chooks, ducks, and bees. It's a suburb with trees and birds in a city with clean air.

... albeit temporarily.

If we could get over this knot, this road hump in history, this obstruction on our way to the new age, the new way of living that would save the planet, maybe we could look to the year 2000, the end of the century, with hope.

The Gulf War was strangely old-fashioned. It was the way

diplomacy used to be: like running into chauvinism — sometimes you forget that it's still around.

George Bush mimicked the symptoms of testosterone overload. (Why did we always see that man in a go(u)lf buggy? [Why did we always see Ronald Reagan in a golf buggy — with Margaret Thatcher?])

America, the insular Albania.

Saddam Hussein mimicked postmodern politics: say anything, and saying it makes it true — the relativity of everything, the privileging of nothing.

Post-glasnost made nostalgia of matriculation modern history lessons — the study of the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century when feudal states were joining together to form nations. Now the reverse, the mirror image, is happening.

I held the map of my suburb in my head and outlined it with my feet, walking out regularly what would now be called (adolescent) desire: vague, unfulfilled, marked by confusion, by hunger for something unknown, unnamed. Walking to and from primary school for seven years, to and from church for ten more. Walking on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Walking the length of Lyons Road, walking down to the water's edge, walking into the middle class, into wealth, high fences, huge gardens, water views, towers and turrets, mansions of many rooms.

By the end of the eighties I refused to listen to or watch "the news". I had hardly ever read newspapers. I dug my heels in over American family sitcoms on TV — they were still making them in the eighties. Where were the cowboy shows of our youth? They were revived at the end of the decade in the movies: *Young Guns, Young Guns II, Dances with Wolves,* and *Robin Hood* — two versions. What did this mean?

It's a Friday night on her stay in the city of present tense. They're meeting in the Cross, she and her sister, for a drink before they join their other sisters for dinner.

It's a long time since she's been in the Cross. She's so self-conscious she feels like a fool. Don't stand on a street corner. Everyone is looking at everyone else. The city of visual input. The city of icons.

Victoria Street is the logical place to go in the city of memory. There are many small restaurants now. In a hotel bottle shop she fills in time by looking at the selection of South Australian wines. A young woman is on the public phone. She is exquisitely packaged in bobbed hair, flawless skin, black stretch lycra, and 501s. "I'm bored," she is saying in an American accent. "Come over and entertain me."

Her sister is in Victoria Street too. They stick their heads through the doorway of one of the new small cafes to say hello to the proprietors. Her sister works in the industry.

They walk across William Street, past the Coca-Cola sign at the top of the Cross and the fire station on the corner, to the other side of Victoria Street, the side of bookshops, more small cafes, St Vincent's hospital and hospice.

Her sister takes her to one of the small cafes. She knows the proprietor here too. Its interior is postmodern European: chrome, black and blonde leather, the walls a wash of dull gold mustard. She has a shooter of lemon vodka over sorbet in a tall glass. Her sister gives her the recipe and the name of the best vodka: Absolut and Stolichnaya which she calls Stolies, like an old friend.

Nearby, three young private school girls, out of uniform, drink martinis and pay with credit cards.

This sophisticated life she leads occasionally, and usually in Sydney.

They eat at the restaurant where her sister works, which is

next door to a brothel. A middle-aged working woman in glasses steps out of a car into the doorway of the brothel and waves affectionately to the man at the wheel.

At the restaurant the young chef is turning twenty. He is in Doc Martens, coloured jeans, and a white Hanes T-shirt. She says to him, remembering, that the twenties are great years.

Over dinner two of her sisters do battle. She does not cope well. She suddenly and fully realises that this is the city of present tense, not the city of memory. It is not a place she can call home. She has no home. She has been out of her mother's womb for forty years. (She has been away from Sydney for ten.) She regrets, but doesn't seek re-entry. Having left home, she is cast adrift, forever practically. There is no fixed space, only light and memory.

Everyone she knows has been to the Guggenheim exhibition. Even those who live outside the city of memory have taken flights into the city of present tense to see the paintings, to revive nostalgia for the European tours of their Australian youth.

The Guggenheim is a quick fix to buoyancy through visual pleasure in the city of visual pleasure.

Pretending to be a tourist, she guides a tourist to the gallery. She can tell the tourist doesn't come from the city of present tense: it's the patina of her skin, the colour of her hair. She does not tell the tourist anything of her past. She does not say, I have lived here all my life; I know where I'm going. The tourist puts trust in her — the tourist has just had a free perm in the city of present tense; she asks for an honest opinion of the perm; her white-blonde hair has been frizzed so that she looks like an earth-bound angel.

At the Guggenheim an amateur painter is overcome with enthusiasm and speaks to her. They agree: the Kandinskys are the best.

She thinks Max Ernst's sculpture *An Anxious Friend* is a portrait of herself: a stylised upper body and square head with large, open eyes darkened with unreasonable worry.

The gallery shop sells pieces of art jewellery inspired by Calder's mobiles, familiar like paintings — especially the lily pads in red. She wants to pick these up — the mobiles and the jewellery — and take them home.

Outside the gallery coffee shop is a small Japanese garden with a gravel path swept Zen-fashion and a notice saying not to walk there. The harbour waters are dazzlingly blue in the distance.

Education

IN THE CLASSROOM with a student, I'm thinking about the trade union course for women — the first of its kind, some years ago.

The session leader in that course told us to write down three things about ourselves that needed improving and three good things. Everyone could think of the things that needed improving, but none of us came up with compliments.

The student says: "My husband said that lack of self-esteem is your own problem. Is that right?"

"Yes, sure, there are things you can do about it personally," I say, and we proceed to do one or two exercises.

We write down three good things about ourselves. She writes easily about things that need improving, and realises, staring at the marks on the page, how complimentary the good qualities are. She raises her eyebrows and smiles to herself, then shyly at me. We make a list together of things we enjoy doing, and how these activities make us feel, and finish with many flamboyant adjectives that we set before ourselves in high, chalk letters on the blackboard.

I consider the possibility of this stream stopping: there must come a generation of women who don't need their consciousness raised, their confidence built up. But hopefully I'd be retired or dead by then, so it wouldn't affect my income.

A friend says, "I don't know how politically effective teaching can be."

"I think of teaching as part of my political work," I say.

The right claims that there should be no politics in education,

as if there were parts of life that were neutral, like weak tea. There are Christians hoping for Armageddon in the near future, so the golden age will follow. Some people on the left see struggle as integral to their lives — not just an aberration, but a celebration. A black South African song says: "Struggle is my life, freedom in my lifetime, no easy way to freedom."

"It's your behaviour," another friend says. "If you behave in a nonauthoritarian way, you're teaching something about what you believe of the world."

I have a friend who simply thinks of herself as a living poet.

"It's all poetry to me," she says.

She bowls into the bank or employment office, says straightforwardly that she is a poet in the belief that it is imperative for the clerks to reorganise systems to accommodate her. She pictures the scenario: a stunned silence, a faint-hearted attempt at argument, and then they fall into line.

She catalogues their reactions: curiosity: "What do you write?"; disbelief: "Have you had anything published?"; brutal pragmatism: "Is that what you do in your spare time?"

At the employment office, the clerk hunts for a computer code. "Public relations? Copywriter?" he asks.

"Of course we could make thousands out of copywriting," she says to me, "but we've chosen not to put down wives and mothers, not to encourage the spread of cancer, or endanger the environment. There is a writer, isn't there: a novel, a film of the novel, and a thousand soap powder commercials under his belt?"

"I want a union," she continues. "I want to fight alongside other poets for better conditions. I envisage a time, given the changing nature of work, when the Poets' Union will be bigger than the Amalgamated Metal Workers."

When I get into a discussion about the world with my students, they tend toward a position of hopelessness.

We had been sitting in the library discussing the future, the video of *Macbeth* finished. Elizabeth was saying that her daughter's school had been leafleted by pornographers. The materials were available to the kids before the staff knew what was going on. Elizabeth had fronted, hurt and incensed, at the principal's office. He opted for understanding, comfort and explanation, where he should have matched her outrage. She suffered the unnecessary, untimely loss of her daughter's innocence. Could we prevent a nuclear war, she asked, in a world that treated children so?

I sifted through history for events where people's actions had changed its course. There was the Vietnam War. I mentioned the idea of a local peace group, and the women's centre. I quoted from remembered reading of a seventies radical educationalist: we should live as if we're in a just world. I thought of the lesbian show on the public radio station: it was a celebration; no aggression nor defensiveness. They just played on the high ground.

Students, people who hadn't put pen to paper in years, come to class for confidence, to be told they can do it.

They believe writers are born, that they pop out of the womb as Hemingways; the product, the actual book, seems awesome, its creation a metaphysical process in which they couldn't possibly participate. "This is my sixth draft," one says, with uncertain understatement.

"Now I've started, I'm not going to stop studying," Elizabeth says. "This bloke asked me to go round Australia with him. Once I would've. But I've got too much to do. It's not only because of my daughter that I said no."

She was planning to become a lawyer step by step. Her

government house was coming together. "I've got my eye on a lounge suite. In two or three years I'll have it."

While this future was clear, she regularly lost confidence in her present ability. "I don't know anything, there's so much to learn, I was so ignorant. For years I've been a blimp. Suddenly I've got an opinion about everything. It's frightening."

Joan is fifty years old. She came from a huge family; seventeen people in one room; they had nothing. "I'm a child again," she says. "I can't imagine why the other students get bored. I love it. I want to know everything."

She had lived through a marriage to a drunk who beat her up. "I see things I've never seen. I'm a scholar. I was born one." She collects old books and dips into them. "I pick up a jam jar and study the label," she laughs. The children complained; they wanted their mother back. "I'm saying to my family 'Get out of my way'. I've become an intellectual; the house has gone to pot." All her family were soldiers; she had believed passionately in the Anzacs. Questioning everything now, she was putting herself through the wringer, "where my washing ought to be."

"I've a big voice, and I use it. Now I don't need it anymore."

It took the male lecturers half the year to treat her seriously. In the canteen students gathered round Joan to ask questions; the lecturers, there for a democratic cup of coffee, couldn't get a word in. She developed strategies, forcing herself on their attention, working them gradually up to accepting her writing. "Sometimes I want to tell them 'Shut up', and take over the class."

I was lining up with other students of a media course, for a meal break at the college canteen. We had been monitoring "The Concrete Gang", a show on community radio, in which the unionists seem to complain interminably.

"Haven't they got enough?" one woman said. "They just want it all."

I was usually stumped by that argument. "Yes, how greedy." But I thought again. In the case of the Builders' Labourers, their work really was hazardous. Could anyone say they worked in a job where the conditions were optimum? Every building site had its list of dead.

The moment when I see a student's enrolment form: the lack of confidence that comes through in the handwriting; the spelling, idiosyncratic phonetic pronunciation; the stumbling over the reading passage.

In a period of threatened funding cuts the students organise themselves and write letters to newspaper editors and government and educational institutions, with newly acquired communication skills.

"Do you know that the State Public Library originally opened as a gentlemen's club?" says my coordinator. "There was a fortune to pay in membership fees."

"Now there's a fortune in overdue fees," I reply. We lick a stamp for a letter to another politician.

A student writes a letter to the council, to a newspaper editor; writes his autobiography, his father's biography. A student finds paid work, reads to her child, speaks on radio, becomes a union representative. A student becomes involved in conference organisation and reads a shopping list.

Week End

IT SHINES BEFORE US as a beacon — Jay Gatsby's light off the jetty. Falling into rough waters, we swim, keeping it in view.

When Saturday dawns, we crawl onto its sands like castaways. We are beached whales that no one can move. On that morning we cradle ourselves in blanket folds.

Like lighted candles, clean sheets and pillowcases are a Friday night ritual, a blessing for the time ahead. A suggestion of morning-soiled sheets mismatches our light hearts and leaves us, with such slender cause for alarm, trouble-free.

Friday night is netted in a holiday mood: we eat fast food, pizza, chicken, fast pasta at Fasta Pasta: clusters of heads bloom at tables; families, friends, lovers, all say, "No kitchen duty tonight": we are celebrating in this house-wine, no-table-linen way.

Bright hearts, bright heads, we know each other in the street as astral bodies in our own galaxy zooming through space. Tapping on the window of our spaceship, we point out, in passing, known stars.

Saturday morning, rolling in sheets as rhinoceroses in mud, we snooze, edging our way out of sleep, slipping down a slide in slow motion, closer to waking, ground level, at a pleasurable pace: fresh orange juice, like a gift, and the zap of caffeine; bodies burn — firework rockets shoot high, burst and splinter incandescent debris.

Always, the functional shower. A spray of baby powder speckles the ferns; sticky underarms deodorised, hair tossed and

pull on of windcheaters, sandshoes, we supermarket just before closing time.

No plans but plans to plan make selection habitual: tinned fish, tooth and tomato paste, butter and cheese, bread and toilet rolls, soap, soap powder, milk and newspapers.

Deposits of shopping in cupboards, washing machine whizzing and whirring like a crazy cat, we eat huge plates of cereal, and the newspaper is subdivided, parcelled out in lots for sectional interests. In our household, travel, real estate and business remain unsullied — the paper is carved up for news, arts and employment: on the table, floor and bed we come upon dismembered sections, deposited willy-nilly as in the aftermath of a whirly-whirly. We sprawl and read, and quote and laugh, and circle and cut well into the afternoon.

We move with the rhythm of neighbourhood dogs, instinctively, from washing line, the garden, to computer, washing windows, vacuuming, sewing, swimming, running, ABC radio on and off all day. There are no commitments — no fairs, no rallies, protests, no family or friends to see, no meetings, seminars, no film or theatre, no exhibitions, no readings, games to play or watch; but trips to the supermarket maybe for food we've forgotten: cream or ice-cream, chocolate bar or torte, alcohol, more bread, milk and newspapers. One meal special, recipe-related, three courses maybe. A famous foreign film on TV and serious current affairs.

Another night we sleep like babies; on an unplanned morning stretching out in bed to consider the world according to "Background Briefing". Is the Pope CIA? We copulate to "Sacred Music".

Like maladjusted retirees, we are at a loss what to do, the day is so free. We are in a frenzy at this final fling. Time is our enemy. The day contracts like a recalcitrant sinner; it falls apart continuously, a puppet weak at the knees. Our power seems only shovel

and steam. If we could hold back the week with our hands on a moving wall we would. Sadness overcomes us, like a spray of blossom petals. Conversation seems pointless, though we express bodily affection for the comfort of it. We open our mouths to speak and they are full of feathers; if words come, they are gravity-prone. We lose our way in the house, and sunshine is an alien medium; we cannot stay too long. Uneasy is the prospect of Sunday night sleep. We pack our bags for Monday.

Mycology

I SCAN THE MAP. Martin's holding it, discussing the driving route with Jack. It's Jack's map. Jack collects teaspoons from his travels and still has his first body shirt.

If I'm excluded from the discussion of the driving route, I don't mind. I haven't actually tried to participate. I could navigate; it's just that it would take me some time, more time than it would Martin or Jack, to work out the route. I don't drive. Neither does Jack. But he does play games of strategy with Martin on boards and computers. And if I worked out the driving route, it would then be double-checked by Martin.

Besides, I sense a pattern will readily form in the day, as if pavers were to be placed in geometric shapes just ahead of my every footfall. I am standing outside events, watching them unfold, like a director shooting her film. Things are happening as if they were the final take of scenes that have been planned out and well rehearsed. Why, just last night, Martin and I had watched a video of *The Name of the Rose*, after regularly checking the shelves to find only its absence.

This morning I ask Jack for a copy of the book. He has bound copies of *Phantom* comics and *Choice*, the consumer magazine.

"I'll give you my copy, if you can get me a rice-paper edition of *The Lord of the Rings*," he says.

"Just because I review books," I say, "doesn't mean I'll come across a rice-paper edition of Tolkien."

It's late autumn — perhaps too late: we are to spend half a Saturday on a mushroom search. Second Valley sounds a place of magic from a storybook, a place of elves, fairies, and toadstools. It is, perhaps, that valleys, and forests, are land formations

that equate with secrecy and ritual. According to the map, Second Valley is down the leg of the peninsula on a small bound foot of land that dips its toe into the gulf waters.

"Wear your wellies!" declares Jack; Sarah has arrived with her pair on. But Jack's declaration is only part of the role-play, the game, the mythology of hunting for mushrooms in damp and soggy places, for, like Martin and me, Jack doesn't have any wellies and instead wears sturdy shoes. Sarah has come down from the hills where there's an easy sense of living in the bush, to meet up with us urban plain dwellers. And I can't imagine any damp and soggy place in Adelaide or its surrounds that would affect our footfall — except after very heavy and recent rain. Rain is rare enough, and heavy rain, heavy enough to make for squelch, rarer still.

By midday we're hurtling down the road, crowded into the car's capsule, held, it seems, by some centrifugal force on this little planet hurtling through space.

Our purpose is specific but clandestine, so we feel ourselves to be visitors from another planet in this ordinary daylight on an earth day. We'll be landing soon — like Doctor Who — in some strange but familiar country. Though time travellers, and therefore supertechnocrats, we can nevertheless be foragers in the forest too.

We pick up Colin as our scout because he has a "nose". He's quiet in the back of the car. It's not that he's sullen; it's just that some men in the games group are unnerved by the way women disturb the balance of the usual all-male group.

We're hoping Colin won't fail us. Yet we'll all contribute what resources we can draw on: sight, intellect, instinct. Since no one seems to have certain knowledge, I'm confident I can contribute equally. At least I'm at liberty to ask questions, as we all do, that set the parameters of our investigation:

Where are they?

How will we know them?

Who's had them before?

Jack's zeroed in on pine forests — that's where he's found them before. Martin disputes. "What we should be looking for is a cow paddock with a row of eucalyptus," he says. "But that was in Tasmania," he continues, thinking out loud, remembering his hippie past. "The optimum conditions were probably different there."

"I was hoping it would be raining," says Jack, dreaming of damp, of mist and fog and fungus.

"Why?" Martin laughs. "Do you think they'll pop out of the ground?"

David Suzuki's on the car radio. He's explaining exponential growth — why we don't need it. We have a way of looking at the world that sees things as useful only if they're useful to human beings. We don't recognise the "interconnectedness" of things. When he took his daughter to the zoo, she pointed to particular animals and asked if they were rare or endangered species. They may not be around when she grows up. Already there are many she will never see — they've disappeared from the earth and the skies.

"There's a man who goes round the world planting trees," says Jack. "He's ninety-three."

"He's dead," says Sarah.

Later we tell Jack that Maria Callas is dead too. There's no need for further comment on the disappearance of species.

The first mushrooms we see are in one of the main towns for the area, Myponga. They're concrete, huddled together with the gnomes in a gnome sale.

We suspect that the mushrooms will be on private property. In the town we see a land sale advertised.

"I'd like to buy some land down here," says Sarah.

Jack suggests we go and check out the mushrooms on these

vacant blocks. There follows some discussion about distracting the real estate agent from our illegitimate purpose.

"Maybe they have Neighbourhood Watch in Second Valley," says Martin. " 'We've sighted them in the field. Over.' 'Hold them till we get there. Over.' 'Halt!' 'Look here, we're ... we're 'cologists of some kind.' "

What's the name of the study of fungi? Mycology. Mycologists. We see Mypo Carpets, which we read as Myco Carpets, painted across a shop window. This is a sign, we say.

Jack looks out onto the road. "They're all druggies in those cars following us," he says. "They've got beards, long hair, and glazed eyes."

"Well," says Martin, "they've come out for the occasion, just like the mushrooms."

Sarah says we should have dressed suitably. "We could have dug out our flares and worn Afro wigs."

Jack says he went to a wedding recently. "The only pants I had were flares. I had to stand still throughout the reception to prevent them flapping."

In the pine forest, mushrooms are everywhere in infinite variety as if abundance acts to confuse and deter. They're like the death of stars, a short, bright burst of life. They're strange fruits, living presences: they speak of other worlds, other times. The bright reds spotted white are straight out of picture books. The big, flat-topped yellows look like parts for electric sanders.

The forest consumes us. The forest floor is like sponge rubber. We're not on solid ground. If the needles don't hold our next steps, we could be sinking through to the earth's centre. It's so quiet we hear our own thoughts as other voices. We could be lulled into a dream and stay here forever. We drift apart and wander alone; it's a long time before there's the call to regroup.

Our scout is lost, reluctant to be found. The forest seems vast,

more vast than it really is. Our voices trail. How would we even begin to look for him in this labyrinth of growth and decay?

Upon regrouping we decide that this is not the place — it's been a false trail. So we're back on the road again. Jack is looking out for clues. And there's the spot ahead of us, according to Jack, with its individual markers: the corner, the only deli, the fork in the road, the hill, the pine forest.

We spread out for a hunt, five metres apart within sight of each other — our purpose is clear: to get what we came for. I've asked for a description of the mushrooms, but like a religious experience or quantum physics, no one can explain: it's the experience — we'll know them when we see them. Our focus is so set now that our search in the forest will be a kind of meditation.

I'm looking for formed nipples. And this is the place; when I pick what seems like my fortieth mushroom and press it with my thumb, almost instantaneously it turns blue. I press and press again: a child in response to a mechanical toy. And the stem and the cap turn blue. Sarah and I — the novices — discover them all at once. Sarah pulls some from her japara.

"She's growing them in her pockets!"

We gather what we can of what we see in the immediate area, for, like the curved line on a graph of a predictable plot, we have found what we came for when it is already late and time to go. The autumnal day has closed in around us and we have left the car exposed on a lonely road.

Propelled back to the city in our time capsule we are subdued; our investigation has been wrapped up, the story closed. In the distance the sun is setting in orange and red over Adelaide. This is our only conversation, except for Martin who is still ebullient and therefore out of sync with the rest of us.

"So, after all that, it is nuclear war that got to us first," he

booms lightheartedly behind the wheel of the car, "not environmental collapse."

I dip my head and begin to try to rub away the black stain on the skin around my thumbnail.

Covering Letters
(A Found Story)

To the Editor

PLEASE FIND ENCLOSED herein a selection of recent stories which are reported to be my most "popular" fiction to date. I also have a novel searching out a publisher. It's a crazy, witty piece called *Brat Pack* — about 1842 pages. It's baroque and bitter and you may like to use some of it. I'll post it on request.

I do not apologise for the last verse of the enclosed poem which has echoes of the rollicking "The Man from Snowy River" by Banjo Paterson. The beat seemed in keeping with the ongoing narrative of the poem. Paterson and I must have been inspired by the same narrative, at different times of course. So the similarity was quite unintentional at the time of writing. Must I prevent myself from using an inspiration I shared with Paterson just because he had it first?

Sending you my story is going some way to winning my holy war to see science fiction recognised and published in Australian literature. It's a lonely crusade, but I'm fired by the correctness of my beliefs. Hope you can use it.

I hope you broadcast my interior monologue, which moves around a lot. It would enhanced if it were read aloud.

I enclose a short story to your magazine in which I have previously had a piece published and thought it looked quite good. This one might catch your eye. Although short, it could

be supported with other material of mine. For example, "Post-Hole Digger" — a subject that sounds dry, but I've given it a dramatic treatment. It was one of the finalists in the Weewar Council Area Short Story Competition in 1969, but has not yet been published, and might be just the thing for an issue of your magazine in the very near future.

Several short stories are enclosed as a submission for your anthology. I apologise for the volume but I can never predict what people will like in my work, and although the advertisement stating the theme for your anthology was not ambiguous, I believe it to be open to broad interpretation.

If you wish to publish my story but find the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics difficult to reproduce typographically, then an English translation is acceptable.

My latest attempt to get a short story into your magazine. If I told you that I've written a television series, received a writing grant for a novel from the federal government arts funding body, had several short stories previously published in other magazines and anthologies and broadcast on radio — both here and overseas, had a play produced by a theatre company touring nationally and a radio play produced by a local radio station, would that influence your decision?

When I last sent you my poems, it was suggested that I send you some after the next financial year (something to do with the grant system for your magazine). I did not get round to doing that since I could not remember the name of your magazine and I misplaced your letter with the address. So since it's about two years down the track now, I am making the assumption that it's

okay timewise to submit my work again, since I saw a reference to your magazine in a writers' group newsletter.

I apologise for the creases in my manuscripts. I tried to fit them into the A3 envelope I normally use (but they fit A4 better). However, I ended up finding a unique newsagent variety which I'll use in the future.

I apologise strongly and sincerely that four of the six poems submitted are handwritten. My apologies; I don't mean to be an amateur. I've had a serious problem with my printer.

Here are some bits of my writing.

From the editor

THANKS FOR THE PROSE. I'll use both if you promise to learn how to spell my name.

Thanks for sending the pieces for our consideration. We are interested in publishing two of these in the magazine. Are you interested in a subscription?

Thank you for submitting your work for the anthology. There were many submissions. The size of the anthology necessitates that a place has not been found for much material of a considerable standard, including the enclosed material by yourself.

Thanks for sending your work. It's not suitable for me, unfortunately — though I can't see that you should have too much trouble placing it eventually somewhere else. Sorry about the

delay in replies. I've only just managed to read submissions, then write these letters.

I am returning this work as inappropriate. I do realise that this can hardly seem a detailed or helpful reply. I am prevented by time from doing more, even where I would want to.

I'm afraid the pieces you submitted to our magazine were not suitable for it. If you take note of what the magazine publishes, you'll see what's suitable.

We regret that we are unable to publish your work. That's not to say that it's unpublishable: it's just not our bag.

We quite liked the rambling, fractured nature of this piece but thought it was too much like a lecture and not enough like a work of fiction.

Works quite well, but it's so scaled down a performance that one regrets the lack of amplitude.

You're right. The original manuscript was lost in the move. I'm overwhelmed with fiction banked up. Please keep submitting work.

A bit fragmentary. See marginal notes.

Can't find a spot for your short story. Cheers.

Mistake. I've already seen this.

Too ironic?

Role Modelling

PERHAPS BECAUSE IT WAS winter, but also because of ongoing financial crises, she decided she would live in a delimited way. And though she had made a start, she wanted to do it *more*. But she suspected, she knew, her living in this bounded way would not be real, would remain imitative. Neither passion nor perfection, nor absolutes nor extremes were part of her make-up.

It was her habit to try out forms of behaviour not natural to her but which she observed in others and, like an infection when her immune system was down, inevitably took on, as if against her will, if she had attempted to exercise it. She had to enact the behaviour for herself in order to understand it. She became what she observed, or rather she would produce an effect by playing a part.

She had her role models for this circumscribed practice. Three women. By coincidence, and perhaps of some consequence, they were all artists. Two of the women were painters and the third a photographer. Their work was characterised by concentration and absorption, detailing, determination and dedication. They shared similar philosophies, defined by the cosmic, the organic, the wholistic.

The three women, it seemed to her, had the same bodily based rhythm. When she thought of each one in movement, it seemed they mirrored one another's pace, which was measured.

She had met Carrie first. Carrie had a reverence for food. She prepared it like a priest consecrating the bread and wine at mass. Approaching the food with great concentration — dicing and

shredding, slicing thinly and neatly — she could have been a jeweller cutting precious stones.

Carrie's practice of reducing and delimiting had a long and hard history from her years as a single mother — though now she lived with it faithfully and comfortably. The times when there was so little money, she went without food; she would avoid public transport and, pushing her child in a pram, walk for miles. How she counted and budgeted silver and copper, and divided the coins into little coin purses; how she never treated herself; how when she did treat herself, it was to go some distance to a special cafe selected for its particular cappuccino, and this was once a week.

Carrie's clothes were op shop, but chosen with exquisite care. Each item, however negligible, was individually selected, had its own unique characteristic which Carrie could itemise. So purchasing a single item of new clothing became an agonising exercise over weeks. It was a search for a simple item — say, a black skivvy — but with particular properties of comfort: to be functional and to fit "the self" exactly. By its very definition, such an item would be so, but Carrie plumbed the depths of its definition and noted all of its features — the softness of the cotton, the looseness of the fit.

Except for her health, Carrie never spent anything on her body beyond the basics. But she dyed her hair with a dark henna, her one indulgence she said, her only vanity being her dark eyes whose depth she wished to highlight by dyeing her greying hair.

Carrie was the photographer. By way of contrast, she photographed what could be justifiably classified as the frivolous — for example, a delicate white blouse: a subject entirely domestic and private. But the blouse was old, in a soft crepe, an heirloom with eyelet lace down its front, and in very good condition. An image of the preciousness of the past and a delicate thread to the future.

Carmel and Judith were the painters. They both wore op shop recycled clothes, or clothes handmade and long wearing: handmade leather shoes and homespun jumpers in colours that had gone to earth with age. They weren't consumers; their artwork did not provide a reliable income to sustain them. But they weren't consumers for more reasons than that — consuming was distracting from their art.

They painted in repetitive patterns of passion and intensity under restraint. The paintings were an enactment of their philosophies.

Carmel painted points of light, minute and off-centre, surrounded by whorls of monochrome. The paintings could have been the cosmos or the body, the points of light the third eye or the flowering vulva. Sometimes the point of light was at the base of tree roots in soil which could have been branches in air.

Judith painted the harbour of the city, though she denied it was the harbour when approached by someone seeking absolute certainty that that was what it was. The harbour waters danced and glittered through repetitive geometric patterns around a grid of solid lines the colour of the harbour bridge.

Carmel and Judith gathered, recycled and cared for. Carmel collected seed, and planted and cared for native trees in large trays bedded beside more large trays. Judith curated an exhibition of domestic technology, gathering pieces of pottery, their glazes shining deeply with wear, drifting her fingers over them.

All three women held, and lived by, precious beliefs not easily amended but readily consolidated. They were dark-haired women. She expected to see them in clothes of russet tones or in dusky teal or mauve and opalescent blue.

She looked for some evidence in her own life, for practices similar to those of the women. She began with the outer signs, hoping the physical practice would engender the deeper phi-

losophy. It was easier to begin with the superficial — results were immediately forthcoming.

The overcoat she had been wearing for over fifteen years was already an op shop piece when she bought it. She was about to let the coat go but thought about the women and decided to keep it longer.

She began again to seek out shoe repairers. Shoes had gone the way of all consumer items to be characterised by in-built obsolescence, and they were cheap enough to buy, and so cheap she would not bother to have them repaired, for the cost of the labour and materials for the repairs equalled the price of a new pair of cheap shoes. To repair, or not and buy new shoes was a difficult decision. To buy cheap and never repair and discard, or buy expensive and repair and re-use.

But as part of the practice of retention, she had some shoes repaired, and repaired again, but the shoes were made so cheaply, and perhaps had reached such a state of deterioration, that the repairs neither halted nor slackened the pace of their decay.

Shoes, then, needed serious consideration and careful examination: the effectiveness of repairs weighed against the current state of the shoes and the cost of new ones.

She wasn't sure that this was the kind of thinking that her role models spent their time on.

She sewed sheeting together — the thinning pieces left after the original hole had been torn away, and even before that when the hole had been patched up and then came asunder again along the join, the weakest point. Thinning towels would be next, sewn together to make one new thicker fabric.

She had long been collecting buttons in tins and bottles. And there were bits of elastic and pieces of ribbon in her sewing box. She knew that zippers were suitable for recycling, but, with her limited sewing skills, she never sewed anything so complicated. The only recycled things in significant quantity were buttons.

Though, strictly speaking, they weren't recycled, for she rarely reused them — that's why they were in a significant quantity, for they remained collected there in the bottles and tins. She thought the saving of buttons might not be truly conservational behaviour but simply childlike, like her collection of shells: pretty things.

But, in time, the saving of buttons proved to be prescient behaviour. For instance, she sewed buttons onto pyjama tops which would have previously been discarded, making them comfortably wearable, so that she didn't have to buy new ones, even though new ones in Coles would have been relatively cheap.

Her purchase of a darning mushroom had been prescient too. She had bought the mushroom years before, not for its function but for its aesthetic qualities — its dark, shiny wood rounded smoothly over its handle to be twirled in the fingers. But recently she had begun darning socks. She had found the image of Julie Christie darning her coloured tights in *Memoirs of a Survivor* infinitely comforting.

For some socks, like repairs for some shoes, the darning had come too late. The socks disintegrated anyway, their usefulness not significantly prolonged. So that even the darning was a waste of time and energy.

Of course, even disintegrated socks could be made useful — for instance, for stuffing cushions. Though in fact right now she had enough stuffed cushions, stuffed not only with old socks but with larger discarded items of clothing which she could always use again, if these items of clothing still fitted her and were neither totally shabby nor wholly unfashionable. It was just that these stockpiled stuffed cushions needed new covers, and covering this stockpile was the first consideration before creating new stuffed cushions.

And this reminded her of a woman she had met before any

of the artists: in a youth hostel, a traveller travelling light, wearing the same black jumper and pants every day but with a change of six or seven pairs of socks. In the large washroom of a youth hostel, with a cream rippled oil heater banked up against a wall, she turned her washed socks, which were spread across the ripples or lay in the furrows of the heater, individually and intermittently, little roasting quail, to dry both sides. The traveller called them her "little charges".

She remembered that she had kept all her heavy-duty socks — bushwalking and mountain-climbing socks — socks that she did not actually wear but had accumulated nevertheless — thick woollen socks from Paddy Pallin or handknitted socks from an Esfahan or Kabul marketplace — she remembered that she had kept all of these, along with her heavy woollen jumpers which she did not wear either, in memory of the women, as a kind of commitment to their values.

She had begun with the unimportant because it was easier, but remained there, distracted. She was neither herself nor the other. Role modelling created a pale imitation, a moderate gesture, when the artists' practice could only be construed as an extreme.

Language as a Virus

SOME NIGHTS I WENT to class without any confidence that I could teach. I thought, I can't teach these people anything. The class was usually bad that night.

I decided that before class I would rid myself of negative thoughts. I focused my attention like a light source until it grew smaller and smaller, fixing itself on the students, on where they wanted to go.

Some nights I wanted to laugh. I felt I could sing the lesson, recite it like a nursery rhyme, perform it like a piece of cabaret.

> Hi! Have I got a lesson for you. Wow! I can't believe it. So hold onto your seats, because this morning I've got … wait for it … participial phrases! Yes, yes I know — very exciting. But look, just stay calm, because I've also got … subordinate clauses. Yes, yes, I know, it's too much! But let's try and restrain ourselves. And let's get into it. Participial phrases — that name's got a good ring to it — come in two varieties at least: past and present — what a bonus. So that means incredible versatility. I love it. They don't come in different colours, just in different times. But functional, absolutely functional. What more could you ask for? Well, we could see some more; it could be a growth industry! And then I've also got … subordinate clauses. It's a jam-packed lesson. Subordinate clauses — could we live without them? They begin with words that are called subordinating conjunctions, and they hang around with commas, but are not as interesting as words that hang around with semi-colons, which are called … connectives! How meaningful and up-market, as opposed to predictable coordinating conjunctions, which, let's face it, are boring: and, but, or, nor, for, so. But I don't want to put anything down; everything is growing and changing. After all, you can now start sentences with "and". Now, that's innovative! And

> when we start putting subordinate clauses with main clauses — well, wow, we've really got something complex there! But on the other hand, let's not knock the simple sentence. We've got something Zen there: pureness, oneness. Subject–verb–object. Clean lines, no clutter. Simple. But if you really want to be minimalist, let's have subject and verb only. Why not subject only? Why not verb only? Wow, the sentence is the verb. The sentence is the subject. One word sentences. A sort of paradox. I like it.

Valves and continents — this is the way students pronounced the words "vowels" and "consonants". They tore away in fright from such words, like fireballs. A lifelong history was hard to undo. These words were things that had always caused them problems; they were mysteries, alien life forms.

"Sinking in", or rather "not sinking in", was a metaphor the students often used. I thought of the toothbrush television advertisement that used a cartoon flip-top head. In class I could partly slice open the top half of a student's head, flip it open, pour in the information and close up the head.

This was the way space was characterised in science fiction films — it was never a friendly place. Students couldn't come at the words in a friendly state. So they immediately mispronounced words in Freudian slips, out of intense nervousness or embarrassment. They secretly thought: we have no power over these words; we must get them wrong, we must clash with words; it's our destiny.

> The language was an animal alive. A wrestling match that made your brain seize up — so full, it might burst; so weary from the struggle, it hurt. The language was a creature from outer space. You couldn't angle it like a fish with bait you knew suited. You couldn't sneak up behind; you couldn't snare. The language was a vortex, a black hole, where you spun out of control. The language had rules, but you didn't know them. If you knew the rules, you couldn't remember them. If you remembered the rules, you couldn't apply

them. Besides, you couldn't trust the language. The language broke its own rules. The language wouldn't be boxed in. The language was space itself. The language was vastness. You'd never know it all. The language wasn't a friend. The language wasn't a fun person. The language didn't make you laugh. The language frustrated you. You wanted to beat it with sticks. The language had no logic. The language was cruel. The language was indifferent to your plight, like the ocean or the desert. The language made no concessions. The language didn't bend over backwards. The language might have had secrets, but you didn't know. You were so bamboozled you couldn't determine if there were secrets. The language might have had patterns, but you were so stuck in a maze with no aerial view, you couldn't determine the patterns. You wanted a key, a plastic card, a code name, or number. You wanted it all down on microchip to snap into your brain, a deposit in a slot, effortlessly. You wanted the language there, to be accessed automatically, like a sneeze or a blink — no altering your way, no break in your rhythm. No implosion of stars. But the language kept thinking it had a life of its own.

Learning occurred with readiness. I took up yoga many years after I'd thought of it, because my body and mind were ready, because the class was close and it was the right time.

Learning took place at crisis point. Many students turned up at literacy classes when a partner had died, a child was starting school, a promotion at work was offered or sought.

Learning was about learning how to learn. I thought because the students were getting it wrong, they needed the strategy, the logic to fix it up, the right tools and equipment. If I pointed out rules to spellers who were spelling okay, they tended to get confused. I played the devil's advocate — the rules to those who ignored them; for those who wanted to know the basics I used the wholistic approach and told them to write.

But the more I taught, the more I made mistakes in my own writing.

In spelling, nothing helps you to know if it's "ance" or "ence" — there are word lists equally long. Oh yes, but "ant" words usually take "ance" and "ent" words "ence", and there can't be exceptions to that — though there might be somewhere and probably are; however, as the world turns inexorably through space and as surely as night follows day, there are more "ables" than "ibles", and the double "s" words, if their noun ends in "ion", usually take "ible". (You're trying to think of one now?); and "ive" words take "ible" too, though there are exceptions. Like the exception to the rule that part words take "ible" and "able" goes on a full root. You can't hear the difference if you're saying them, but if the last letter of the word is a vowel, "b", hard "c", "f", hard "g", "h" in a combination, "m", "n", "p", "r", "v", "z", then it's "able" with few exceptions, and soft "g" and "c" take "ible". But no one ever gets them all right all of the time: like the pilot who wrote the flying manual and spelt (I'll take up "t" or "ed" in the past tense in the future) propeller "propellor" all the way through (but that's another story I'll get onto either before or after the one about "t" or "ed" in the past tense). And you'd like to get more of them right more often than you usually do, because even though everyone everywhere is always using a dictionary, when you always use a dictionary all the time, somehow you forever feel inferior which is spelt "or"; "er" is most common, especially in nouns, although some common nouns are spelt "or", especially if the word is an action, which explains propeller but not "or" for inferior because "or" most often follows "ct", "it", "ss", and adjectives are most often "ar" or "er". About doubling a final consonant (while noticing — even noticing "noticing" — leaving off the final "e" in doubling): when adding "ing", "er", "ed", "est" to a word of one syllable that ends in a short vowel pattern (for words of more than one syllable — double if the stress is on the second; always double "l"; for "ic" and "k"; never double "x", "w", or two consonants, likewise vowels), double the final consonant, and if ending in "y" preceded (most words of this type are spelt with "cede", only three words with "ceed", and one with "sede") by a vowel, do not double, and if preceded by a consonant, change to "i". Either "t" or "ed" in the past tense is acceptable.

I loved the way the language worked like a piece of machinery. I spent a lot of time with words, like a plumber with pipe, an electrician with wire, generating or reproducing, presenting and teaching them.

> I whip them into shape. "Okay, words," I say, "take that!" Yes, this is a joke. I have no authority over the words, and I abhor violence. It's give and take, a cooperative effort, an equal balance of power — that is, sometimes the words fall into line. But sometimes they set sail. I race down to the jetty, just as they loose themselves from their moorings. "Goodbye, words!" I say. "Bye, bye." I wave them off from the jetty, and the words set sail for open sea. Sometimes it's a game of cat and mouse. I sneak up behind them, pause, and with a pre-emptive strike, scare them into place. Or they wrestle with me, throw me to the floor and keep me pinned down. They knock the air out of me. I'm down and winded. They show no respect for age. (They seem eternally young.) Never destructive intentionally, like nature they're indifferent. They try my patience. Starve me. Make me long for sex. Sometimes we play together. They're the jigsaw pieces, the Lego. We sing and dance. We share the same rhythm. We're working well. We're Zen monks. The words respond to placement and maintenance. We're the technician and the instrument. Sometimes the words mimic a stony desert. Caught in the middle of nowhere without water, I scratch at the ground for moisture, and nothing trickles to the surface. Sometimes I'm building sandcastles — insubstantial structures. The words are collapsing, falling in upon themselves. Or, we build the pyramids. Yes, I joke again. The words forbid pride to triumph. The words are children. They're jubilant, slapping against each other in a happy sea. They keep me awake at night. I wait on them. They're self-contained, and if vulnerable, they renew themselves, given the right conditions. They're suitable for collecting like memorabilia, or precious like antiques. They're worthy of study, in fact, by mathematicians, microbiologists, and physicists; theosophists, magicians, and occultists. They waver between public and private ownership. Politically speaking, they're anarachists. Be careful: on

formal occasions they turn up unexpectedly, uninvited, vaguely known. To a roulette wheel I come to gamble with the words. Tossed and tossed again onto the spinning grooves, the words tumble, are sorted out and fall into furrows. They may find a pleasant bedding there and sprout. Or they get stuck in the narrow ravines — without leverage I cannot pry them free; they're left there, forgotten, to break down in their long half-lives. Sometimes they're moneymakers: capitalists and entrepreneurs. They attract investors from a number of sources. The words spread themselves around like media stars. They're distant relations, brothers from another planet, sisters, but they have no gender really. They're interplanetary life from systems without binary forms. They are life forms — alien yet known, like acquaintances, and yes, sometimes, some would say, friends. I coddle them with smooth paper, sometimes coloured, bought specifically, and a thick pen. I get them to do my bidding. The words might conduct themselves with dignity — a committed choir at practice. Over weeks, months, finally they harmonise. I could talk of embroidery and lace. They have cradled me like a hammock between trees in summer. Sometimes they enclose me like a shell. I've crawled out to the light of some other world: there's a period of adjustment till I find my bearings and recall another rhythm, other values, codes of behaviour. The words are in the body, singing. They're dancing to a rumba beat. I'm catching up with them at the tail end.

You Know
(Aphorisms for the Posteverything Age)

YOU KNOW THAT YOU'RE post-forty when people called Kylie and Jason are no longer under five but over twenty;

when the Hollywood "rat pack" no longer consists of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin etc.; not even Rob Lowe and Charlie Sheen; but people called River Phoenix — a name like the names your generation were calling themselves when they called themselves Seagull etc.;

when your teenage daughter asks for a tie-dyed T-shirt, and her birthday party will have a hippie theme and a mock peace march.

You know that it's postfeminism when you buy your first dress, your first bra, and your first tube of mascara since 1970;

when you've lived through underpants called His Pants for Her and find it impossible to predict the next fashion trend in anything, least of all underpants.

You know that it's postcapitalism when you give up trying to find underpants that have a life span significantly longer than a bee's in high summer;

when, on a personal level, you revive the art of homecrafts like pickling and consider giving these as gifts along with pot-pourri, lavender bags, and pressed-flower bookmarks;

when you start making your own soft furnishings — curtains, cushion covers — and repairing shoes, and linen: thinning towels, torn sheets;

when, on a personal level, you revive the art of darning;
when your darning doesn't make the slightest bit of difference to the life of any item you darn.

You know that it's postfeminism when you realise you're not the first women to ever think of doing this;

when all of your conversations with other (post)feminists are all about gardening, home decor, and house renovations;

when you feel guilty when you don't take out the garbage, which is your job now, and when you don't clean the toilet, which isn't your job any longer;

when men still stand back to let you go ahead first and you do, without any bother, while thinking, What the hell, it's your problem.

You know that you're post-forty and its postfeminism when, on a personal level, you revive the art of skin care;

when protuberances like your breasts and bottom finally lose their valiant struggle against the force of gravity (Good one, nodules!).

You know that it's postcapitalism when nuclear warfare no longer forms part of your personal profile of angst, but skin cancer, high blood pressure, and sugar diabetes do;

when you realise you'll never drink full-cream milk, let alone from a bottle, ever again;

when, on a personal level, you revive the art of the thermos and packed lunch, which you always take with you on any excursion of any kind that's likely to be longer than one hour;

when you place an inordinate and unreasonable value on a good cup of tea, and you seriously plan political action on behalf of the tea-leaf and against the tea-bag.

And you know that it's postmodernism because you know you know.

Chaos

Do not keep saying to yourself, if you can possibly avoid it, "But how can it be like that?" because you will go "down the drain" into a blind alley from which nobody has yet escaped. Nobody knows how it can be like that.

Richard Feynman[1]

THE SECOND LAW of thermodynamics is entropy. The complex becomes less so; the structured, unstructured. Order turns to chaos. All things conspire to disarray and messiness.

This physics is palpably present in my life, and present too and influential is the uncertainty principle: the impossibility of precisely tracking a particle; the best available is the establishment of its probable motion. I've kept science and religion at bay in my life, under wraps like a photo album. But I've woken up to what's going on, to "how it can be like that," or rather not knowing how it can be like that, but accepting, that is not rejecting, the impreciseness, the "unneatness".

It's inherently misguided to extend the "principles of science beyond their usual domain of application", and doing so "leads to spurious conclusions",[2] but I struggle with entropy and the uncertainty principle every day.

My dealings with paper and its accoutrements are notorious, if only to myself; they exist, but their properties — their momentum, their energy (the paper moves, I think, I feel, maybe, in the stillness of the house, over days, weeks, silently like buds in the change of season, so slow, not swift, as to be inconspicuous) — exist as a contingency.

I try, like a scanner of objects in space, to keep track of personal and official papers: reference material; documents for immediate or constant use; writing and teaching materials; Australian and non-Australian literature; fiction and nonfiction books; my books and books I've borrowed from friends, and from libraries, and the borrower's cards for these; the cards for

banks, for membership to unions and art organisations; fliers for exhibition openings, first nights at the theatre, and readings; leaflets for political speakers, meetings and rallies; letters, postcards, bills, and the reminders for overdue bills and library books; calendars; cartoons; newspaper cuttings for teaching, story starters and substantives; stickers; swimming pool and sauna opening and closing times; addresses, phone numbers; interest rates, superannuation schemes; positions vacant, and briefly, real estate listings; lists of jobs to do, shopping, courses to join or run; diaries; stories completed or in draft; recycled envelopes — all sizes — and the paper to recover them; paper — recycled and crisply new, lined and bond for printing; ribbons — faint and dark; correction fluid; rubbers; glue; pens; pencils; paperclips; rulers; calculators; tapes; sticky labels; floppy disks; manuals, dictionaries, the thesaurus; folders — spring-back and manila.

All of these are looking, just now, to better days, as I, like a developer promulgating the idea of progress, fight off this natural process of decay; all of these were in a mess, subjugated to entropy and unable to be found exactly, existing by the uncertainty principle, unable to be precisely tracked down by myself or have their location described by me in a useful way for others to lay their hands upon them, only the probability of their location being able to be stated, estimated by working out a statistical averaging of their many possible positions, or actual positions as located there in the past, as "the most important questions of life are really only problems of probability".[3]

Cultures that cannot withstand this anarchy in the business of souls, bodies, finding each other, as molecules linking randomly, for love, for procreation, arrange marriages and oppress women who represent, in their sexuality, chaos — "the semiotic", "fluid and plural", the "undermining" of "the symbolic order".[4]

The tracking of meaning in conversation, in speaking, is the tomato seed moving in its juices as it is attempted to be held in place by the flat base of a spoon;[5] or as a deflated balloon, a knot in one end, cannot be held as a piece by the enclosed hand — it's too soft; the ends themselves swell like sausage meat from its broken skin.

"Meaning is always in some sense a near miss."[6] How to communicate! Risking. A talking out. I thought once things could be stated, everyone would understand. When they didn't, when they didn't often, I was befuddled. I was never where I thought. I wanted to shut up. I saw the need then to explain, and re-explain, ask questions, clarify, rethink, restate.

Physics is what we can say about nature — what we can say: both the difficulty of knowing how nature is and the difficulty of saying. For the language of nature there is no natural language, scientists having tongues tied and twisted over physics. The language of physics becomes the language of poetry, "an excess over precise meaning",[7] metaphor only having meaning "if we are unaware of a meaning, if it's impossible for us to say what it is precisely".[8]

They're lost for words in quantum physics. They don't know how it can be like that, and they don't know how to talk about how they don't know how it can be like that.

How can I be expected to say where anything I own is?

The rejection of quantum mechanics is the rejection of chaos and anarchy for the sake of order and hierarchy. "Clarity goes hand in hand with hierarchy and stability, and reaffirms both in discourse."[9]

The neatness of our interiors, our exteriors — our lawns, our clipped hedges — is a joke, and a triumph. Love is lavished on computers, which seem triumphant as we have never been in keeping order in this chaos, in keeping track of, tracking down particles.

Nearing middle age, when my obsession with security, festering over some years, burgeons in the eighties — years like a rapid transport system — I make meaningful attempts to create order amongst inanimate objects attached to my life as lampreys. I might score seven out of ten for a gathering of wire baskets, four-tiered trolleys, and shelving systems, desks, cardboard cartons, boxes, folders, and the sticky labels for most of these. Perhaps this is my religion, this gathering of sacred objects for ritual and ceremony.

I am learning to replace things after their use. I never did this for my mother, who kept recipes in folders in drawers, and condiments, sweets, and biscuits in an array of recycled jars. I hunted for these ceaselessly and carelessly. And now she never lets me go to them. The untidiness of the child is the "untidiness of life" that "flung away a thousand thousand sperms to bring about the single birth".[10]

Besides, I break everything. Crystal and china are not at home with me. They move; they have a life of their own; they abort themselves in my presence: mutually repellent like particles, small atomic explosions.

They're tearing down a rainforest: a thousand thousand years of growth. "Some poems fall anyhow / all of a heap anywhere dishevelled / legs apart in loneliness and / desperation / and you talk about standards."[11]

Robot

To Ania Walwicz

I'M TIME-TABLED, metronomed, tick-tocked. Diary listed, future-perfected. Crossed off and done, booked up and out. I'm space allocated. Handed in the fullness of. I've got my shoulder to. Spearheaded, instant decisioned, no grass grows, I'm rolled stone. Overachieved A-type, don't bushel hide light, I'm redoubled effort burn candle both midnight. I'm toggled tight, buttoned plump. Not dog-eared, not rat-tailed, I'm tailored sharp, powered sports car sleek. Drawn stretched, taut tight, I'm honed smooth. Never non-plussed, not airy-fairy, I'm health perfected, exercised, less salt low cholesterol non-sweet. I journey thousand first step. My feet now firmly. I every second keep it under glued and stuck. My eyes on blinkered, nosed and on the button, no panic. I'm zeroed in, action oriented, mean businessed. Untrammelled, I'm trained terrific. Pursuant of, clock-wise and photo-finished, I'm bent enterprised no bruised bull in china. I'm robot now.

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