

**Shifting: The Creation and  
Theoretical Exploration  
of a Collaborative  
Autobiographical Novel**

Helen Cerne

MA 1998

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



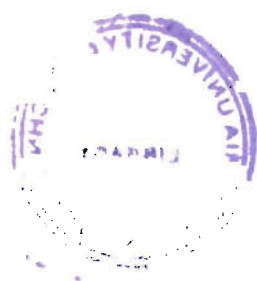
3 0001 00534 9347

***SHIFTING: THE CREATION AND THEORETICAL  
EXPLORATION OF A COLLABORATIVE  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL***

Helen Cerne

VOLUME ONE





STA THESIS  
A823.3 CER  
30001005349347  
Cerne, Helen, 1947-  
Shifting : the creation and  
theoretical exploration of a  
collaborative

This thesis, *Shifting: The creation and theoretical exploration of a collaborative novel*, is submitted in two volumes.

Volume One comprises the creative component of the thesis, the novel, *Shifting*, written collaboratively in alternate chapters by Helen and Serge Cerne.

Volume Two comprises the theoretical component of the thesis, a commentary which explores aspects of collaborative writing with particular reference to *Shifting*.

***SHIFTING: THE CREATION AND THEORETICAL  
EXPLORATION OF A COLLABORATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
NOVEL***

Submitted by Helen Cerne

Trained Primary Teacher's Certificate (Toorak Teacher's College,  
Deakin); Bachelor of Arts (University of Melbourne); Graduate  
Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language  
(Deakin University)

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
**Master of Arts (Research)**

Department of Communication, Language and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Arts

Victoria University of Technology  
St Albans, Victoria 3021  
Australia  
March 1998

CONTENTS

Volume One

	Page
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Declaration of Authorship	v
<i>SHIFTING</i> , the novel	vi
Contents of the novel	vii
<i>SHIFTING</i>	1
References for the novel	193

## Abstract

This Master of Arts thesis has two parts: a collaborative autobiographical novel *Shifting*, written by Helen and Serge Cerne, and a theoretical commentary which explores aspects of collaborative writing. The research material in this thesis has come from a variety of resources: primary and secondary sources, literature data bases, a journal I kept while writing the novel, interviews with family members, discussions with my partner and field visits to places represented in the novel. Only my part of the novel has been submitted for examination but the whole of *Shifting* has been included because all of it must be read to understand the thesis. The novel, written from a male and female narrative perspective, has alternate chapters which tell the story of an Italian migrant boy and an Australian-born girl growing up during the 1950s and 1960s. The story deals with physical, emotional and psychological changes in the lives of the two central characters. *Shifting* is a social history of the period which mainly documents the western suburbs of Melbourne. The central argument of the thesis, both novel and commentary, is that identity is not fixed but constantly changes or shifts, especially in moments of crisis such as migration. Displacement and marginalisation, or repositioning of identity, are delineated in each chapter of *Shifting* to contrast or echo the 'other' narrative. The theoretical commentary also discusses various models of collaboration, collaborative agreement, dialogue and negotiation, with special references to *Shifting*. An analysis of heterosexual collaboration shows how socio-economic circumstances or gender expectations can limit the female partner's contribution to the creative partnership. Finally, autobiography as a form of self narrative is explored as a form of personal mythologising.

## Acknowledgments

There are many people to thank for their encouragement and interest in the writing of this thesis. I acknowledge with gratitude the support of staff and fellow post-graduate students of the Department of Communication, Language and Cultural Studies at the Victoria University of Technology. I thank all my family, but in particular, my parents, Doris and Noel Dougherty, and Serge's parents, Maria and Pietro Cerne, for their contributions to the project and their willingness to have their stories told. Lastly, I wish to thank Serge, my husband, for his patience, time and cooperation in writing half of the collaborative autobiographical novel, *Shifting*.



## Declaration of Authorship

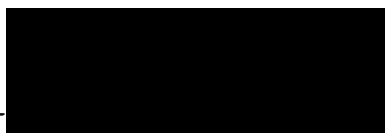
1.

I hereby certify that half of the novel (alternate chapters) is my own research and original written work. Due acknowledgment has been made in this thesis to my husband, Serge Cerne, for writing half of *Shifting*. All of the theoretical component is my own research and original work and has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, in respect of any other academic award. The Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research project in March, 1996, (HREC 97/355).

2.

The content of the thesis is the result of work carried out since the official date of commencement of the program

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_



Date: 18/3/98

# ***SHIFTING***

Helen and Serge Cerne

1998

# CONTENTS OF THE NOVEL

## Chapters

Prologue: Beginning	1
1. Fiume, 1944, Italy *	7
2. Beulah to Melbourne 1938-1940s	12
3. After War, Rijeka, Yugoslavia*	16
4. Bendigo 1950	23
5. Voyage*	28
6. Mildura	35
7. Mildura Migrant Camp*	43
8. Dandenong	54
9. Somers*	60
10. Korumburra	65
11. Yarraville 1952*	71
12. Kingsville, Melbourne	80
13. School at Seven *	90
14. Two Departures*	97
15. Two Arrivals*	104
16. Growing Up Australian	113
17. AMDG with Featherduster*	122
18. Catholic Neighbours	130
19. Who Are You? *	135
20. Footscray High School	144
21. Seeing Things*	155
22. Where's Home?	166
23. Meeting **	174
24. Epilogue**	187
References for the novel	193

## Key

Unasterisked chapters written by Helen Cerne

\* Written by Serge Cerne

\*\* Written by Helen & Serge Cerne

## BEGINNING

Christmas 1987

*Caught in time they reminisce, living in a world no longer there.**H Cerne*

Thirteen of us sit around the dining room overflowing with presents, food and festive trimmings. Everyone talks at once. Wine and champagne are poured into long-stemmed crystal goblets and someone makes a toast but no-one listens. Suddenly a loud male voice shouts,

'All the best, all the best!' It is my father, Noel, at the head of the table, overseeing this annual celebration. We raise our glasses and clink them together. My in-laws say quietly,

*'Chin, chin, buon natale, buon natale.'*

My children bang their drinks against their cousins'. We all laugh, mainly because we're together. My mother, Doris, is in the kitchen fretting over the turkey and the gravy. It is a hot Australian day but it is the full traditional English Christmas with plum pudding, chestnut stuffing and cranberry sauce. Maria, my mother-in-law, has made lasagne oozing with mozzarella and button mushrooms. The aroma of garlic and meat hit our hunger as she offers us a slice.

'No thank you Maria,' says my father, 'I don't want it to spoil my meal.'

She smiles at him, perhaps not understanding. We start pulling bonbons and read out fortunes and jokes.

'Here's a good one,' says my son. 'What's the best way to serve Turkey? Join the Turkish Army. Why does Santa come down chimneys? Because they soot him. What do gorillas sing at ... '

'Did you hear the one about the Irish soldier?' cuts in Dad.

'Yes pop!' shout his grandchildren.

But he tells them anyway.

'Pietro you want something?' says my father in a loud, flat, monosyllabic tone.

'No, thank you, Noel, *grazie, grazie.*'

Serge sits opposite me eyeing the gathering. My brother Ian is telling him about a racehorse he backed. Dad is in on it too. They just missed out on a fortune again. But they have a cert for next Saturday. If it doesn't rain or if the jockey ...

My daughter is giggling about something with her favourite cousin. Maybe it's about a boy, maybe it's about us, maybe it's being fifteen.

Ian goes to carve the turkey and I decide to help serve the vegetables. It's hard to keep it all hot. Marlene, Ian's wife, checks on the custard bubbling on the stove. The children sit filled with lasagne: chewing nuts, grabbing dinner mints, refolding serviettes in intricate origami patterns, ignoring us oldies with our set ways.

It is a good day. I look at my family growing older. My parents move more slowly now. Mum has arthritis. She can hardly open jars and lids for toppings and garnishes. But she radiates warmth and optimism. All will be well. Her face is still young, framed by auburn hair. Dad's is now nearly white but he looks healthy, objects to being quizzed on his physical condition. 'You'll have to kill me with a bloody brick!' he always says. His face shows intelligence, strength and a tendency to frown.

My Italian in-laws are both well, despite their long years in factories on twelve hour shifts. They are reserved people. Polite, shy, respectful in social situations. It is hard for them in English. They can speak it but they have some difficulty in understanding Australians, especially when some idiomatic expression is thrown in like, 'Would you like to wet your whistle before the real tucker arrives?'

Maria is slim, grey and small-boned. Pietro is tanned, bald and sinewy. He moves quickly and prides himself on his fitness. Loves to exercise and keep busy. He walks to Footscray to shop even though it's several kilometres and he's well over seventy. Has done it for thirty years. They are people with simple needs. They love their family above everything else. Italy is another time for both of them. Visits back there make them love Australia more. Still there is that remembering of origins that nothing can replace ...

It is the same with my parents. Their memories are now more real than each day in retirement. They talk of the Mallee, of Mildura, of Bendigo, of Korumburra, of Ian and me as kids. It is a happy past. They treasure it.

The meal is over and we are full, wanting to sleep it off. The youngsters go out to play while the adults sit, sip coffee and savour liqueurs.

'Are you gunna read the cards, Dorrie?' asks my father.

From the mantelpiece, the seasons greetings are collected from friends and relatives. Mum reads out each one and says as she does each year, 'Now everyone I care for is present at my table.'

We grow silent and nod, thinking of someone who is not with us, like Christiana, Serge's sister in Auckland, or uncle Bert in Adelaide, or the rellies up in Beulah, or just old neighbours down the road.

From outside come loud screams and abuse. The new cricket bat has just been split and blame is being thrown round the backyard. Loving cousins are suddenly distant acquaintances:

'See what he did!' my son shouts. 'See what he bloody did!'

'It wasn't me. It's your bowl. I told you to use the tennis ball, you dickhead.'

Serge goes to sort it out. It's settled quickly. Santa will return the bat on Monday and meanwhile the game can go on, a replacement has been found. That's all that matters on a warm summer's day with a bright blue sky, an open playing space and healthy Aussie kids wanting a hit or a bowl. They are special, these rare days of family celebrations. Tolstoy was spot on about happy families, especially at Christmas.

Ian and Marlene live several hours away and we don't see them too often. The hectic pace of the eighties, working and living, paying off mortgages and credit cards keep us all too busy for get-togethers. It's not like the old days and the Sunday roasts.

My mother gets out the photo album and there is that world caught in black and white. We look at the faces, the clothes and notice the changes. Predictably, my daughter laughs at me in my school dress. Then I recall a stranger I met last week. She was a woman about my age. I check the class but cannot see her. I try to find her photo in the bottom drawer of the walnut sideboard with all the other faded snaps of our past. It was an unsettling encounter because I cannot remember who she was but she knew me very well. Even recalled one Guy Fawkes night at the bonnie up the back paddock.

And yet I feel I know her. The voice was strangely familiar. The eyes I recognise from another time. I find one photo of solemn school children sitting frozen and there is one girl with an insouciant grin of guiltless surprise. Is that her? That look of independence stands out from the accepting conformity of the fifties. Perhaps it is but I cannot be sure.

*Come up over the garden wall  
 Little girl to me ...  
 I've been waiting a long long time  
 And the wall's not hard to climb*

The face on the edge of my memory withdraws. We pass the photographs back and forth recounting private joys and silly happenings we had almost forgotten.

'Is that you Elena?' Maria asks me.

There stands a thin pale girl with long plaits, a frilly party frock, a fuzzywuzzy cardigan and shiny black patent leather court shoes caught tight with a strap ... I'm off to a party to chant :

*I wrote a letter to me aunt  
 And on the way I dropped it  
 Someone must have picked it up  
 And put it in their pocket  
 Thief, thief drop it  
 Thief, thief drop it*

'Yes Mum.' I smile thinking of all those games, outings and secrets I shared with girls I no longer can name. Doris starts reminiscing about my childhood antics. I see my reflection in the hallway mirror. There is no trace of that youthful dreamer eating fairy-floss by a carnival merry-go-round. Like Christmas shopping the other day, I saw my face in a shop window then realised it wasn't me at all. It was my daughter. I was the plump woman of forty beside her. I am the one people no longer see.

The tattered album brings it all home. Change is inevitable, that's what life is. So many people come and go shaping the present, like all those past school friends who have now retreated into anonymity. Neruda once asked, '*Where is the child I used to be, still within or far away?*'

Faces and places are lost until the stark black and white images start one thinking again. And what about the most evocative trigger of all ... smells wafting into girlish poems pinned up long ago on schoolroom walls.

*The sick puke of butter factories  
the cool change sea breeze,  
the rankness of Footscray air  
a pot of daphne sweetly there*

Where are all the houses we lived in? There's no record of most of them. The Bendigo terrace has been pulled down. The Mildura house is now a supermarket. The Korumburra place gone. Our Windsor address now part of a freeway. Bit hard for the family historian. Years of growing, shifting and ageing are blurred by time. And too often wishful thinking. We talk of it and suddenly it sounds better than it was. All a bit romantic. Remember those relationships at school camps? Then those church groups? What about the neighbourhood gangs? There's a whole list of them. Walking up back alleys to school. Yabbing up the creek. Camping in the backyard on those boiling hot nights, bitten by mozzies and ants. Holidaying all summer at beaches. Listening to the radio by the open fire, toasting bread and burning fingers. Whispering behind the garage. Spying from the peppercorns. Yes, it's on. The whole family is now competing to remember. It's contagious. Perhaps Swinburne was right: 'Time remembered is grief forgotten.' Pietro stares at my wedding photo but sort of beyond it, he's back in Fiume with his inseparable twin brother Paolo; Maria tells us about her childhood in an orphanage in Mussolini's Italy; Dad goes off to find a newspaper cutting of the 1939 football premiership team; Mum fossicks for baby snaps. The teenage girls have disowned us and are in the bedroom with the blaster on, but going over past dates. And me ... I'm still thinking of that stranger who knew where I hid those swapcards in 1958.

That was the time when everything seemed possible. When Mum and Dad knew everything. When having fun cost nothing. When dreaming was real. I look at Serge and his family and wonder about their story and how we all came to be in this room at this time sharing our lives together. So much to tell. Serge says he can't remember much. But I think he won't. It's all blocked out or something. For some people, the past is not their past. They cut themselves off from it pretending or believing they are strangers.

Who was that middle-aged woman I met last week? It's nagging me like a word in a cryptic crossword. Almost articulated. Dad says he



has such a good memory that he can remember things that didn't even happen. How far back should we go to construct the truths? To a point of time beyond recalling when facts blur with fiction. To things we choose to remember, to forget or even to imagine?

## FIUME 1944 ITALY

'What a surprise!' Maria said, taking the flowers resting them over a thick book on her sideboard, '*Mamma, questo e Pietro Cerne, di lavoro. Ti ricordi?*'

'*Certo*, you're that ... that *dopo lavoro* gymnast person,' Giovanna Radetich said turning to her daughter. She hadn't expected to see him, but there he was standing as erect as a gate post. 'How's your appetite dear? You look drawn. Are they feeding you? You still look so pale Maria.' The mother was trying to be a comfort while ignoring the man by the side of her daughter's bed.

'I'm pleased you've both come,' Maria said, looking down at her feet near the end of the bed so she could be impartial

'Are they treating you well?' he asked. He had a long face, heavy eyelids and grey eyes. In the light of the window she saw his scalp through his thinning hair and noticed how well he seemed to her unwell eyes.

'I can't complain.'

'What are you saying, Maria? They've treated you worse than if you were in a poor-house. What are they feeding you? Bed-bugs and beans. I'll have words with whoever runs this ward.'

'But there's a war on, Mamma.'

'To hell with the war! They have to make you get better.' She held her daughter's hand. 'Look at that swelling. I had no idea this bone arthritis could be so terrible.'

'Maria, you must exercise,' Pietro said showing her how to move her hands and arms, 'to get your joints moving.'

'I will when the redness fades.'

'Don't you move till you feel better. You're still too ill. Take my advice Maria. Don't listen to anyone.'

'*Si, Mamma.*'

Pietro Cerne looked at the short, irascible widow, the intent round face as it moved on neckless shoulders. From their first meeting she had let him know she was a headstrong woman, to whom reason had nothing to do with her instinct for things. He watched as she blabbed on with her talk and pushy cheerfulness which ran away with Maria's attention, and with his chance of getting to say what

he'd come to say. 'We're all crazy with fear ... Fiume's a madhouse, the Germans pulverised the synagogue, Molo Cagni's been blown up ... and little *balilla* drowned in the toilet.'

'The porcupine?'

'Poor pet. A floating pin-cushion. You know, poor Giulia, she's met some bald-nansy with a big mouth ... '

With mild reluctance, he looked on the hospital gardens below. It had gravel walks broken by oleander and tamask shrubs. Some of the sick were taking advantage of the sun before it went away. Above a hospital wing, he saw the peak of Monte Maggiore with its hat of snow. In the weak sun the snows of the dolomite glimmered above the forest of conifers reaching up from its foot.

'Mamma, Mamma, see if you can get a vase for these flowers,' Maria interrupted, 'they must have water or they'll die.'

Her mother's look told her that it was incomprehensible she should leave.

'There'll be a vase downstairs.'

'But they're made of paper, aren't they?'

'Then I'll go instead.' Maria drew away the bed sheet.

The mother's unwillingness vanished as she saw her daughter strain to get out of bed.

Alone with him, Maria suddenly became self-conscious as she sat against the pillow in her light camisole.

'I had no idea you were here,' he said, 'your mother ...'

'Yes, it was sudden,' she cut him short, not wanting her mother mentioned, knowing what the meaning of her talk and cheerfulness meant. 'But how is it with you?'

'As usual. Work's busy.'

'Is it true about the bombing?'

'We were a bit shaken in the shelters. It's nothing, don't worry.' As he spoke she listened with interest, knowing he was edging, awkwardly circling, trying to find the nerve to really say what was going on inside him.

'What are you reading?' he asked without picking up the book.

'Tolstoi. It's about a man called Levin. Have you read it?'

'No, I must find the time to read again. Your mother's been a long time,' he noticed looking uneasy over his shoulder at the open doorway.

'Don't worry about her.'

'Will she take long?'

'I think so.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because there are no vases downstairs.'

'You knew all the time?'

'I ... I just remembered,' she said with contrived innocence. Suddenly they laughed together and he sat at the side of her bed, absolutely aware that now was the time and place, that if he waited any longer the setting would change. Taking her hand firmly in his, he found the courage, to say, to ask, to address and be accepted.

'They made me walk all over the hospital to find this,' Giovanna Radetich complained puffing, holding a large retort in the air. '*Porca miseria!*' she exclaimed startled, 'Maria, you're all flushed! You're not ill?'

'No, I'm well Mamma. I've never felt happier.' She put the flowers in the vase, breathing in their aroma mixed with the faint medical tang of the place.

'They're beautiful, thank you Pietro.'

Suddenly afraid of what her daughter might go on to say, the mother began talking again, 'Did I tell you about the *bora*, it blew that strong last week it overturned the tram going to Tersatto, lucky it was a work day and there was no-one on board but the brakeman ... '

Maria only thought of the man by her bed, even after Pietro and her mother had followed each other outside to the front of the hospital.

The sun had now gone out of the afternoon. Monte Maggiore was hidden by cold cloud that sifted down through the woods and continued in the air. Gladly, she returned to the thick novel that lay by her bedside.

The driver of Giovanna Radetich's hired car was sneezing. For a brief moment she looked at the man beside her and wondered, with displeasure, what her daughter saw in him. She put on her gloves with a parting sense of relief, telling herself that she must have been mistaken by being too suspicious. Of course, his unexpected visit had been prompted by politeness rather than any interest in her child. There was nothing between them, and of course, she would not have wished otherwise.

'Signora.'

She turned, walking to the waiting car.

'Signora Radetich.'

It was unmistakeable, his following voice, the grate of gravel underfoot. From the back seat of the car she got her toque and the driver helped with the heavy coat.

'Si?' She turned, anticipating what he was about to ask saying, 'So you'd like a ride back to Fiume?'

'I'll catch a tram, thank you.'

'But, the curfew? It's getting late.'

'I'll beat it.'

'Allora?' she asked impatiently.

'Maria and I are going to be married.'

He saw her face harden before she impulsively dropped the veil of her toque and slammed the car door after her.

'Good evening signora.'

The auto drove off back to Fiume.

The last, almost empty tram railed along Viale Benito Mussolini. The few travellers had cold and uncomfortable faces. At Piazza Dante the tram clanged and sparked and crackled and jolted to its last stop. A few shopkeepers hurriedly were drawing shutters. A couple of *bersalgieri* with women on their arms were making double-time to get off the streets. He knew that in no time now the life of the city would be abandoned to the cold night and the clamp of '*la ronda*'.

Still starry-eyed and dreamy, he broke into a run as he heard the old fortress cathedral of San Vito sound the curfew over the city. He hurried home via the shortcuts he knew. On the surrounding walls of houses and narrow back lanes smeared slogans of VIVA IL DUCE and ABASSO LENIN screamed mutely. Just as he was scaling a low wall, about a block from where he lived near Piazza Braida, a German night-patrol picked him up. Without question or asking for papers they marched him to prison where he passed the rest of the cold night.

Before dawn, he was pressed into a Todt forced labour gang, and under the gaze of guard and dog, Pietro dug trenches all morning by the ancient stonewall of San Vito. By lunchtime he was released by the Germans and allowed to return to his family who had become somewhat hysterical in his absence, first fearing that he'd been shot

and then that he had been sent to Germany. And when he told them he was going to be married, they panicked all over again.

Pietro and Maria wed in a simple ceremony at the Chiesa degli Capuccini before the end of the war. In that grim and seemingly prolonged uncertainty that followed, the young woman gave birth to a tiny sickly-thin son, in September '46. They called the boy Sergio. Jubilant at seeing the squirming bundle, the tiny fists and the pinched face, his father went to bed early that night, beaming with pride, and overcome by such emotion that he missed his supper and his gymnastics class. He already saw into the future, seeing his infant son leap and somersault all over the gymnasium of his imagination.

Ever the optimist he spoke of their future with hope.

'You'll see. Everything will be fine, Maria.'

'*Si* Piero, *si*,' she murmured but her eyes told a different story.

Somehow, she sensed what was ahead.

## BEULAH to MELBOURNE 1938-1940s

*Oh, they slide and they vanish  
as he shuffles the years like a pack  
of conjuror's cards*

Judith Wright

'You should have seen your mother when she was sixteen, she was bloody bonza.

Have I told you how we met? I remember as if it was only yesterday. Swept her off her feet I did. One look at me and she was a goner.

We met at a church dance but we were introduced in a milk bar. She was with one of those cocky dills, looking a treat in a balldress, not like those ones you young people wear. A real dress. She took one look at me and that was that. I reckon she'd heard about me being chosen for the league. Geelong, as a matter of fact, I'd been away from home for a few months training with the team. Your mum's father had just moved into town to run the general store. Well, me and me mates had gone into this shop for a sarsparilla when there she was. All done up with nowhere to go except with this fool of a farmer. I ran my fingers through my black hair, well it was then, don't laugh you lot, and stared right at her. At first she played it sort of cold-like but I bided my time. I knew I'd meet up with her at the ball later. They were real dances then. Not like now. We had the Jolly Miller, the Gypsy Tap, the One Step, the Pride of Erin, the Valetta, the Waltz Cotillion, the Lancers, the Monte Carlo ... and the supper. You should have seen what those country women could cook. Cakes like you wouldn't believe. Chocolate eclairs, matches, passionfruit sponges and cream lilies. Ever tasted a cream lily? No? You don't know what you're missing. You should've seen them all ready to melt in your mouth; not like these packet things. So there I was. Just home for a few days and strike me pink. I'd met my match. She pretended of course that I was like all the others. Another mug. Some bloke just passing the time of day with her but I could tell how she felt. She was a secretary with the local solicitor, I found out. So brains as well as looks. All the better I said to myself. I couldn't get a dance

for a while, all her card was filled out. You with me? Not like these discos where you can't even see or hear who you get stuck with. Those days it was a real dance. The girls had these little dance cards and a fellow had to ask politely well in advance for a turn on the floor. They wrote down the name of all the blokes next to the set program. And a girl could say no to riff-raff. Nowadays you'd be lucky to know what you're getting with the dark and the noise. And you can't tell me that's music. We had a real band that played songs you could sing with words that meant something. Oh those Catholic balls were wonderful, cost ten shillings. A lot in those days. So there I am waiting for her in the barn dance. She sort of tosses her golden hair, well goldy red hair as she comes near me. I pretend I'm not interested and she smiles and says,

'I hear you're training at Geelong?'

'Yeah, I'm giving it a go,' I say casual like.

'Must be hard working and playing football.'

'Can be.'

'How long are you home for?'

Then I decide to show my cards.

'I won't go back if you don't want me to.'

At first she laughs and then realizes I'm serious.

'You're crazy,' she says, but I can see I've got her thinking. 'And what Noel Dougherty has it got to do with me?' She goes sort of uppity.

'Everything from now on.'

She whirls away with her partner after this, glancing over her shoulder at me. I give her a wink and she blushes.

'So after that I didn't go back to the league. Got a job at the Beulah butcher's and hung around your mother everyday. I'd meet her after work and walk her home across the paddock. One night she was chased by a bloody sheep. You should have seen her run, she didn't know what it was. Cripes she could move faster than a scared rabbit! But she could shoot and cook. Not bad for a city girl, I thought. And too bloody good for me but I kept on. Lots of people told your mother that I was a bit of a handful. Word had got round that I had a temper and what with all my brothers and sisters laying it on a bit thick anyone would have thought I was old Nick, you know, the devil himself. Well, it didn't seem to matter to your mother what they said



about me. I didn't have much to offer her but myself and that was enough for her. Not like these days when a woman wants to have a house and car and credit cards before she'll settle down with a bloke. And a honeymoon in bloody Bali ...

So I courted her for a few years. They were beaut times even though the war broke out. Never had private transport in those days. It was all train or bus or shank's pony unless you were flush. And we never were. That was when I decided to join the police force. Only job with any future for the likes of me. We came down to Melbourne after we married. That was in 1942. And your mother got even more beautiful. Those were the days despite the blackouts and ration cards and the Yanks everywhere spending big. They were all camped out just up the road not far from here as it happens. You know, Royal Park, opposite the zoo. There were thousands of them and we had our work cut out for us keeping the peace with all those soldiers out at night. And we had to walk the beat, not like these divy vans with guns. We had a baton and a bike. Don't smile at me, that's what we had. A bike to ride round on and a good pair of boots. I could tell you a few stories about those days, too right I could. About Leonski the murderer. But I won't. You know, your mother used to hang over the fence waiting for me to come home from nightshift. At half past five! Imagine the girls today doin' that. All too busy gallivanting about their own business to wait for a poor bloke when he's bushed! Anyway, your mother would cook me a big breakfast, bacon and eggs and a strong cuppa tea and then I'd have a sleep. None of this fast food muck. If we wanted fast food then we'd go get a rabbit, only sixpence then. After Ian was born we'd walk with the pram up Puckle Street or catch a tram to the city and look at the shops. And that was our entertainment. No joke. Should have seen some of the houses we lived in. Most of them pulled down now. But they'd fetch a price today, my oath they would. Prime real estate, those inner suburban terraces. Your mother did them up nice. Put her heart and soul into making other people's houses into our home ...

I remember the first time I saw Melbourne and those little boxes city people lived in. I was nearly twelve and the scouts had a jamboree in St. Kilda. The Shrine of Remembrance was going up and we slept in tents and on palliasses looking at the slums and the smoke of industry. And the sea. The sea made me homesick just watching it. I

missed the wheat fields and the plains, the open spaces of the Mallee. And what did I do? I ended up living here, right smack in the middle of Melbourne. But your mother made it all worthwhile. Look at her grinning at me. Doesn't look a day older than when we met that Easter. Show' em your photo Dorrie. The one by the Yarriambiack Creek. The one with me and Paddy ...

You know there were a few who were not too keen on me marrying your mother. Like your grandmother, her mother. She said I was a showoff, or larrikin or something. Mind you, I was never the quiet type but I'm no skite. I make a din if I've got something to say and what with eight kids in the family, well you had to be heard. Besides, if you keep your gob shut, who's going to know what's going on in your scone. Larrikin? No. Have I told you about the time me and Paddy tied the cow to the Church bell? Well, it was like this. One afternoon, Father O'Brien ...

## AFTER WAR: RIJEKA, YUGOSLAVIA

In Fiume nothing, except buildings and streets, remained the same following the war. The confusion, the contradiction, the harsh reality of a new order took its toll on countless lives. Fiume became Yugoslav and almost over night it had new signs, a new language, new politics, a new name – Rijeka – and a new people.

Giovanna Radetich had lost more than some of her weight in the long harshness and struggle for daily survival. She had been reduced to a few pieces of gold jewellery and finding new accommodation.

When Giovanna could, she called on her daughter Maria and her grandson, cursing the flights of stairs of the high rise flat where they now lived; in fact, she told herself, it was so modest and bare there was no need for her to poke around.

This day her cursing wasn't so keen because she was bothered by the lot of her daughter and new grandson, by the carrybag she lugged filled with too few foodstuffs traded for a shawl and jewellery through the thriving blackmarket, but mainly by the decision she'd made.

'What have you got there?' her daughter asked.

'A few things, for the boy.' Giovanna went to the cot where the two year old slept. 'Does his belly still hurt?'

'It's as hard as a brick.'

'Constipated. He needs a clyster.'

As Giovanna inserted a nozzle into Sergio's backside, squeezing a rubber ball several times, Maria asked, 'Will he die?'

'Maria, he will if he doesn't shit. It's only warm water and soap.'

'But I've given him pills from the clinic.'

'Let him sleep. He looks tired.' Maria gently lay the boy in his cot. 'Maria, look what I've brought you, powdered milk, some eggs. It took my good gold ear-rings to get that.'

'You've sold your jewellery?'

'I've nowhere to stash it.'

'What about the mattress?'

'I don't have one.' Reaching in her carrybag, she brought out the last of the things. 'This is for you. It's only secondhand, but you're so skinny it'll fit.'

'You shouldn't have.'

'A farewell present.' She looked up from the sleeping boy, facing her daughter, hesitating for a moment. 'I'm leaving Fiume. I'm going to Trieste'

'Trieste, Mamma?

'Surprised? Why not? They've taken over the flats. I've got to share with this young *drugaritz*a. She has her boyfriends with her every night. I don't care if she wants to play the whore, but I want my sleep. I'm getting out. And if you want my advice you should too. Get out while you can. The longer that man waits to make up his mind, the harder it'll become. I don't understand that husband of yours, Maria. If he thinks Fiume is going to be the same, it's like blowing wind up a dead man's arse believing you'll revive him.'

'It's where he was born Mamma. His family is here.'

'Wake up, even if he won't!'

Maria, not wanting to say anything more asked, 'When are you leaving?'

'Tonight.'

'But everything we know is here.'

'What's here? A mess. There's nothing to buy. Nothing to eat. And what about the boy? Think of him. You've got to leave for his sake. And if you don't, yes, he might die.'

'I'll talk to Pietro about it.'

'It's all gone. Kaput! When I saw the partisans coming out of the mountains and forests, I thought of poor Giulia. Then I asked myself, are they liberating us? It's all kaput. They've changed Fiume into Rijeka!'

'Are your papers in order?'

'What papers?'

'For Trieste.'

'Since when have papers come into it?'

'Since the frontier was closed.'

'But I'm only going for the day.'

'The day?'

'Of course, but then I'll forget to come back.'

'Mamma, you'll end up in gaol!'

'And where do you think we are now? The OZNA can knock on any door at any hour and take you away. Is that freedom? Like I said, no better than the Germans. So much for the new order. The shit changes but the smell's the same. Nowadays only black marketeers can eat three times a day and smoke new cigarettes.'

In his cot the boy stirred and grizzled. She looked gently at the drowsy, squirming infant, 'It's your nonna, it's your nonna my little prince. There, there, come on, give your nonna a smile, please ... Poor little seed,' she tumbled and comforted him in her arms. As she cuddled him, he clung hard to her shawl as though they were in a clinch, 'I'm surprised you can break wind in all this *carestia*.' He didn't displease her; a pang tensed his body, he smiled and drained warm soapy faeces into his pants.

\* \* \*

They didn't shake hands.

'So *drusce* Cerne, you want to opt for Italy?'

'If it's possible.'

'We're not concerned with possibilities. We're interested in reasons *drusce* Cerne. Don't you like our Yugoslavia?'

'I have no cause to ...'

'So, now that the struggle for liberation has been won, you'd still rather the fascists than a future here with us.'

'I only want what's best for my family.'

'I cannot understand you people, all you want is to renew old days.' A resentful silence followed. The official lit a cigarette and coughed. His tense youthful face was virulently pitted. He was proud his right arm didn't have a hand. 'We need people to build a new Yugoslavia. The future is going to be bright. We are going to build a new society, a sound society not built on sand but on socialist ideals and principles. And I assure you,' he added pointing the stump of his arm at Pietro Cerne, 'the war and wilderness hasn't deprived us of humanity. Weren't you born here?'

'Yes, I was born in Fiume.'

'Rijeka.'

'Rijeka,' Pietro corrected himself.

'There is a family home?'

'We live in a flat.'

'Inheritance?'

'Yes, but my wife and son ...'

'Your wife was born in Istria, like you, she has Italian citizenship. But your son, he was born in '46. That makes him a Yugoslav. He will need permission to expatriate.'

'How long will it take?'

'Weeks ... months ...'

'Months?'

'Who knows, it could take longer,' the young official leaned forward, emitting a prickly intensity Pietro could almost feel, 'but you may leave anytime if you think Italy will be better, just let us know. However, you take nothing away but what you have on your back. So as a result, you might like to reconsider, in the light of what I've said ... about the future of our great country.'

'I'll discuss it with my wife.'

'Naturally, *drusce* Cerne; we don't wish to put you in a hasty or ill considered position. *Zivio Tito drusce!*'

A few days later, Pietro looking like the ground had gone beneath his feet returned with his answer. Before he went to Italy he only had a bit of time to reassure his wife and son; had no time to shake hands and say goodbye to his few friends. He left with a borrowed suitcase and the clothes he had on his back.

\*

\*

\*

There wasn't a moment in the day, when Maria wouldn't go over every step she would take when the time came to go. But as the day took longer and longer to arrive, she began having doubts about what she was waiting for. And when talk came that the Yugoslav army had clamped down on the frontier because of growing contraband, and that fewer and fewer people were being permitted to leave, she became desperate that they would never leave.

All dressed up, Maria and the boy spent their days in slow walks. They went to the abandoned fair ground of the Scietto and she made the effort to visit the old Campo Santo talking to Sergio about uncle Peppi, nonna's lame brother. From the cemetery she looked down

on the sea and city with no interest; Fiume looked so exhausted and miserable. In the harbour, the shattered arm of Molo Cagni still lay broken. Wherever she went about Fiume, she took its bombed-out image with her because like so many lives, it could never really be repaired.

One afternoon, after getting back tired from their walk, Sergio heard his mother talking to someone at the door. When she went to sit in a chair he ran to her frightened. She closed her eyes and drew him to her thin self as she often did in moments of doubt, holding him hard. He thought he heard her cry but when he looked up she was laughing.

'Imagine, after all this time, we are all going to be together.'

'With Papa?'

She nodded laughing, but this time she also cried.

\*

\*

\*

They visited Nonna in Trieste from Aversa. When she saw them she went all weepy and blustery. Sergio remembered his grandmother hugging him with his face against her soft mouth wet with sweet wine. She made the air sing by celebrating with polenta, radicchio and boiled hairy chicken.

'Near the frontier I heard a noise. Then I knew others were hiding to get past the guards. Suddenly there was shooting, yelling. Screaming. I crossed over and never stopped running till I got to Trieste.'

'How long did it take?' Pietro asked.

'It must have been near midnight.'

'You must have run fast Mamma,' Maria said listening with care.

'I ran like hell. I had sore feet for weeks,' Giovanna Radetich said not failing to laugh at the serious looks she was getting. 'When I stopped I asked a policeman where I could get some accommodation. When he found I had no papers he put me in gaol. I took the pillow and put it under my swollen ankles and aching feet. They deserved it. They saved my head. I slept well and safe the night.'

'But in gaol Mamma?' Maria said horrified.

'It was the safest place in Trieste.' She made it sound like fun.

Someone had given Sergio a rifle, a wooden one, and a straw broom. It became his horse. He rode stiff-backed, bucking and prancing and howling round and round the kitchen.

'Well, soldier, what have you shot with your rifle?' asked Nonna. She had chicken-down on her apron.

'Nothing. I'm an Indian chasing bison.'

She turned to Pietro.

'So you're off to Gaeta? You're going to migrate?

'Yes.'

'Aren't you going to get seasick floating around the world?'

Galloping after stampeding herds of buffalo gave Sergio sore legs. He went to rest next to his tired horse on a blanket on the floor, looking at legs and shoes. He felt so excited he couldn't sleep but when the blanket went warm and cold he knew he'd been dreaming. He saw his nonna sitting gloriously in a cloud of feathers, sucking on a pile of succulent chicken bones.

After that, all Sergio remembered were lots of people, all waiting. Going up the steep steps between cramped white walls with his father, he watched ships passing on the sea below. His parents called this hot rocky place Gaeta.

It was a bustling terraced town, with an ancient castle and a view of the sea. To fill in their day, he and his father, browsed for butts along the flights of narrow rock-hewn steps going from one level to another. The white house walls were flush to the steps, some of which brimmed over with flies that exploded into frenzied clouds as they approached.

'Watch where you step,' his father said holding his nose. 'The local kids like to leave natural treasures everywhere.'

Most evenings, in the afterheat, a train load of refugees would leave from Gaeta to some unknown place. Sergio liked this, waving them off; it was a kind of game, a distraction, a brief escape. But afterwards, they would join the others and face another hot day languishing in quiet frustration. It was the beginning of a feeling that would take them long to forget, that dull feeling that you're nowhere with nowhere to go. It was this day-to-day living that threw their thinking back to what they'd lost.

'Where's Nonna?' he'd ask before going to sleep. He could see her fanning grain to hungry chickens.



Then suddenly everything went into double-time. His father talked of something called IRO - the International Refugee Organisation. After that, they began taking him to an infirmary where there were queues of squalling kids all being given shots on their arms and backsides by men in white coats who wrote what they did in booklets.

Feeling sore and hot on his bum, Sergio lay and listened to his parents talk about Identity Cards and places with strange names: Canada, Argentina, Australia. He heard them talk in excited whispers and with mixed feelings. His mother said 'no' to Canada just as she had said 'no' to Sweden, and Argentina was eventually turned down because of the fearful glimpses they had of its geography which was too big and vast and untamed; with monkeys, the anaconda and ugly Patagonian giants, which they'd heard about in school. So they were left with Australia, not that they knew any more about the place than they did about South America. Sergio heard them say words like 'merino', 'aborigine', 'cungurro'.

What followed were unending visits to offices and Australian officials.

'Why do you want to go to Australia?'

'A better life,' Pietro answered, hoping it was the right answer.

'What work did you do?'

'Clerical, and teaching,' Pietro said confidently.

'Australia doesn't want clerks and teachers. Australia is looking for tough people, people who work with their hands. We're interested in manual labour, not brains.' He then pointed to a poster of a beautiful girl with yellow hair picking oranges.

'Next.'

## BENDIGO 1950

*But golden days are vanished,  
And altered is the scene;  
The diggings are deserted  
The camping grounds are green.*

Henry Lawson

'Giddy up, giddy up horsie.'

I'm riding my gigi around the kitchen.

'Whoo girl, there you are.' I pat my horse's head. It stops and pants. I dig my heels into its soft back. Off we go again. Round and round the wooden table, over the linoleum. The warm round body feels good as it moves from side to side, back and forth. I pull gently on its hair to stop. I love my pony. I like riding her. It is my mother scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees.

Through the haze, dark maroon velvet drapes hang in the musty hallway with a brass potted aspidistra in the corner. Diffused light from the stained-glass door shines on the dusty particles I watch in the air. If I squint my eyes they become beautiful tiny shapes like miniature snowflakes falling. We live on the bottom floor of an old terraced house overlooking Bendigo, splendid in its dying grandeur. I am three or four. My brother Ian is seldom around. Either at school or off with his mates playing war with little lead soldiers or brandy with a stinging ball. I am too young to join in. Mine is an inner world.

It takes a long time to climb the stairs. I hang on the wooden rail and slowly enter another time.

'Come in little Miss Helen, up you come.' It is the voice of an old lady. It is Mrs. Mac who lives up there with her memories and things. She takes my hand and leads me to her sitting room. It smells of camphor and cologne. 'Would you like a biscuit?' she smiles. She serves me formally even though I don't go to kindergarten. Her furniture is covered with lacy antimacassars and everywhere are tiny photographs, ornaments and silverware. She lets me touch a cruet set and a porcelain doll on the mantelpiece she calls 'Our Lady'.

'And what have you been up to today Miss Helen?

'Playing with Mummy.'

'What did you play, dear?'

'Mud pies.'

'Oh, goodness.'

She passes me a cup of milk with a linen serviette. I look at the statue of the pretty lady in blue. These are my friends; my mother, old Mrs. Mac and the lovely statue that I talk to sometimes. I want to take it down from the shelf and play with it as a doll but Mrs. Mac likes it too much. It's her special toy.

I look at my mother chatting to the old lady so much older than her. They make each other laugh a lot. I hear words and places I do not understand like Sandhurst and Goldwash Gully and the Red Ribbon Rebellion which someone marches in a long time ago. I hear things about the Chinese grocer and the curses of something called Dai Gum San. My mother giggles at her and asks,

'And what would Father O'Flaherty say about that?'

'And who'd be telling him?'

'I thought you had to tell him everything?'

'I say what needs to be said. Our Lord knows it all anyway.'

Mrs. Mac smiles and passes me a shortbread and a little leather-bound book not much bigger than a matchbox. It is full of tiny drawings of boys and girls, men and women. I look at these pictures many times in that room. All the faces look the same. Years later, I realise they were saints and sinners.

In the afternoon I am never lonely. I stir jelly, lick beaters, make cubbies out of upside-down furniture. My favourite game is making coloured water with cochineal, peppermint and lemon essence. At first it is so bright and clear but the more you mix it the murkier it becomes. Like remembering. Mummy pours my creations into a little china teapot and we have cups of tea together and pretend to nibble mud pies. I have dolls somewhere but I prefer making things than playing with them. Their faces are empty.

After lunch I see beautiful ladies and white prancing horses emerging from the water. I am in a pusher looking at the Alexandra fountain licking an icecream cone. There are big grey buildings with closed doors along the street down to Pall Mall. My mother hurries past the hotels where men are making loud noises. I smell something sour and make a face. 'It stinks,' I say.

'Lucky it's not six o'clock,' says Mum. I don't understand then as we head for the Gardens where there are blossoming flowers in a green house by a little lake. Looking up I see a giant wooden thing reaching to the sky. I think it is a stairway or a ladder. For some reason it frightens me. I start to cry. My mother picks me up and pats me on the back. I cannot say what it is. But in sleep it comes to me. In time I accept its presence and it loses its importance. It is the old looming poppet head of the mine shaft.

*'Off we go, you and I  
 Skipping in the sunshine  
 Tra lala la la la ...'*

It is *Kindergarten of the Air* and I'm singing the songs saying the rhymes, pretending to read a book on Mummy's lap. I cut and paste Women's Weekly pictures on butcher's paper and colour in shapes with crayons. I make paste out of flour and water which goes brown and smells after a while.

The lavatory is down the back, across the paved yard on a sort of hill. I get stuck one day. Scream and scream as my bottom dips in the water. Afraid I will disappear when the chain is pulled. My legs kick frantically trying to get out. But I am rescued and put down for a nap. There are other adventures and near escapes but I stay close to Mum and safety.

'Help me, help me, Mummy, please help me!' The shout wakes me. It is my brother screaming. He and his pals have set the back paddock on fire. I see the grey smoke rising above the fence and watch his eight year old friends frantically trying to put it out with their little sand buckets. A neighbour arrives. My mother throws the hose over. Someone goes for the fire brigade.

'Come here at once boys, you'll get burnt!' Mummy shouts.

They run through the back gate crying, huddling together afraid of what they have done. Before long it is under control and the boys are sent home for lectures or beatings. My brother starts drawing a battle scene on the table.

At tea, my father hears the whole story and takes Ian into the lounge for a talk. They are there for a while. I peep through the opening but can't see much. The smell of roast lamb brings them out.

'I'll never do it again Dad,' says Ian sucking the knuckle bone.

'I know son.'

'We didn't mean it to get so big.'

'It's over Ian, eat your tea.'

We eat our meal in silence but for some reason I see Mum and Dad are smiling.

My father is away quite a bit travelling in his job. He is a plain clothes detective. Sometimes he comes home tired from work or from what he's seen and sits in the dark by himself thinking. Ian tells me that sometimes Dad tracks down murderers. I hear my mother getting cups of tea and their whispering into the night. For a while Dad is gloomy and then suddenly brightens up by telling us jokes and stories. He can recite perfectly poems from the old Victorian School Readers like 'The Ballad of the Drover' or 'Where the Pelican Builds Her Nest' or, of course, Banjo's 'Clancy'.

*And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly  
voices greet him,*

*In the murmur of the breezes and the rivers on its bars,  
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains  
extended*

*And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.*

I sit on his knees and he encircles me with his woollen cardigan, pats my back as he sings. I like him best like this but then every morning he goes off in his dark garbadine coat and grey hat with a heavy gladstone bag.

I take a fancy to books with smooth pages. Cannot read them but love to stroke the smooth page surfaces. So cool to touch. A complex gardening manual with glossy sheets becomes my favourite. Very serious, I pretend to read it. I write pages of scribble to my grandmother and mum posts them. Watch Ian with envy as he reads little school books. I ache to crack the code of the little black marks across the page. They are mysterious to me, a world of communication which I cannot enter. Yet. In the dark passages of my indoor world of filtered experience with Mum and Mrs Mac I reach towards the light. I am ready for school and kids of my age.

'We're off to Mildura next week. Your father has been posted to the Mildura Police Station. He's not a detective anymore.'

My mother is pleased as we board the bus for the trip to our new town. We don't have a car and Dad has gone ahead with the moving van. Halfway on our journey, we pull into a cafe for a meal. I am worried because I am a fussy eater. I am scared of stews, vegetables, casseroles, puddings and cakes with dried fruit. Even bananas worry me if they have black bits on them. My brother peels them like spiders and chases me.

'Steak and eggs, chops and eggs, sausages and eggs?' says the man behind the counter, taking orders.

Ian and I smile with relief. It is food we love and can trust. We never eat out. Only in the lounge on Sundays. In the fifties, nobody else we know does either.

## VOYAGE

Pietro faced the odds again.

'Why do you want to go to Australia?' the official asked; his grimness seemed made of iron.

'To work. For my family.' Pietro answered, rubbing callouses he didn't have, and showing the black under and round his finger nails.

'What work did you do?'

'Mechanic.' He handed over a certificate. The official jumped out of his chair and shook Pietro's hand.

'You're the man we want! Perfect.'

'Thank you very much.' Pietro smiled, thinking of the truck with no engine. Just a cavity covered in dirty grease. The Italian who taught them told them to imagine. Imagine here are the sparkplugs. Imagine this to be the pedal to the carburetter, 'Broooooom, Broooooom. Broooooomm. Fast. Slow. Broom. Broom. Faster. Broooooom, brooom Piu piano Broom, broom. Così, bravo!' He'd got a mechanic's certificate for using his imagination under an empty bonnet. So, near a poster saying,

**A HAPPY LIFE AHEAD.**

**Your children will have a better future.**

Pietro and Maria's decision was confirmed with another Australian Commonwealth handshake for each of them after signing papers before the consul.

'I'll be given work,' he told them later back in their room.

'What kind Papa?'

'Government work. *Mano d'opera*.'

'Why?'

'Because everyone has to work for the government.'

'Where are they going to put us?' asked Maria. 'I'm tired of the waiting.'

'We only report a few more times.'

'I'm sick of being photographed.'

'It doesn't hurt Maria.'

'And fingerprinted?'

'Identification Maria.'

'And accommodation?'

'They'll have accommodation,' Pietro said. 'Now Sergio, show me how you do a forward roll.'

Sergio ducked his head; his shoulders bumped the floor, his legs followed and somehow he got the tumble all wrong ending up a squashed heap against the wall.

'That was interesting. Now this time, I'll guide your movements. That's better. I might even be able to teach gymnastics. Maybe they'll let me fix trucks without motors? We'll all be happy, you'll see.' His father embraced them, 'Would you like a story? This is going to be about Buffalo Bill and his wagon train to California.' Before long, the boy was lumping along, on his father's knee, in a covered wagon on the Oregon trail but before they reached the Rockies he nodded off. Just as he felt the hard bunk under him he opened his dozy eyes, 'Did they see any prairie Indians Papa?'

'The wagon train is bedding for the night ... so you'll have to wait ... but all I'll say is this ... '

'What Papa?'

'I'll tell you next time.'

'Why?'

'Because it's time for bed.'

X-rays. Blood tests. Urine tests. When the okay was given, those leaving, bundled themselves into the train. Sergio sat wide awake, quietly excited. As the train moved off he watched the darkening shapes and the passing lights. Soon he couldn't see much of the world outside. He heard the clatter and the echo of wheels. In the daylight, he watched as they threaded through a changing and unfamiliar landscape. In the end he couldn't remember much, except that at Delmenhorst it was cold and drab. Then in a kind of unreal manoeuvre he found himself aboard the back of a covered lorry. After a quick muster they were given a room in a big building block. Someone said something about a tag number.

'*Guten morgen, guten morgen.*'

He went with his father to a bench. A man handed his father some bits of paper. The man smiled and kept saying, '*Guten morgen, coupon*' to everyone. Pietro shook the man's hand and put the paper



in his pocket. He swung Sergio onto his shoulders. Maria was led away to another big building where lots of things were being handed out.

A man squeezed the cups of a bra to show Maria they were soft and elastic.

*'Nicht schlecht. Nicht schlecht.'*

She went bright red as she took it quickly with some soap and a comb, telling Sergio not to stare because it was rude. His father was handed some thick woollen socks, a shaving kit and matches. Then for the boy, an English cap, a satchel and a small blanket. On their way back to their room Sergio ran ahead, cap on head, blanket over his shoulders. After tea, he slept with his cap and satchel and had a dry night, the first in a while.

*'Look Mamma, what a big boat!'*

*'Pietro, che grande bastimento.'*

The ship looked very long in the drizzly mist assaulting Bremerhaven. As they neared, they saw they didn't get it right. It looked so big because there were three moored together.

As they boarded, some of the black American crew, in gob hats, stared down from the rust-streaked side of the ship.

Once on board, they went along a gangway and down many levels until they entered what seemed to Sergio a huge but cramped and noisy, echoing room. He sat on the edge of a wire two-decker bunk above his mother. Above him the low ceiling was white. He looked at all the women and children crammed together in the ward now stuffy with human smells. He had never slept with so many people before. Some kids cried because they were scared. He watched intently as a little girl near him tucked her doll under some blankets. He hid his satchel under his bunk. Before long they were back on deck.

*'Where have they put you?'*

*'With the men. At the front of the ship, Maria.'*

*'Why can't we be together?'*

*'Men aren't allowed on women's decks.'*

*'Papa, when are we going home?'*

*'First we have to stay here for a while.'*

*'But I don't like it.'* Sergio shook with the blasts of the ship's horn. *'Let's go back now Papa!'* With this came the added horror of seeing water widening between the ship and the wharf below.

*'It's too late now. We can't jump in the water.'*

Later, when he looked for his satchel, it wasn't there. He sat quietly hiding his emotion. He didn't tell his mother because, already bad-tempered, she would have given him a speech and a good cuff on the ear. That evening they had to squeeze past one another, coming and going from a steamy galleyroom. His mother ate a skimpy meal, Sergio squeamishly picked at the food. They sat on a bolted form, eating off bolted tables, from tin trays with tin plates, tin cutlery and tin mugs. His father enjoyed the tinned-mess-mash.

In the Bay of Biscay alarm bells shrilled. Fear like an electric shock ran from one to another. A clattering, frightened, single-minded crowd of women and children bumped and impeded each other to get from below to above decks. They fought to get into lifejackets. In the commotion Sergio's mother, breathing hard with panic, tied his on upside down. On deck he stood trussed and anxious. Under them the ocean heaved in great-grey slabs. In the hush everyone waited to abandon ship. When a husky voice announced drill was over, a general grumble of relief murmured before everyone went below decks still prickling with fear and confusion.

Just before Port Said, Sergio ran up to a Negro sailor and touched him to see if he was made of chocolate. As he looked at his finger tips the sailor grabbed him by the wrist, gave him a big friendly hug, a white smile and rolled his huge dark eyes. He offered the boy some chewing gum or a small ball. Sergio took the latter. After that, he wasn't sure if he preferred gum or the rubber ball.

At Port Said the interest was all around the ship. They got a bird's-eye view of the floating bazaar made up of red, yellow and blue bum boats loaded with big baskets. Arab vendors, some in turbans, sold handmade pots, strings of jewellery, clothes and spotted canemade snakes that twisted tight circles if you held them by the tail. What caught Sergio's eye were the quaint tin turtles.

'Here's a coin. Throw it.'

Even before it hit the water, the cheeky naked Arab boys were duck-diving after the darting glitter. A young boy's black head bobbed with the coin between his teeth. Sergio was delighted. The young Arab gave the coin a quick look and tossed it away in disgust, yelling and shaking his thin arm towards the deck.

'They only want English or American money,' someone said.

'Papa, can I have one of those?'

Other kids were walking their green turtles by working levers.

'I haven't any money.'

He envied the kids. He was glad when the bum boats were sculled back to shore taking their toys with them.

The only stunning thing on the way to Aden was the desert. Nothing but huge dunes with palm clumps. The hot twinkling Arabian night was thick with the acrid smells of naphta and carbon and the endless racket of hoots and commotion of shipping. After bunkering at Aden, the vessel struck out into the ceaseless, spanking roll of the widening Indian Ocean.

After uneventful morning drills, everyone stayed on deck in the hot air to escape the heat below, to hide from the sun and the heating metal of the upperdeck. It was like a makeshift refugee camp. Some dozed under lifeboats, others tried to get relief by using sheets and blankets as sunshades; some read, others loafed in groups; talking, joking, laughing, farting, smoking and sharing the lunacies of heat and boredom.

By late afternoon, the sultry heat and idleness had everyone edgy. To make things worse, the open-air night movies had been cancelled since both married and single women complained that men were feeling them up.

Sergio sat alone. He bounced his ball. It got away from him. It rolled to a glum-looking young woman in a white blouse. A boy and a girl were lying beside her. She sat with her legs out and her dark hair combed back like the movie stars looking at him. Her vivid eyes made him wary. She smiled and handed back his ball. Her children eyed the toy. A noise, that wasn't speech, came out of her mouth.

Sergio darted back to his mother.

'I don't want to be sick, Mamma.'

He lay flat, face to the sky. Sergio saw it change and become dusk.

'*Guarda che bella luna.*' A warm moon moved with them across the sky.

He lay there listless, disinterested as his stomach rose and receded in lazy swells. His fought the scaling upset inside him. It got to his throat, taunting him. He fought it back swallowing in gulps, turning to the merciless sea. His cheeks bulged, gushing vomit. He was seasick for days.

To beat the doldrums and to prevent fights, the Americans got everyone busy, glueing, nailing and painting makeshift stage sets, and having rehearsals for an end of voyage review. Sergio was in a skit with his father. He played the part of a sea urchin. His job was to slowly lower a cutout sun into the sea with a string.

'Let it down slowly,' his father said, showing the five-year-old how to slowly sink the sun.

'Like this?'

'No, s-l-o-w-l-y.' His papa showed him again, 'We have to do it right because the American officials will be watching.'

When the curtain parted, the place was full of faces. His papa played a fisherman with painted moustache and rolled trousers mending a net. The sun stood still, as a big blonde, squeezed in a blue dress, crossed the stage. Her presence was made more noticeable by the silence that followed. The audience sat very still, their eyes never leaving the wavy blonde with the serpentine lines. Sergio waited for his cue, watching behind cardboard waves and fishing nets while an American accompanist led her into song. In a loud voice with a German accent, she sang and acted her way through *O Sole Mio*, ending with a hot wriggle of her hips, and as the sun suddenly fell into the sea, there was a gush of applause, wolf-whistles and cheers. The Americans observed decorum by serving icecream and rounding off the night's fun with a rousing rendition of *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. The next day the sets were thrown overboard.

There was no drill-call, but the ship's decks began to crowd early. The morning breeze was harsh. The darkness was becoming less impenetrable. The vast ocean had a steely glitter, every so often a bleak sun broke through night cloud. There was an air of growing expectation in the glow of deck lights. With more morning came more people.

'Look on the horizon. Do you see?'

Beyond, Sergio saw a smudge of coastine. The ship's speakers began ...

NOW HEAR THIS! NOW HEAR THIS! ALL  
TRANSITS ARE TO PREPARE FOR DISEMBARK-  
ATION IN TWO HOURS ...  
ACHTUNG! ACHTUNG! ...  
ATTENZIONE! ATTENZIONE! ...

The day was overcast. A pair of black tugs docked the ship. They were off loaded at Station Pier, Melbourne. In this new and strange place their only identity was an official name-tag. The train that was to take them to some inland destination was not running because of a strike. They went by single-file, bus convoy instead. Sergio said goodbye to the grey Liberty Ship, with its pluming funnel, the *USNS General C. H. Muir*, before it was gone for good behind a bridge.

## MILDURA

*Plague me no longer, for I  
Am listening to the orange tree.*

John Shaw Nielsen

It is either very hot or very cold. I am sweating in the sun or freezing with my hand around my brother's handle bars being dinked to preps. I am a slim pale girl with long brown plaits and a face covered with 'sunkisses' or freckles. We suck iceblocks in square cones. We eat crusts from the warm bread loaves left by the baker's cart. When the driver is not looking, we break his whip and hide behind the peppercorns down the backyard. We play chasey and hidey in the lanes overgrown with citrus trees. We shoot each other at the 'Battle of the Bighorn' with bows and makeshift arrows. From the branches we swing like Tarzan and beat our chests like apes. 'We' are my brother and me. He is good to be with. He lets me join his mates in their loud games and even takes me to the Saturday arvo matinee at the Ozone theatre with a whole gang of nine-year-old boys

My grandparents live here. Grandpop runs the general store up the street. He is a big bald happy man with black eyes and a hairy chest who likes playing tricks on people. He is a good gardener, gives me cauliflowers as bouquets with a gentlemanly bow. Mum adores him. Grandma is more serious. She has long grey hair in a bun with bunions on her feet, throaties in her handbag and a talent for crosswords and arguing. Mum is a bit afraid of her.

Under the black deep Mildura sky, I count the star diamonds on hot summer nights, looking out of the flywire at the world. Ian is a talker. He is always yapping about something or other, either with his pals or by himself at the dining-room table when he draws incredible battles of blitzkrieg or kamikaze, shooting them down in boyish squeals. I am more quiet. I have fallen in love with Noddy.

In school, I am in 'Bubs.' Like a whole generation, I have discovered Enid Blyton. Her magic world of faraway trees and enchanted woods delight me. I read everything of this magic realm of pixies and elves inhabited by Moonface, Silky and Big Ears. I like school. I watch the infant mistress with the sinewy neck twirling a set of keys and for months practise in front of the mirror, giving formal school instructions to my imaginary class of infants. I envy such

power and confidence and long for a future of dominance. Of course, I am scared stiff of her and shake every time she enters our room. I hate school milk. Especially when it's left in the sun. Mum writes notes for me to get out of this daily torture. Obsessed with red ticks, purple stamps and stick-on stars, I show my mother my collections of paperwork success. Before tea, I play school and write all over the bedroom door with chalk, shout fiercely at naughty pupils, bang my dressing-table with a wooden stick. I will become a school teacher. I will. Ian thinks I'm crazy.

'Haven't you had enough of that all day?' he says racing outside to join his mates in another game of yelling movement.

No. I go back to my books and homework listening to the sounds of running footsteps down the side. In bed, I devour my reader while Ian absorbs the Phantom. Mum is usually busy doing something. Even at night she is tinkering in the kitchen, preserving Mildura fruit in her new Fowlers Vacola bottling kit.

One hot day while queueing for a drink at the school taps, a girl in my grade called Elizabeth gives me a huge bunch of grapes.

'My dad grows them.'

The cool moist sweetness quenches my parched throat better than water.

'Put them all in your mouth and chew,' she says.

I do and a really delicious sensation of squelching flavour oozes down inside me.

'Want to sit with me?'

'We can't, teacher said.'

'It's all right. Dad'll fix it.'

The next day a large fruit truck appears in the carpark and after play, I'm shifted next to her. She invites me home to play. Her farm is out Irymple way and Dad borrows a neighbour's ute and takes me out there. We pass rows and rows of grapevines, packing sheds, irrigation channels, red, red soil and drying racks of grapes. Huge palm trees line the roads leading to the houses with long verandahs. A cream brick house emerges from the citrus orchard and vineyards.

'Gee, it's nice Dad,' I blurt.

'A fine building all right.'

'There's a swimming pool and a tennis court.'

'Lucky girl, isn't she Nelly?' says my father, looking at me.

I am about to ask why aren't we so lucky when I remember we are just renting until something better pops up.

'It's not where you live that's important Helen,' says Dad quietly, 'it's how you live. We do all right, mark my words.'

'I wouldn't mind living there,' I say.

Elizabeth rushes out to meet me in a new dress and whirls me into her room full of toys and ornaments.

Our house is built for the heat. It's old, a large wooden dwelling with a sleepout for hot nights. There are a few holes in the wall and the floors creak but it's comfortable. It's right opposite the Working Men's Club and next to the Masonic Hall in Deakin Avenue, the main thoroughfare leading into the town. There is a lot of room to play and places to explore. At dusk, our family walks to another State - across the Murray River to New South Wales and back again. Dad tells us stories which some old Aborigine told him about the river. The skeletal gums stretch eerily, guardians of the water spirit. I nestle into my mother's full skirts and watch the silver moon dance on the waving reflections of the stark trees. The ripples carry the secrets of the crickets and the mopokes. Dad and Ian chuck stones skimming, bouncing twice across the water. In the daytime we go for picnics at Fishermen's Bend. The river is too deadly for swimming as the currents are strong, so we paddle by the edge or sit in the shade of the huge river gums. Despite the frowns from Mum to be careful, our father rows us out.

The Murray is plentiful with fish especially up river where Dad goes with his mates on weekend fishing trips and returns laden with cod, perch and catfish. But it is Ian idly fishing with an old cane rod that makes the Sunraysia Daily. He catches a seven pound perch that breaks his rod and some local record. At school I boast at morning talk and my teacher pins his photo up under "Story of the Week". Ian doesn't talk to me for a couple of days. I suddenly realise he's shy.

I share a double bed with him. He likes to scare me sometimes with tales of murder and revenge.

'See that dark lumpy thing in the cupboard?'

'Yes,' I squeak.

'It's a body in a sack.'

'It's not, it's not,' I insist but my heart is pounding as I nestle into his back. And then his imagination is in full flight as he raves on



about mysterious happenings in the still of night. He sleeps with the carving knife under the bed, just in case, you never know, it could be tonight that someone comes. I fall asleep to his ten year old fibs. He calls me Bub and says I'm a sook. In the morning on weekends Mum brings us breakfast in bed. We have 'dipdip' which is boiled egg and fingers of toast. Ian calls the prickly sticky crumbs that get in the sheets, 'googaloogs'. As they fall in our pyjamas he jumps about screaming, 'Oh no, the dreaded googaloogs are here. GOOGALOOGS from outer space. They are spreading, growing, coming. Get them before they get you!'

But when the neighbourhood gang teases me, Ian sticks up for his sister and tells them to nick off, leave me alone, like when my granny makes me a fur muff to wear in the cold and everybody laughs at the odd dead thing hanging from a velvet cord around my neck. I love it but stop wearing it, wanting to belong. I stroke it in private.

At the annual Church fancy dress parade Ian and I win prizes. He goes as Superman from the wireless, with bathers and a towel tied from his neck as a cape. He is well-built and strong for his age. Everybody thinks Liz will win as she has a cowgirl suit bought from Myers in Melbourne. But the judges go for Ian in togs and me in a bride's dress with a small basket full of fresh apple blossoms picked from our tree. Mum has sewed for days. They present us each with a box of chocolates, then the ladies serve afternoon tea with asparagus rolls while we run outside and chase goannas under the gums. Elizabeth tries to shoot them with her brand new colt 45.

At night the drone of adult voices puts me to sleep. People come for supper and I hear my parents laughing and talking about the district. I creep to the door and listen.

'Course it's his second wife but. Divorced.'

'No? You know a lot. Must have been here for years?'

'Too right, my grandparents were one of the first out Red Cliffs way. Changed since then of course. The Chaffey's did all that. The irrigation scheme opened the joint up. Used to be good for sheep runs but then too dry in the summer.'

'Well, it's thriving now. City people are booking in now for their winter holidays to catch the sun. The Grand's booked for months in advance. Reckon it's a boom town.'

'My old pop wouldn't think so. He used to tell me about how busy the port was back in the 1850s, busier than bloody Bourke Street he always said. He knew the Jamiesons who named the place.'

'Fair dinkum? Gee ... you do go back a bit. What would he say to these new motel things being built along the river?'

'And the swimming pool. The Murray's made it all of course ... an oasis in the bloody desert, no green lawns without it. No bowling, no tennis, like blooming England some of these beautiful gardens.'

'Yeah, we'd have just mallee scrub. Still can't get the workers but. Except those dagoes from the camp at the aerodrome. They make good pickers though.'

'Long as they keep to themselves, I reckon. See 'em up the shops sometimes, all dark together, talking gibberish, holding their kids to them like they were gold.'

I think of one family at the milkbar. All brown and smiling from the sun. One little boy with tight black curls tries to pull my plaits but his mother pushes him then pulls him away.

'Some of 'em are moving into town. Bought Morgan's green-grocery, now that's not right, is it? Them taking over our businesses?' I try to hear my dad's response but the conversation changes to something else and I feel sleepy. Dagoes, I think to myself. I like the lady in the milkbar. She has a kind face when she gives us lollies, even if her name is Rosa. My dad went to a Mr. Villari, the tailor, for his new suit, reckons he does a real good job. Mum always smiles at them too but then she is a polite sort of person. I wonder how they really feel.

I know how they feel about the English, especially royalty, coming here. Very excited indeed. The Queen makes her first visit to Australia in 1954 and Mildura is on her busy timetable. Along with just about every other place in the country. We are given flags and marching drills and practise, many many times. When she does finally come, all pretty with gloves, a hat and a floral dress it is too hard to believe, like seeing magic. Suddenly there she is; the beautiful lady hanging on the wall in the headmistress's office, the one the boys salute with our flag, the one we cheerfully promise to obey with parents, teachers and the law every Monday, the one on every magazine cover, every cinema newsreel. The one who just twelve months before rode in a golden coach with a jewelled crown to her

splendid coronation. We have kept all the souvenirs and photos from the occasion. I stare entranced with a gush of overwhelming feeling as she flashes past in a Landrover waving. I am ready to die.

'She smiled at me. She smiled at me!' I scream to Elizabeth.

'No, it was me,' she shouts with a flushed face.

But it is my grandpop casually walking down Deakin Avenue who gets the best view. A Rolls Royce appears from nowhere and the queen gives him a friendly nod and special wave. He dips his lid and bows or so he says, the only one in view. I can't wait to tell the class for morning talk but Liz's story is better. Her dad was on the dais of dignitaries and got to shake the royal hand.

It is May. The icy frosts make the lawns white and the milk frozen. We leave a saucer of water out over-night and it becomes shiny slivers, sharp as glass needles. Gloves and thick socks become morning necessities especially when I'm on a bike being dinked by Ian. My hands and feet sting with the cold. I long to wear my muff but prefer the cold to the retorts of others. The days are shorter and the frost bites to the bone but the afternoons are beautiful and warm, just right for tiggy and hidey. Under the big backyard peppercorn hangs my swing where I can see over the backyards full of peaches and citrus trees. Up, up, up with a sensation of rising joy and then down to my yard with its chook pen, red geraniums and couch grass fighting for control. Elizabeth likes my back lane overgrown with oranges and strange people like Big Jim who's always kicking fences and cursing everyone because he's drunk. We peep through a hole and giggle at his predictable lurching stagger. My kelpie attacks him one night. And then goes for the postie and the baker. So my dad has to get rid of our one and only pet.

I learn the piano while Elizabeth begs for ballet lessons. A touring company performs '*Coppelia*' in the Town Hall and that settles it. Liz is enrolled and bought black leotards, shimmering tutus and satin slippers but within a month she is tired of it. Ian and I practise our scales monotonously for hours and then learn there's to be a concert in the Town Hall. We are to play a duet. Suddenly Ian is sick of the whole thing. He wants to give up because his mates are laughing at him or it interferes with cricket practice or it is on the night of the cubs function or in other words he's backing out. At six, I am one of the youngest on stage. I play the piece:

*'Over the hills with an Emu  
Over the plains every day*

I keep up my piano but Ian continues happily in his jungle lair with Devil and Diana.

For the first time I see my mother cry. Her father is sick and has to go away for an operation in Melbourne. She holds me and sobs shaking with worry. I pat her hair uncomfortably.

'Grandpop will be okay. You'll see,' I say encouragingly. My grandfather has had a hard working life since the age of ten when he left school.

'Maybe,' she says, 'but after that sort of operation they're never the same.'

He does come back but he has changed. Has no energy and his body is tired. A few months later Grandpop dies of a sudden heart attack. He is fifty-six.

And then I hear my parents whispering in the warm summer evenings, about choices : about moving in with Grandma, or about moving away, leaving Mildura. Dad gets a transfer to Dandenong just out of Melbourne. We are to have a new Housing Commission house with a bedroom each. I feel afraid of change. A new school. A new town. A starting over. My mother holds me and says we will be together. I know I will miss the heat, the cold, the backyard, the river walks, the iced tomato juice, frosty nights, Grandma and Elizabeth.

'You'll come back though, won't you?' Liz asks me inside her playhouse.

'Perhaps,' I say hopefully.

'Will you write to me?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Who'll I play with now?' she asks forlornly.

'What about me? I have to make new friends.'

I bite my tongue, about to cry. I don't want to leave her.

'You know what I like better than anything?' she asks.

I think of her house and her toys and her horse and her clothes and her parents who give her everything.

'Ballet?' I joke.

'No. You.'

I look at Elizabeth and feel a strong sense of belonging. Decades later, I can't even remember her surname.

## MILDURA MIGRANT CAMP

*Unfortunately there is little information available officially and most depends on memory ...*<sup>1</sup>

'Have you got my ball?'

'Yes. See.' Maria showed him.

It was hot and dusty in the bus. Sergio's lemonade bottle had turned warm and sticky. He had drunk all the water and was toying with the marble stopple, too caught up with his own needs to care much about what his mother might be going through.

'Why isn't Papa with us?'

'He told you, he has to work.'

'Where?'

'A place near Melbourne.' Sergio knew she had no idea where it was, just as they had no idea where they were at the moment. It felt no better than being lost. All he knew was that by now they had been on the road for hours since their last roadside stop for sandwiches, milk and fruit.

They'd left Bonegilla early that morning. All the women and children were handed bottles of water before being packed solid into buses. He felt bright but before too long turned dull and grumpy. It was becoming a long slow trip through barely visible uninhabited land. He watched the dust blur down the outside windows in heavy drools. Quietly, it trickled inside the bus too.

Sergio felt sore, thirsty, impatient.

'I want a drink.'

'Why did you drink all the water?' He felt her gaze on him.

'I'm thirsty.'

'Be quiet,' she snapped, turning her face from him, 'look out the window.'

Her grim look told him she'd gone elsewhere; so he looked out from the bottom of the window, then he tried over his shoulder. The woman behind had a drowsy face, with a bubble-belly. He saw wet

---

<sup>1</sup> Extracts in italics in this chapter are from a letter Sergio Cerne received from Ms Trude Lobl of the Red Cliffs Historical Society, Mildura, 2 June 1995

patches under her arms. There were quite a few women big like that on the bus.

'Mamma, why do they have fat bellies?'

'Maybe they've eaten too much.'

He smiled and soon forgot about the women. He grizzled thirstily, but to his mother it was just another noise.

'Why are we stopping?'

'It could be another food stop.'

The dust hung and drifted over the wild withered grass by the road, before leaving the air to a bright piercing silence. The driver unhinged the door. He vanished among rows of lush green trees, gone for a long time. In the bus they were starting to fry. Uncertain, some of the women got off and squatted to do their business in small groups by the road side. Kids quickly scrambled to join them.

'Where are you going?'

'To pee. I don't want to wet my pants.' Sergio shot past her impatiently out the door. Swarms of tiny flies jumped him as he peed on the fence post of a green grove. He heard shouts of enthusiasm as thirst-driven women and kids pinched between the wire fence. Oranges. It suddenly became a free for all with everyone crawling over the citrus trees.

While gorging himself on his third orange, he suddenly saw the feeding mob alarmed, backing away to the safety of the roadside. A big, grim-faced man in a hat was striding their way behind a couple of angry, ramping dogs. The man's eyes bore hard on the intruders. The bus driver followed hot and bothered.

The dogs yapped at another driver, leaning against a bus mudguard talking to their owner. There were nods of agreement. The oranges could be taken but no-one moved until the dogs were taken away; then the bolder women skirted the man and before long the orchard was besieged again. Sergio glanced at the farmer watching the strangers brashly strip and gobble his crop. The man then stood up on his weather-beaten tractor and took off his hat to show a flare of red hair. Ignored, he grinned, then yelled, waving his big hairy arms and his large hat. Was he angry? No, he was smiling, getting off his tractor to show them the best oranges. Later, when the hot, sweat-smelling buses pulled away, the man stood by his bare fruit trees laughing. Clutching a couple of oranges and sucking on another, Sergio tried to

look back from the bus window but all he saw were swirling trails of dust.

It was dark outside and they were still on the road. Now silenced by distance, he wondered if they'd ever get there. He could still smell orange on his fingers. Peels squashed under his feet. His mother had said the place was called Mildura. The name didn't mean anything except exhaustion. An hour later, they arrived but didn't know it, until the town lights stirred everyone to life. They had come out of the dark. Sprinklers snapped spray after spray. He could taste the water. The sight of it kept them looking even after they realised the lights had dwindled and the road had gone through the town taking them along with it.

*As far as I could assert the "Migrant Holding Centre" as it was known, was situated next to the Airport. Originally it was constructed during World War II for the Australian Airforce.*

In ranked groups they were led, worn and travel tired, to a huddle of tin huts. The night sky was filled with stars. The air risped with crickets. They were led down a dim passageway to a door that opened into a poky room. His mother switched on a light crisp with insect corpses. She plopped his dead weight on a thin lumpy mattress, making sure his head lay on a knotty pillow against the iron bedhead. She put something damp on his forehead. He watched her take off his shoes and most of his clothes. Her face and eyes were dark. She gave him a mug of warm water from a tin bucket. After a few sips he was awake enough to refuse any more. In his eyes the room drifted, the floor stood up away from him as did the table.

'We won't need blankets. It's too hot,' his mother said dreamily slumping on a chair, her head in her hands. He didn't know when she switched off the light but in the night she had to get up because they began to shiver. It was the blankets that stopped their teeth chattering.

He woke after his mother. She wasn't there, but the sun was. Through a moth-eaten curtain it sprinkled over the bed. When he saw her he asked, 'Have you got my ball?' She retrieved it from a pocket and handed it to him. He held it firmly. 'What's that noise Mamma?'

She was dressed holding a mug of milk. She poured him some. 'Aeroplanes.'



'Dove? Dove?' He jumped out of bed. 'Dove?' He pressed hard against the window, 'Where are they?' he cried.

'Maybe they're too far away to see.' Now Maria had her head at the window. He could hear engines throttle up and down, but all he saw was a big roundabout hump with yellowing grass, a red brick building, young men in dark blue uniforms entering and leaving under a white portico.

*After the war it became part of the University of Melbourne for students in Medicine, Dentistry and Engineering and in April 1950 it was re-opened for use as the Holding Centre. It eventually housed over two thousand people. It was administered by the Department of Immigration.*

He saw lots of little grey birds. '*Guarda quanti passeri.*'

As she opened the window, the sparrows flew away.

'Can I get them?'

'You have to throw salt on their tails,' she laughed repeating the old wives' tale.

His mother was rostered to work in the hostel kitchen, set tables, work the plate machine, and top up urns with water. The dining hut was big and crammed with the smell of cooking and the clatter of people. The air from the windows didn't dilute the stink.

Maria left him in the hut, telling him she was too busy and the place was so hot and smelly. Why should they both be cooked and suffocated? Maria ate little. She didn't like the taste but she liked the rhubarb compote. The boy asked her to get him some salt which she did. His mother also brought him sandwiches and milk.

'Can I go out?' he asked, anxiously biting his nails.

'Have you caught any sparrows?' she said, before shutting the door in his face. He didn't say that the ground outside the window was crusty with salt, that he'd already thrown at the birds.

Sergio liked the fresh food his mother brought him and loved listening as she talked about his father in a wistful way while grating apples that she sprinkled with sugar which he relished.

The weeks were long. Men came and went but Pietro didn't, not from Melbourne. Often, after the men arrived at night, frustrations flared. Sergio lay awake, listening to the uproar. His mother was so

quiet he didn't know if she was awake, listening or asleep. He guessed the latter.

'You tart! *Stai ferme le corna!*' A man's startled cry. A door slammed shivers down the hut, the tin roof echoed. Everything jumped, kids cried. 'What are you doing trying to get through my wife's window?' Another man's frightened voice said above the commotion. 'Well, the door was locked.' A window slammed. 'I'm going to teach you a lesson, you dumb *puttana!*' Someone was bashed. Someone crashed to the floor. 'You can't dive under the bed, bitch!' Then silence broken by, 'I'll give you bawling! After I go back to Adelaide, you go screw yourself, slut!' Through the flimsy walls came violent creaking and squeaking of an iron bed.

Days later Sergio heard muffled voices on the other side of the door. When he had no nails left and got bored with mousing round the tiny room, he clicked the door gently and stepped no further than the doorway. In the hush the sensation of being alone ran over him as he stared down the long shiny passageway which had doors facing each other. Down one end, Sergio threw his ball and chased it. Before long he ran into a boy and a little girl. They didn't see him because they were on their hands and knees picking at something crusty in a corner. The boy with a blond fringe drew himself up and gave Sergio a mean look as though he disliked being disturbed. The girl picked till a chip popped out of a corner. With delight in her blue eyes, she grabbed it and quickly put it in her mouth. She pointed and Sergio looked closer. Did he want some? He did. The boy wanted the ball as a trade. Clutching his only possession, Sergio backed away. But afterwards, he snuck back and helped himself to the stale gum and spent the rest of the day chewing and playing with his ball.

'Where did you get it?'

'These kids.'

'Not out of their mouths?'

'No Mamma.'

Weeks later, one sweltering afternoon his mother returned furious and empty-handed. She looked frail and hard-faced, her mind elsewhere as she sat on the edge of the bed, cold with anger. He wondered what was bothering her. Pretending that he hadn't left the room, he immediately felt uncomfortable. Did she know he was

disobeying her? But soon he knew it was something else. He ate a sandwich. She was very upset, sobbing.

*There were postal and banking facilities available, hospital and outpatient's services, large kitchen and dining areas, a store, cinema and leisure and sporting areas. A team of twelve teachers had the task of teaching about three hundred children of various ages who came from between 8-12 different nationalities. English evening classes were available for adult migrants.*

Suddenly she gasped, 'We're all getting the blame for stealing food scraps. The men talk filthy. I'm not going back in that hell.' And that was all she said before saying, 'Tomorrow I'm going to work on a farm picking potatoes and carrots. We need the money.'

His eyes widened with dismay. There was a soft knock from the outside. His mother wiped her eyes and opened the door.

'This is Aninka,' Maria said.

He recognised the glum dumb woman with dark hair and vivid eyes from the ship. She had a black eye and blue marks about her neck. There was a nice smell of soap about her. She had paper and pencil in hand. The boy with a blond fringe from the corridor also entered.

*The camp – as it was called for short – was for wives and children only, the men had been placed in vineyards in South Australia for the grape-harvest. At the end of the harvest other work was found for the men, mostly in South Australia and from thereon they looked after their own interests.*

'This is Lello.' The kid gave him an unfriendly glare. The girl wasn't with them. She was called Lolli. The boys were sent out to play but it was no good. Two disturbed kids, they put up with each other stiffly. Lello soon left after Sergio didn't have his ball.

'Why can't I come?' he asked his mother later, alone.

'You can't work with women.' She sat next to him. 'It's only for a little while. I'm just going to take Aninka's place.'

'Why?'

His mother showed him a piece of paper. 'Aninka wrote here that some fellow at the farm won't leave her alone. She'll keep an eye on you. It's only for a few hours.' The paper didn't make him feel any better. It was scribble because he couldn't read.

'I don't like that boy,' he said, kicking the floor with his heel.

'Don't be nasty. You need a little friend. He needs a little friend.' Her voice was full of feeling, 'His father has run away to Adelaide.'

What did she mean? He turned to find his ball.

'I'll try to be back early. And listen.' Maria scolded, 'Behave. Aninka can't speak, but she can write.'

*'Si, Mamma.'*

The next day, Sergio reluctantly went with his mother across the corridor to Aninka's room. He soon realised that Aninka also intended to go off, leaving him with her kids. He told them how he caught sparrows while still being careful to do as they wanted. The first day they did some colouring in. On the second, they played grown-ups. They had water in cups and drank coffee like adults. Lolli was very hard to catch. After, she let Sergio hug and squeeze her chubby thighs while she shrieked. On the third day, Lello got great pleasure in arm-locking and then gouging Sergio on the legs with pencils while Lolli pretended to defend him by raking Lello with her nails. When the woman returned, he could smell again the airy scent of soap on her.

Sergio decided to take his chances away from Lello. He scrambled over a crumbling stone wall. He set out like an intruder in the stunning heat, among gnarled stunted trees with the greyness of stone. Before long he didn't know where he was. A strange clear silence enveloped him. It was horribly heavy. Suddenly he felt it through his scalp like a prickle, and then its swooping flutter made fear crawl over his skin. He was being attacked by an invisible fury. He did not know about magpies. He ran screaming to his hut. The door was unlocked and he found Lolli sitting sweetly, chewing an apple.

'Catching sparrows?' she asked, staring at his flushed face.

'No,' he said, 'got no salt.'

She wouldn't let him near her. Poking her tongue at him, she left him with a half-eaten apple.

Late one morning, after Aninka had gone they went to retrieve some gum and then, Lello made Sergio go somewhere else. They walked to the laundries and the rows of toilet cubicles. Sergio could

hear muffled voices and water running. There was a wetness about the place. Lello crouched before a corrugated tin partition. The tin was pierced with nail holes. From these, the two boys spied on some women taking showers. They returned the next day. He knew it was wrong but he was drawn to peek anyway. His prying-eye got small, rounded and stary. The undressed woman glistened, her hair slicked back and mouth pouting up into the spray. Sergio saw Lolli's mother lightly soaping herself. As he peered into the hole, he felt someone watching him. He turned from his squat and saw his own mother. Lolli was pointing at him, holding her hand. He was too muddled to say anything. Sergio's mother said *brutto schifoso* in a tight voice before she hit him. Hit him hard. It hurt and she hit harder. His legs were bruised for days.

A few weeks later, on a weekend, the buses came. Maria and Sergio waited for him, eyes searching every window of every arriving bus, buses stopped and went but Pietro seemed in none of them. Finally, Maria's despair was met by a beaming smile and a big bag. It was a wonderful moment and all Sergio could do was jump around to stop himself from bawling with happiness. His parents talked and laughed excitedly all the way from the camp gates to the hut. Inside, his father opened his big bag and gave Maria a frypan.

'What am I going to do with that? Put it on my head.'

Next came a small electric cooking stove.

'We can cook our own food.'

'It's forbidden to cook food in rooms.' Suddenly she thought of the kitchen and dining hall with its offensive greasy smells of mutton, and soggy vegetables overcooked in water. She shivered. 'I'll make sure I'm careful.'

They were very chatty and affectionate, talking and laughing until his father suddenly remembered his son.

'I've got something for you Sergio.' He gave the boy a lead redskin with headdress and a Dinky bus. 'That bus will bring you and your mother to Melbourne. Would you like that?'

'Yes, but I'd rather come by train.'

'Don't you like the bus?'

'No. The driver takes you where he wants to.'

His father laughed. 'Next time I'll buy you a train. No, better still an aeroplane. How would you like that?'

'Then I could take off from here.'

'I'll tell you what, why don't you take me and show me these aeroplanes they have here.'

'It's prohibited,' Maria said, suddenly seeming pinched and prickly, betraying an inner tension. 'Why don't you let him go out and play with his new bus?'

'I want to be with Papa,' he cried, peeved. 'I want my cap.'

'And what am I going to do?' she asked, filling the room with her touchiness.

'Cook the meat for lunch.'

'What meat?'

'Here.' He got another bundle out of his bag.

He peeled the last shred of bloody paper off the rolled red lump tied with string.

'What kind of meat is this?'

'Beef.'

'It's all fat.'

'Just a bit.' He handed her the rolled hunk of meat. She flung it away from her in the frypan. 'Leave the string on and it will hold together nicely until we get back. I'll just connect the electricity.'

Pietro removed the light-bulb, rigged a cable, connecting it at one end to the ceiling outlet. He plugged the other to the back of the small stove. Sergio didn't know why his mother had gone strangely quiet and from the look on her face, he sensed that it wasn't the time to find out. Slowly, the meat began to sizzle and spatter.

In the afternoon heat, they took a dusty track away from the hostel. After a time, they came to a site of a boarded-up house sitting high on leaning blocks. A see-through window filled Sergio with an eerie fascination. It was as though in the quiet of the heavy-drowsy heat the house had tired and given up long ago, like the family who had tried exploiting the land.

'Who lives in there Papa?'

'Someone's memory.'

After lunch, Sergio played with his bus in the shade of the tin hut. Later when he saw his mother, she was different. There was a funny smell about her and she looked languid in bare feet, whistling an unfamiliar song. His father lay on the bed in his singlet and shorts, but didn't look a bit sleepy. They spoke in whispers.

That evening they went for another walk. The hostel grounds were crowded with figures and talk that hung in the afterheat stillness, some came from dark places, and some from the lights of doorways and huts. She talked about the huge farm where she and the other women worked. She spoke about Aninka and her new interest, the farm-owner.

'Who is this *rubacuori*?' his father asked.

'An Italian widower. A Calabrese.'

His father talked about coal and being together down in Melbourne. Soon stars began to glow in the black Mildura sky.

It was hot again on Sunday. Before leaving, his father made him a paper war bonnet and they fought the Indian wars. The young brave was many times mortally wounded in the exhaustion of battle, and he played riding into combat again and again knowing that this game would soon end.

Later that afternoon, Sergio and his mother were alone again. While going back to the hut she talked to take his mind off his father but when they got inside he saw the war bonnet and began to bawl. He put it on and crawled under the bed with his lead redskins and toy bus and was soon far away driving it down imaginary roads to that faraway place at the end of the world called Melbourne where his papa was. Maria lay on the iron bed, the wire mattress sagged near his head. He heard her crying and she heard him playing.

Sergio heard a knock on the door. His mother got off the bed and brushed her dress. He made sure he had a ground view of the door. A short, dark man with a trimmed moustache and shiny shoes stood in the passageway. He wore cuffs and a new suit all buttoned up against the heat. His grizzled wavy hair all brushed back like it had been ironed and waxed. A smile on his face, hat in one hand and under his chin a big bag of peaches. He looked important.

*As soon as accommodation was found the families moved from the camp to join their husbands, fathers etc. to start family life again. Progressively more and more people found accommodation and left the camp, which was closed down in March 1952.*

'Scuzi, vive qui la signoria muta?'

A few days after Aninka and her children left to live with this man on a big farm. Aninka had her face painted and she smelt better than soap. She and Lolli wore bright cheerful dresses. As they left in a new Ford V8 Customline car even Lello's smirk seeming unusually kind.

In February 1952, Sergio and his mother left Mildura. A town he had only seen a couple of times on short shopping bus trips with his mother. He looked at the green lawns with their twirling whips of spray, the flower banks, the neat houses, the wide streets, the huge river, but these images soon blurred into the past. Forgotten.

*Thereafter all the buildings (mostly constructed from corrugated iron) were progressively sold off and there remained no indication that once a population of over 2000 experienced their first impressions of life in a new country.*

As he looked out of the train window, all he would remember of the place was the chewing gum, scary hot walks, naked women, a belting, squeezing chubby thighs, and waiting for his father; worst of all, he was sad because he didn't know whether Lello or Lolli had pinched his ball.



## DANDENONG

... factories like terrible relations  
moved in, changed the place.

Judith Beveridge

My father leaves us packing and heads off to the industrial suburbs of Melbourne. The night before we are to shift a knock on the door changes things.

'Mrs Dougherty, Mrs Dougherty, come quick ... your boy's been hit!'

'How bad?' My mother goes white.

'He's very still. Real bad, I'd say. The ambulance is on its way. Down at the intersection a few minutes ago. Some car swerved out and knocked your boy right off his bike. They say he went right up in the air.'

Ian is taken to the local hospital unconscious but all right. He recovers slowly and ends up with a badly broken right femur and a few other minor things. He has to stay in there for over a month. I'm not allowed to see him ... hospital rules. 'No children visitors,' insists the domineering matron. I look through the window and wave but he's sort of sad and takes no notice of me. The food is for babies, says Mum. They give him Farex and mushy things so she smuggles in lamb chops and rump steak when no-one is around. Sometimes she speaks firmly to this large matron with thick hairy arms in the triangular hat and white uniform.

We are left alone, Mum and me. Dad is faraway near Melbourne. Ian is in the hospital. Everything is in a shambles. Our furniture has gone. We have to shift out of the house and stay with Grandma for a few weeks, waiting. Waiting to leave I feel on reprieve. Now I can see Liz for another month. But it is hard for Mum with my brother in traction. Grandma is kind to us. Although Mum is worried about everything she never lets anyone see her upset. Ian is the miserable one while Mum beams all warmth and care. She is outwardly calm and busy, determined to set things right. While Dad is away she seems stronger, ready for something. Doctors tell her Ian will have a permanent limp. His stitches burst open and there is another

operation for his plated leg. He's had sixty-six stitches from hip to knee.

'They've scarred him for life,' I hear my mother say.

A letter comes from Dad to come. Despite their protestations, Mum stands up to the medical authorities and whisks Ian away in an ambulance all the way to Dandenong. It takes a lot of their savings, about three hundred pounds.

'He's not getting better in there. He's fretting. I'll nurse him myself. We have to help him. They can't. Not going to be easy but we still have to pull together. You'll help won't you honey?'

'Yes,' I say, not knowing how.

The ambulance journey takes all day. Mum sits in the front with the driver and I sit in the back with Ian yapping continuously trying to joke but he snaps at me so I sulk for an hour. I forget he is in pain. And then I realise you can see out the dark windows but people can't see in. I poke faces at them, stick my tongue out at a fat boy in jodhpurs licking a double-header which I want. This is good, spying, not being observed. About six at night, we reach Dandenong. Dad runs out to meet us. Hugs Mum for a bit, then leans over to Ian and says,

'How are you son?'

'Okay. Better than that place.'

'You'll be up and about before you know it.'

They get busy settling Ian into the new house. Its made of lime-green fibro cement and looks exactly like all the other Housing Commission places going up and down the street. There are no gardens or footpaths, just piles of dirt. In the front porch wall there are three round holes for decoration just like portholes on a ship.

*Sail away, sail away little boat across the sea.*

*Sail away, sail away*

*But don't forget come back to me.*

A bed is made up by the lounge window so that Ian can see out at the world. No-one notices me for awhile. Everything smells new, strange. I feel lost. We have never lived in a new house before. I have wanted Ian home for so long but now it is different.

For the first time I have a room of my own. It is light pink with a pale blue ceiling. When I talk my voice echoes. The toilet is at first out the back - a dunny can that makes me feel sick. At night I lie listening to the stillness of the empty room and long to hear Ian laughing, telling fibs, scaring me, running outside with his mates. A street light shines on all the identical houses waiting for different people to live in them. I miss Mildura.

A doctor visits a lot. My brother's stitches have not healed well.

'They butchered him the second time,' I hear Mum say to Dad out of earshot of Ian.

His metal plate is painful. The long large wound has to be drained frequently. My mother stands by his bed glowing confidence as they take a cup of pus from his leg. She squeezes his hand as he squirms. In the dunny I hear her dry retching over and over again but never in front of the patient. She has to teach him lessons from the Correspondence school which become a daily grind. Outside I play in the mounds of dirt and building debris hearing her coaxing Ian to do the spelling again. There are not many neighbours on this new estate but the few kids there are, soon find my brother at the window and start coming over to this incessant talker stuck in bed. They rave on about the Redex Round Australia car trials that are in the newspapers all the time. After school, the lounge is full of a constant stream of ten and eleven year olds swapping comics and yarns. He has a pile of comics about five feet high; there's all the popular ones like *Mandrake*, *Prince Valiant*, *Archie and Veronica*, *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Donald Duck*, *Superman*, *the Scorpion* and of course *The Phantom* ... Mum gets Ian *The Silver Jacket* too, a magazine with stories, puzzles and news. He reads Boys' Own Annuals and Biggles books too. I realise Ian is getting better and will walk again, but not in this place of old farms turning into factories and houses. After only three months, Dad has decided not to stay. He hates the mud, the job, the suburb, everything.

At school I am lonely. No-one plays with me and I wander around every recess lost and sad. Out of things. The very first day I do well on a test and that seals my fate. The other kids avoid me like I'm contaminated or something. The teacher is kind and picks me to be book monitor which makes things worse.

'You're her pet,' they spit at me in line. It's a curse which sticks.

One day Dad drives past and sees me alone in the playground. We now have got Grandpop's old grey Ford V8. He stops and chats, trying to distract me from my solitude. That night, plans are made.

The next day my parents arrive at recess and take me for a drive to the city to visit my aunty and cousins in South Melbourne. Dad removes the back seat so that Ian can sit with his leg stretched out in its frame. I sit in the front between Mum and Dad not quite tall enough to see much above the dashboard.

We pass the motor assembly plants, the agricultural machinery factories, the Springvale Crematorium, a place I've never heard of before. The dead being burnt! The place intrigues and spooks me all the more because of its neat precise rose bushes in ordered lines and no graves in the rush of passing traffic. So different to Mildura; the cemetery there is peaceful, secluded, out along a bush track with tall drooping gums shading my grandfather's marble headstone from the hot sun. Nearby, there's a white angel watching over him in the red earth where he rests.

Every week we make this trip and head off into Melbourne. I start missing a lot of grade two. But I love it. Mum and Dad reckon I'm better learning with them anyway.

A German boy moves in down the street. He can't speak much English but likes to play chasey and hidey and is full of all sorts of ideas how to make pocket money by collecting empties, making homemade lollies, doing odd jobs or even begging for a bob from well-meaning people. His father works long hours in a car plant and his mother has got a job too. Everyone feels sorry for Eddie being left alone, most mums don't work. This blond refugee with his funny crewcut, piercing blue eyes and broken words has a winning smile. His parents however are viewed with suspicion. It is only nine years since the Second World War ended. People have not forgotten.

One afternoon we hide inside one of the empty houses nearly finished. On the unsanded floorboards we play marbles, getting dusty splintered fingers. My German friend wipes mine on his trousers and gently pulls the wood out trying not to hurt me. I giggle girlishly.

'You like me?' He pats his blond crewcut.

'Yeah, sure I do.'

'You not laugh at me like other kids.'

'No, why should I?'

He moves towards me encouraged and puts his arm around my shoulders, breathing fast like he's running. He stares at me in a strange way.

'You beautiful.'

'No, I'm not,' I squirm thinking of my freckles and my skinny limbs. I pull my spotted cotton dress across my legs to cover them.

'I kiss you?' He bends his head at an angle.

'Kiss? ... I don't think so.'

I know I'm blushing as I stand up. He tries to grab me but I duck and escape, weaving in and out of his outstretched arms as if we are doing some primitive dance. We run around the incomplete building laughing and hiding from each other. I feel very excited and being seven don't know why. Suddenly he's got me, won't let go. He pushes his face against mine like a blind butting animal and then backs away. He looks different, older, intense. He is nearly eleven, like Ian.

'I better go,' I say firmly.

'No, stay.'

'No ... see you later, tomorrow. I can hear my mummy calling.'

I am off fast. I never go back.

Mud is everywhere. Cars get bogged. Concrete footpaths are laid and we put our footprints in one around the corner. Mum stains our wooden floors with dark varnish and our footsteps sound hollow. New people are coming all the time. People like Eddie with little English but lots of hope. I have girlfriends whose faces and names I have long forgotten. Together we take cut lunches on the vacant lots for Saturday picnics; we dress up in high heels, long frocks and make-up, play chasey in the wooden frames of newly erected structures, peep under the flaps of outback dunnies when people are inside, chew lots of bubblegum. From the front window I see the face of my brother, looking at us run through the puddles together.

Three months pass and then my father has another job. This time he will be in charge of a police station. Korumburra. None of us is sad to leave. The huge van arrives and packs our things in tea chests. All week my mother has wrapped her precious crystal and crockery in newspaper. Dad puts my brother on a rug and pulls him around the house.

'Better see all the rooms before you go son.'

Ian sees my bedroom and the other which would have been his. He is still not up on crutches. He keeps his chin up but does not talk to me much anymore. I have become an outdoor girl in this place because of him. Daily, I run away from his face at the window. Mobility is between us.

A couple of neighbours come out to say goodbye. None of my friends are there. I glance around at this boring treeless street just made out of a paddock. I don't feel anything except a kind of emptiness that I should care and I don't. The houses are all the same, the gardens will be too. I have been unhappy here playing solitary games, reading stories and poems in Girls' Own Annuals.

*I had a little tea party  
This afternoon at three  
T'was very small  
Three guests in all  
Just I, myself and me.*

I think of Lizzie and her tears. I have written to her but not much. Each letter becomes harder in time, knowing we are changing and will never go back to the heat and the river to live. At least she knew me. I am ready to go. Dad carefully lifts Ian into the back of the V8 and the three of us pile in the front with me in the middle. Someone peeps through a curtain at the crippled boy they have never seen.

Suddenly, from behind the corner of a house, I see my blond German staring. Yes, it's Eddie. He does not wave or smile. I have not spoken to him for a long time. I have avoided encounter. At least he is here, I think. His eyes are on me. He looks miserable. Lonely like me. Suddenly I want to get out of the car and run to him, say goodbye like I should. The motor has started. I try to turn and wave but it is too late. Will anyone ever get a chance to know my real self? We have turned the corner.

## SOMERS

His father visited regularly. Now quite often the silence between his parents was a friction. When put to bed, Sergio lay listening through the thin wall of his room to them talk and talk until his mother got angry and they fought.

Pietro often would arrive late on Friday nights. Sergio and his mother, in a growing crowd, would wait for the bus-beams to announce arrival. When the buses finally drove through the hostel gates, everyone suddenly jostled forward, reaching up to the windows, eyes straying to catch sight of their long awaited loved ones. The men looked down smiling, waving from inside the bright bulging bus.

'Lovely to see you *fanciulla*.'

Feeling Pietro's voice on the back of her neck, Maria jumped.

'Papa!' The boy gave an excited cry.

Hugging Maria his father asked, 'What have you been doing *fanciulla*?'

'We've been going to the beach,' she said, 'it's beautiful.'

'Like Abazzia?'

'No, it's sand. It's all different.' Then she asked in a voice tinged with impatience, 'When are you taking us away?'

'Soon Maria. Soon. Don't worry.' He squeezed her hand in his.

'What are you so pleased about?'

'Wait till you see what I've got,' he turned to Sergio. 'Zio Clemente would have been proud.'

'Provided he was sober,' quipped Maria, then she quickly softened, 'Clemente was a cultured man. A ship's captain, wasn't he?'

'It was only after he went to sea, and began chasing women he went bad,' Pietro said, laughing at the memory. '*Domani mattina andiamo pescare*,' he said adding to Sergio's excitement and making sure the barbed hooks were embedded in their skein of line.

'*Trovaremmo l' esca, e poi i grandi pesci.*'

'*Piero no riempirge la testa di scempiaggine,*' Maria said.

'*Ma che scempiaggine Maria?*' he laughed.

He waved a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

'I've bought land Maria. I paid cash.'

'Where?' she gaped suddenly with disbelief.

'Near a place called Yarraville.'

'Where's that Papa?'

'A few kilometres from Melbourne.'

'When did you buy the land?'

'Tuesday.'

Sergio and his mother gazed at the paper like it was precious.

'Is it nice?'

'It will be, you'll see.' He spoke like he could see it, 'There's plenty of space. Lots of grassland.'

'Are there others living there?' she asked, becoming unusually alive.

'No. Well, one Australian family. He's a builder. He's going to put our bungalow up. They're a young couple. They have a little girl and a dog.'

'Is there water?'

'Not yet, but it's coming.'

'Coming?' Maria repeated puzzled. 'Is there a road?'

'Not yet Maria. But it won't be long. It's a growing area.' His grin told her he knew more than he was letting on. 'The man who sold me the land said it's going to be a popular place.'

When she heard there was no electricity or water she didn't know what to think. Maybe they should have rented? But they knew there was a shortage of houses. That night there were no angry words. From his bed, Sergio heard them laugh and talk and talk. Eventually, their voices became hurried whispers that just reached his ears, and then they just didn't at all.

Saturday morning. How Sergio loved it. His mother singing to herself before daybreak as she got them some food together. Then, their leaving the hut in darkness carrying tin and tackle. That morning had a trace of rain. The window squares of the kitchen hut blazed yellow in their frames. From its funnels, greasy smoke puffed into the sleeping air. At that moment, Sergio felt his world full of promise and adventure. Because he could feel only calmness coming out of his father, it made his urgency mount as they walked from the camp into the blur of the awakening bush.

They fished off a wrecked footbridge, ate thick slabs of bread, butter and marmalade. The boy wanted to keep all his fish, but his



father made him put some of the babies back before they headed along the deserted beach. Sergio mucked about throwing driftwood into the swashing sea. He suddenly let go of a sand-crusted stick he'd playfully picked up among the shreds of seaweed above the tidal reach. As he dropped the brittle stick it squirmed. He'd never seen a stick come to life.

'Don't hurt it! It's an eel,' his father shouted. 'It's probably trying to reach the sea.' With the tip of his shoe he nudged it over damp sand. Once free of its crusty coat the eel thrust and slithered away in a backwash. 'In their lives eels make great journeys.'

As they walked, gulls squawked leaving the lace of their footprints on the damp sand only to rally on the sand behind them. From the west, clouds filled the sky moving across from the dark mainland.

'Why are you whistling that song, Papa?'

'Because I like it.'

'That much?'

'Si, like I like fishing, like I like gymnastics. Like I like your mother. Like I like being with you, it makes me feel happy. It's a safety valve.'

*'La donna e mobile  
me pui del vento.'*

His father sang loudly in a voice like a cracked bell.

'Please whistle Papa.'

They left the beach for a track among scrub covered dunes; Sergio heard the story of the humpback jester and his daughter Gilda. As he grappled with the drama they made their way back between the sea of Western Port and the shallows of Merri Creek.

They neared the tidal mouth of the creek. The hostel was some way up the steep wooded slope, when they heard a rumble followed by a fierce crack of thunder. A sudden shot of drops splattered on them.

*'Presto, presto! Sotto i cespugli.'*

They were close to running. They made for the trees. His father dived into a mantle of clematis. He followed not liking it. At their feet, they saw charcoal remains in a ring of burnt stones. It was like being in a teepee. The rain, however, didn't seep in, it poured in.

A drop of water hung off the tip of his father's nose.

'Who would have lit this fire?' his papa asked in a soft unnatural voice, made all the more mysterious by the situation they found themselves in. Sergio looked around wondering, looking up at the cone of dark green leaves that shook drops on him.

'Not me,' he said.

'The Aborigines.'

'Are they here now?'

'Maybe at night they come back for a drink and a dance.' The drip finally fell off his nose. 'Interesting, isn't it?'

Sergio wasn't sure. He was relieved to get away from the aboriginal shelter. They were soaked but the boy didn't care. He didn't feel cold, but he didn't feel dry either.

The storm now trailed mists of drizzle. All was drenched and peaceful. The deep grey of the trees and bush had turned black. There was a smell of refreshed life in the air. Sergio felt good. He felt, for the first time, he'd found a place he really liked even if he felt it didn't like him yet.

They dried off. Pietro cleaned the fish. Sergio went to the store to get butter.

'Don't buy *grasso*,' his mother said. 'Get butter.'

On his way back with the butter, he saw the roaming gang of older boys going about uncontrolled. Lots of kids milled round the intersection of rutted streets. Sergio squeezed in the squash, found himself in the centre. Near his feet, he saw a bucket with something wriggling in the water.

A big kid, with a jerk of his knife, sliced the eel's sleek head and peeled away its dark glistening skin. The raw pink and red flesh switched madly in his hand. He slit its belly flicking the guts and other runny bits over the smaller kids. Most screamed, running away. The older boys laughed and cheered. In a reckless impulse, Sergio gripped the big kid's bare arm and dug his teeth into his flesh above the wrist. Caught by surprise, the kid yelled and stared at the round imprint on his flesh filling with blood.

As the big kid's face changed from disbelief, to flinching pain; Sergio was all arms and legs as he ran for his life. He was ahead enough to be able to double back, hide out under one of the huts and

sneak back home unseen. He was surprised he still held the butter and that it hadn't melted. That evening they had fried fish.

He didn't leave the room for days for fear of being seen.

A few weeks later his father returned to take them away from Somers. It was the first time in nearly two years that they had left together since getting off the American ship. Bright and early, they were first on the bus with their suitcases. Sergio sat, fidgety with excitement, between the quiet expectation of his parents. They were going to Frankston to get the train for Melbourne. The bus had to wait for latecomers. While it shuddered with the action of its engine, Sergio stared out the window.

As Somers fell away in the distance and the scene became a flat shifting pastured land, he turned to look around the bus, and instantly, he knew he should have minded his own business. Startled, he tried to hide in his seat. Across the aisle, the big kid was showing him his fist and skinning him alive with looks of revenge. But the threatening antics meant nothing, a mere bluff against the buffer of his father.

## KORUMBURRA

*she won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where  
they're heading for-she'll only remember how, when they came here,  
she held out her hand bright with berries the first of the season and  
said Make a wish, make a wish*

Bruce Dawe

Through the fog I see fairyland. Green rolling hills dotted with tiny cows just like the birthday cake my mum made Ian on his ninth birthday. The lush grassy pastures of Gippsland sit waiting for us as we arrive at our new house, Korumburra Police Station and residence. It is a solid sandstone building surrounded by a huge yard full of blackberries, fruit trees, large bracken ferns, liverworts and mosses. There is a goat in the backyard. On the side of the house is a privet hedge shaded by a pine tree. This will be a secret place to hide and build cubbies.

Suddenly there are endless things to do like climbing trees, eating berries, chasing the goat, hiding in the damp shaded nooks listening to grown-ups gossip, learning to ride a horse. People are friendly. They visit all the time with fresh vegetables, bags of mushrooms, jugs of clotted cream, homemade pickles and jams. Everything is wonderful except for the smell coming from the butter factory.

On my very first day at the school, just behind our house, a hundred yards or so away, I meet Maree, a small muscly girl with holes in her cardigan and runners, no socks but a happy huge grin. She's hungry for a friend. After school she takes me home to an old weatherboard shack up the hill. It has a dirt floor in the kitchen. Her mother breastfeeds a baby, another brother milks a cow on the back verandah, two sisters are wrestling on the porch and a man, I think her father, snores in the bedroom. He was a coal miner or something but now only does odd jobs around the district. There are ten kids but five have grown up and gone. I'm very impressed with Maree. She is the first eight-year-old aunty that I've ever met who can do cartwheels.

'I know a beaut place to go on Saturdays'

'Where Maree?'

'You just wait. It's not that far. You'll love it.'

I am ecstatic with expectation and the joy at not being alone.

Saturday comes and we set off through the town towards the Strezlecki ranges blue in the distance. It takes all day but when we get back we have boxes of old shoes, bottles, clothes, broken gadgets. I hide it all behind my hedge and swear Maree to secrecy. In private we play dress-ups with our rich finds under the shady greenery enveloping my house.

Mum sees us from the laundry.

'Where did all this stuff come from?'

'Up the road...you know, near that farm.'

'Not the tip?' My mother is appalled. 'Give it to me at once. It's all filthy and smelly. You'll get terrible germs from a place like that, you should know that Helen. Never, ever go there again!'

I glance at Maree but she just looks confused.

'But why Mum? '

'It's a dirty place that's why. And why didn't you ask?'

'I forgot. '

'You better forget that place, my dear. '

Everything is handed over and we have to wash our hands twice. Maree says she had better go home.

I walk with her to our back fence.

'Can't understand it ... my mum loves us to bring stuff home. '

'Oh she's just a bit funny about sickness ... you know since Ian got hit.'

'Yeah ... I guess that's it. Better not go again?'

'No better not.'

Suddenly I wish I was Maree with baby brothers and sisters to chase, cows to milk on the back step, big sisters with lipstick and boyfriends, rooms full of junk and a kitchen with a floor you can dig in. And a mother who doesn't fuss.

Lots of kids in my class do not like Maree. They say she smells funny and wears odd things that are too big or small for her. But I like her. She can climb up doors with her arms and legs spread out like a spider and do backward somersaults and flips faster than anyone I've ever met. I can't even do a forward roll. She wiggles her stomach like she's a double-jointed monkey which makes my parents laugh. Besides Maree is nice to me, the first friend in a long time.

School is very formal. The teachers are strict and make us sit in silence with our hands behind our backs chanting tables, rhymes,

spelling rules and proverbs. Most of the infants have trouble with, 'Not failure but low aim is crime.' We copy huge slabs of text from the blackboard into exercise books, sketch nature study specimens on to blank pages and complete rows and rows of arithmetic addition and subtraction sums. We don't have ink yet but the older kids do and flick it at us when Sir is not around. Caning is common. I stare at the distant hills and long for playtime. In my playlunch box Mum puts surprises like chocolate crackles, melting moments or chocolate-coated teddy bear biscuits. I usually run home for lunch being so close.

I sit in my hard wooden desk and dream of escape.

'Go on Helen.'

It is my turn to read. My heart is beating so fast that I think I will faint. Sir is coming towards me. Sir is looking at me.

'I've lost my spot. '

'Have you just? Staring out the window is not acceptable in this school. It may have been in Dandenong, or Mildura or wherever else you have been but not here, is that clear?' The voice is cold and hard.

He is frowning at me and tapping his palm with the long blackboard ruler. A reddish blue vein is throbbing on his neck. Bang! The ruler misses my hand by half an inch. My desk vibrates with it and the shaking of my body.

The class go rigid, afraid to move. Sir is on the warpath.

'I was reading ahead,' I stammer.

'Page 67, paragraph three. Read.'

I begin, *'Whatever else can he want? he muttered to himself. He was only eight and had a lot of things to learn. Suddenly a sunbeam which had been shining on the wall for a long time reached Brighteye's cage and peeped in. The poor little bird spread his wings, fluttering round and round eagerly. I wonder... Then Jack stopped.'*

I look up and Sir is smiling kindly, approvingly at me. The class breathes again. They smile at me too. I am a useful person after all. Unlike Dandenong, they are pleased I have changed the mood of Sir, diverted his rage into acceptable control. I go on reading. The air is fine. Afterwards he only says,

'Thank you Helen. Keep with us next time.'

I never forget this passage in the grade three Victorian Readers that every kid across the state had to read from grade one to grade

eight each year from 1930 to the early 1960s. In the school yard the kids include me and Maree in their games.

Here in Korumburra I settle in quickly. I find out Sir can sometimes be nice. He gives me extra things to read and do. I read *The Secret Garden* to Maree after school behind the shrubs and the whole shaded hedge along the wall takes on an extra dimension of enchantment and wonder. Our secret password is Misselthwaite. We creep among the ferns and leaves concealed in an imaginary world of English greenery at the turn of the century.

One day a boy brings an enormous earthworm to school in a glass jar. All the other Gippsland kids have seen one but I haven't. Sir writes the Latin name *Phylum Annelida* on the blackboard and gives us a nature study lesson on the local environment of burrowed colonies of giant earthworms *Megascolides Australis*. I don't understand all of it but listen incredulously to how these worms can groan, gurgle, suck and are able to grow heads or tails if cut in half. I feel ill but a bit better when the boy lets me take it home for a couple of days. Mum even lets me keep it in my room. Strange that, I think. Nothing from the tip but a jar of oozing mudworm is fine.

But Dad is not happy. In this country town there is not much crime but he is busy licensing and testing drivers, registering motor vehicles, doing various court duties, collecting agricultural statistics, being the local truant officer and sheriff's bailiff, covering writs and summons from the County Court, keeping an eye on all the itinerant workers who drift in and out of the place during the peapicking and potato season. There are also things he does not talk about. More and more he sits in the dark staring into the fire. Dad misses the flat plains. The Mallee and its rolling wheatfields dotted by silos. Everyday trapped in the green hills is harder for him. He keeps a lot inside himself.

The jails along the other side of the police yard are sometimes full of swearing drunks but mostly they are empty so I play nearby. Mum has to provide food for the inmates. One day, a lady who has stabbed her husband is put in there awaiting trial. Mum brings her into the house and gives her a hot meal with us. She looks pretty, young and miserable. Another time an Aboriginal woman is brought in without shoes and Mum gives her a pair of her own. 'Too big.' She kicks them back at her proudly, and they fly up high in the air, one landing on the

roof. She does not want anyone's charity. My mother is hurt and tells me not to go near the cells, 'You never know what they may do.'

On Sundays my father bundles us in to the car and drives to the coast, to small towns like Inverloch or Wonthaggi. We return in the twilight mists feeling things are changing. It is getting colder and wetter. I hear my dad talking intimately, quietly to my mother. Ian is at last up on crutches. We fight a lot. I can tease him now he is up and about, taller than me. I grab hold of his thick hair and won't let go. He hits me. I punch him back. We kick and squeal falling to the floor wrestling, letting out months of unsaid frustration. For the first and last time Dad picks up a stick and almost belts us. This shocks us and we go off sulking, blaming each other.

I walk around my yard patting the horse which I cannot ride yet. His name is Tommy. He belongs to someone else but as our yard is so big he just stays down the back with the goat. One day he wanders into the police station when the door is left open and they can't get him out. He's very clever, my mum says. I can't tell. I stand behind him and he kicks me. Maree says I don't know how to handle him yet

I know I never will. It is too muddy to hide, too damp to dream. I sit under the rose trellis and read my special book

*'And delight reigned. They drew the chairs under the plum tree which was snow white with blossoms and musical with bees. It was like ...'*

'Nellie, Nellie.'

It is my father calling me. I hide. I know what he is going to say. At tea time he catches up with me, trapped hungry at the dinner table.

'Your mum and I have decided to move again. I've got a transfer to the city, a place called Kingsville, near Yarraville or Footscray. You know, the footy team in Melbourne?'

I look at my mother who is nodding with him.

I cannot speak, my throat is dry. I don't feel like eating anymore.

'There's no future here. Ian needs a good high school and ...'

'There is, there is a future,' I break in.

Mum sits down beside me and says soothingly, 'Your father and I are still checking it all out. Nothing's decided yet. We know you're happy here, honey, but look you'll make new friends in no time and you'll be able to see your cousins and ... do you know Grandma is moving to the city?'



'I hate the city,' I say angrily thinking of Dandenong. They turn away ignoring me about to burst with silent fury. Ian starts yapping about something to change the subject and I get up and run out of the kitchen slamming the backdoor as hard as I can.

I belong here in Korumburra in my own secret garden. *'Between the blossoming branches of canopy bits of blue sky looked down like wonderful eyes.'* I look up at the sky but it's dark and grey. Oh Misselthwaite, why can't you be real? Everything changes. Nothing ever lasts. Not even when you want it to.

## YARRAVILLE

The train on the opposite platform lumbered away slowly gathering speed. They were on time. They panted relieved, giving smiles to each other. Red in the face from hurrying, Sergio and Maria sat staring at Pietro, as he looked up and down the list of stations saying 'Iarraville'

'Yous want Yarraville?' a thin man croaked in a voice dragged out of a scraggy neck. His mouth held a cigarette.

*'Iarraville, stazione. Okay?'*

'Na, mate. Ya shudda got the train that's just left before. Wrong platform. Yous want number 7. Look,' he raised a burnished elbow, pointing to another list of names, 'Yarraville. Next train in ten minutes. Yous wait over there. Right?'

'Si, yes, Iarraville.'

'Yeah. Yarraville.'

'Tankyou. Tankyou,' Pietro said.

'No worries mate. Take it easy.' He linked a trolley piled with parcels to a truck and trundled off down the platform.

'What did he say?'

'Maria, he said we have to wait.'

'Wait?'

'Yes, the other side.'

'Aren't we on the right side?'

'Maria, you know what trains are like.'

Minutes later Sergio asked, 'Papacci, why do we have to wait?'

Pietro took the boy's hand. At a kiosk his father let him pick out lollies. Clear crackling bag. Empty lolly wraps crinkled. Chewing, Sergio train-watched. Dark red ones on wires with square faces and discs. Windows in pairs. He stared at the twirling ventilators on the roofs. Slowed. Never stopped.

'Is this one the right platform, Pietro?' Maria asked wanting to be sure in her uncertainty.

'Maria, look up there, at that board.'

'I don't understand?'

'See ... Iarraville ... how many stations before then. Let's count Sergio.' They counted names hung down a yellow board. Yarraville was sixth from Flinders Street.

Maria read the sign again eagerly. Her eyes jittery, vague in their new found eagerness. She was here and far away all at once. It was difficult for her to believe that after such a long time, she would never have to see the hostel grounds with their rows of laundry, or the semi-curved tin huts again. It was as if she'd suddenly woken while her mind was still dreaming. An accordion sang:

*Partivanno le rondini  
del mio paese freddo  
senze sole.*

Were they really going to a new place? For a brief moment she roused herself to ask what time it was, because the time on the face of the black clock under the platform roof hadn't moved. Moments later a uniformed man slotted a pole beneath the clock and the arms jerked to life. He'd switched the time.

'Mezzogiorno ... Close to midday Maria,' Pietro said almost absolutely sure, but he knew the day was Monday, the month was May, and the year 1952.

'How much further, Papa?' Sergio asked interested, watching the level stretches of land rising and falling in a flash vanishing to become a road over which he suddenly felt breathtakingly elevated while making his insides shrink with sensation. Station. He caught his face in the window, with its accumulated grimy smudges in the corners while the outside world ran through his head, materialised vanishing as it skimmed and slid alive and unchecked galloping landscape and old brick wall stretched forever before his eyes marsh flats curving river glistening quickly smoky concrete factories under trusses of bridges and dark tunnel and billboards Robur Tea advertisements and Station. Roads with black cars waiting at shut gates vastrusset brick wall white scrawl and billboards Pelaco White Crow Station. Swamps grassless trampled cattle yards strange unpleasant smells neighbourhoods with long narrow seedey backyards. Station. Sudden soaring sprawl of sawtooth roofs and dingy chimneys with clouds of smoke and the train slowed speed and stilled with a screeching jolt at the sixth station from Spencer Street.

[ YARRAVILLE ]

Reaching for the suitcases, Pietro stood up.

They waited for the bus, tired but not too tired to notice. From over the road, the written-on windows of a Milk Bar, a little place, looked back at them. 'Wait here. I'll only be a minute.' Pietro returned with a bottle of milk, butter, some bread, a tin of jam, a folded newspaper and a big cheerful smile.

'We have to have something to eat.' He didn't say he'd also needed to buy candles and kerosene.

'What are you giving him?' she asked surprised.

'Don't worry Maria. It's only a sweet.'

'What about his appetite? He eats like a bird. He can't feed on sugar.'

'It's a special day. Come on *fanciulla*, don't worry.' He handed her the milk and butter to hold. '*Meglio che carne di pecora?*' He winked. Distracted she smiled, trying to muster happy feelings. '*Maria, siamo tutti insieme.*' He always could make her feel better. 'Now, it's time for some *ginnastica*,' he said to the boy.

'*Capriole! Capriole* Papa!' They turned somersaults. 'And now for the '*salto mortale*.' Sergio spun and landed on his feet. His mother clapped. The white railway gates slammed with a shudder. A train pulled into the station going the way they'd come. A black motorbike hurtled by with a roar.

'Did you see that?' squealed the boy.

'Is it far Pietro?'

'No, we could walk.'

'Let's walk Papa. Do you want to walk Mamma?'

'If it isn't far,' Maria said happily.

It was like a leisurely stroll the first twenty minutes. The lawns and front gardens, the street with its self-possessed rows of amusingly strange weatherboards kept their attention. They had never seen lace verandas before.

Then in the outskirts, the houses and street went no further, like a boundary. Sergio pretended he was a motorbike, accelerating ahead as his parents followed. Maria hoped Pietro knew where they were because now there were no streets or houses but just a wide, almost featureless landscape of spiky vegetation. The motorbike came back. Greeting them, was a creek-gully and beyond a rising tract of flat wild

land without a single house. Pietro pulled them along confidently as he set off.

'It's not far now. Follow me,' he said, fighting the weight and bump of the suitcases as he pushed on.

Sergio looked to the last line of houses in the far distance, as his father led them down the bumpy-steepening track to the crooked creek.

'Pietro, where are we?' Maria asked, looking round, making an effort to make a happy smile because she was incapable of guessing where they were.

'Just out of Iarraville.'

'Maybe we should have waited for the bus?'

'It doesn't come this far anyway *fanciulla*,' he said, indicating back to the outskirts they'd just left, 'the bus stops at the end of that bridge and goes back to Iarraville.' He pointed and they looked across to the Francis Street Bridge over a threading Stony Creek. 'We have to go this way.'

Keeping close to each other, they walked through ground pocked with holes, and littered with piles of rubble, broken glass, rusty cans, old tyres, shreds of twisted tin, and heaps of other smouldering trash.

'Papa, what are those things?'

'Where?' Pietro asked feigning surprise, glad of the chance to have a break from the suitcase loading him down.

A putrid stench hit them like a fist.

'Pietro, *che puzza!*' Maria cried.

Teeming runnels of rummaging rats scurried over the rubbish.

'Where are we? Where are you taking us? The place is a *fogna*.'

It was too ugly. She felt her brief happiness harden.

'It's nothing. Come on.'

Eager to get away and afraid not to slip, Maria, holding Pietro's hand for balance, reluctantly crossed the creek where it dipped and tumbled over scummy-green rocks. She had no idea where they were going, where they were being taken. Again Sergio began to run ahead, but when his father yelled something about snakes, he quickly came back beside them.

'It's a sink-hole,' Pietro said.

'Too big to be a *foiba*,' Maria observed. 'It's not Istria.'

They passed the low side of a quarry. The back, a wall of boulders packed together with groutings of soil, rose out of a dark sheet of water. Sergio flicked a stone. It gushed a quick ring-rush and hurried back to what it was, a black mirror.

The track vanished. They were on a rise of an open field. A vast sky sang with the song of invisible birds. Three small figures, going through a maze of thistles, stones, weed and sparse grass. The indifference of the big and growing field made her apprehensive. Its strange desolation dredged her enthusiasm. Feeling unnerved and angry, she asked herself what exactly was life in Australia all about - the edge of the earth or extinction?

Pietro dragged them on easily. 'Another two steps,' he kept saying, 'just another two steps.'

'Don't make yourself tired,' Maria said being ignored. 'Your father's already carrying two bags. He won't be able to carry you too.'

Friskily, Sergio now moved with the curiosity of a pup. Using a withered thistle stem, he waged war, seeding thistleheads went flicking everywhere. Some hurtled, plunging into the surrounding clusters of undergrowth, others exploded in flurries of robins. Free and airborne, the down escaped in wild eddies.

'There it is, Maria!'

Maria looked blank, bewildered. She stood there a moment, looking ahead. There was only a big box-like thing. She looked back behind herself, wondering which was worse. Sergio looked and looked, seeing a dark wall of trees behind it. Pietro looked delighted. 'That's the bungalow!'

'Pietro, where's the nearest street?'

Poised on blocks above the grass and thistle was a grey-white fibro rectangle with a wooden door in the centre. It stood in the middle of nowhere, looking even stranger than Maria felt. They waited as Pietro finally unbolted the door with a new brass key. First the suitcases. There were no front steps. He helped them up like they were boarding a boat. Her hand went out for something to hold. In the effort, Maria's heart didn't sink. It had already sunk.

Pietro pushed the new table away from the new cabinet. On the table stood a new brass primus. Sergio squeezed between the wall-studs crying out, 'I can see through the house.' Opening a back louvre window, he asked,

'What's that?'

'The toilet,' Pietro answered as Maria cut the bread. 'Sergio, come and sit at the table.'

Reaching for the butter and jam, he heard his father finally ask, 'What do you think Maria?'

She just looked back at him. What could she say after all her surviving on hope. That she found her situation difficult to accept because of the finality with which it had come. That suddenly things seemed worse than she could have imagined. That all the hoping, waiting for a place of their own in the face of the unknown had come to this. How, no more than an hour ago, all the fighting within herself and with him had all seemed to have some reason. It had kept her together. It had got her here. Here? To this box in the wilderness. She looked at the three rooms, bare floorboards, no walls, no doors, each room with its window of frosted glass, the corrugated fibro roof. She saw the double bed through the uprights of the walls. No water. No power. She had come all this way to sit in a vulnerable shell with a few sticks of furniture in the middle of nowhere. She resisted the welling in her eyes, by fighting down a ball of bread, butter and jam.

'Maria, what's the matter?' Pietro lay a big warm hand over hers. 'You're not crying?'

Again she fought the swimming in her eyes.

'I'm touched, moved because ...' As she felt the warm pressure of his hand over hers, she understood that for him, they had made a start no matter how humble. 'because I'm ... happy. I'm being stupid. I'm so happy.'

He knew she was not, so he had to be for both of them.

'So, which room's going to be the kitchen?' he asked.

She made a vague move of the head, looking through the bungalow at the new furniture. She got up and stepped about the rooms. He'd let her decide, let her put things into shape.

'I think that one,' she answered staring beyond them.

'Sergio, see what I've got you,' Pietro got up and reached behind the cabinet. His son jumped off a skew brace he was monkey-climbing to the roof.

'What's that Papa?'

'A bicycle wheel.'

'Where's the rest?'

'It was sold to buy a motorbike.'

'See what I've put on it for you?'

Wire had been shaped to a fork-handle and nutted to each axle end.

'Hold this and pretend you're the motor.'

'Can we pump the tyre?'

'No valve, besides too many prickles outside, you'd get a flat.'

Pietro held the bike wheel up, Sergio spun it. The rim wobbled, spokes flickered.

'Can I take it outside?' That afternoon, for the first time he could remember, Sergio ran wild on his own. With bursts of air about his ears, he criss-crossed the flat-ragged paddock. The wheel wavered and jumped ahead of him. It raced, it reached, it leaned. The wire-handle jarring excitedly in his hand. While he was doing this, his father told Maria he was going to fill the bottles with water to drink. She watched Pietro walk off briskly to the tap about 200 metres away. Sergio changed directions until he stopped.

It was quiet. Maria looked at the walnut veneer dressing table. She saw herself in the tiny-scalloped round mirror and turned away, not wanting to think, only wanting to forget. She found the newspaper on the laminex table. She didn't know what to make of the words, **'I WON'T RESIGN' Burton to Calwell**. So she read the date, 19 May 1952. Slowly, she curiously glanced at the pictures. On the same page two men were jumping high for an oval ball above their heads. Couples were getting married, she looked admiringly at the shoe advertisements, and blankly at the tiered photos of the horse races, *Little Sport*, but only for a moment. She leafed and left them because they had no meaning. A scrabbling, ruffling noise broke the silence. She remembered the ratholes and rummaging lines of rats. She looked up to see birds trying to enter under the daylight ripples of the ill-fitting roof. Taking the paper, she stood on the table. Urgently she scrunched the pages into balls, stuffing the bright gaps.

Sergio had stopped dead in his tracks, staring at a pitted jawbone seamed with rot. It lay on a heap of old bones. Its ridge of teeth had gaps filled with spider webs. A creeping terror scratched and crawled up his backbone. A fear tingled his scalp. He kicked at the heap of bones to lessen their dread. As he raced away he knew the bones had already floated together behind him, white and cold and sharp. It was



reaching fear that wouldn't let him get away, no matter how fast he went.

He screamed and ran. As he got near the bungalow his father appeared, holding bottles of water. Maria hearing the scream, had jumped off the table and rushed to the door, throwing it open to see Sergio make a lunge at his father like he wanted to climb his shoulders. He blubbered that a skeleton was breathing down his neck. Bones were chasing him! His father laughed. They went to find these lively bones but instead found the abandoned bike wheel.

Darkness came inside. Sergio saw his mother light candles. He watched as shadows wavered. He saw his parents look at the black sky from out a louvre window, hearing them say the sky was going in another direction. He heard the blossoming croak of bullfrogs fill the night. He heard his mother and father go on and on in search of their past after they had gone to bed. With drawn legs, he heard his father say how he missed a good coffee, gymnastics with friends in Piazza Braida. Later, after Sergio had stretched his legs, his mother told him, a story about when she had been a scared little girl.

'It was dark, just like this. I ran inside saying, Mamma, Mamma come and see what this is. What's the matter now, your nonna growled. It's got big bulging eyes, I said.'

As Maria remembered she became the young girl because for the moment she'd forgotten where she was.

'Nonna looked into the grass. She lifted a piece of wood above her head, That's a big ugly toad she said. The unblinking toad's eyes seemed to say, *Pieta, pieta*. Nonna then lowered the piece of wood. She said, I won't kill it, I'll wait to see if he turns into a prince. Just like your bones today. Once they were probably a beautiful animal.'

Sergio snuffed the candles. As they lay snug in bed, Maria told herself she was glad they were together, while her insides told her she was apprehensive. Pietro stretched and yawned, whispered,

*Addio amici e famiglia  
Che non vedero mai piu.  
Saluto i ricordi della  
Mia gioventu*

After they stopped talking, Sergio heard along with his parents' breathing that drifted warmly up to nowhere, the ponderous revelling of bullfrogs in the nearby ponds. He tried to think of a beautiful animal but all he thought of were ashen bones. That night the bed went warm and then cold again.

## KINGSVILLE, MELBOURNE

*'Highway, by highway, the remorseless cars  
Strangle the city, put it out of its pain'*

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

'I don't like this place. It's ugly and it pongs. There's only houses and shops. And the road's too busy to play on.'

'What about the smell of the butter factory at home?'

'I'm not going to that great big double-storey school.'

There should have been something special about arriving in the city that year.

It is 1956 and the Olympic games are soon to be on. Everything is bigger, busier and different. Korumburra seems a long way away. Across the smoke-stained sky of a winter afternoon, I hear the hum of urban industry. There is no sound like it.

We live in an old weatherboard next to a service station, opposite a greengrocer's and a butcher's. Somerville Road, Kingsville is choking with fumes and traffic. Dad's police station is down the back of our dwelling and he is busy with calls and callers wanting information or help. An old chookpen and the jail stand side by side, empty out the back. I stare through the chook wire, the walls of my playhouse, and feel trapped.

Dad is in charge of a huge area, 12 square miles or 30 square kilometres. The boundaries stretch from Williamstown Road in the east to Sunshine Road in the north and Kororoit Creek Road in the South. There are just three men stationed here. Dad is a senior constable in charge of two first constables. Their work is very different to Korumburra. There's more crime for a start, like house-breakings and petty thieving and always domestic complaints. Dad seems to spend most of his day doing paper work - there's no office staff. We hear all about it every time he comes inside for a quick cuppa or chat with Mum. He is always serving summonses and executing warrants, collecting traffic fines, handling hectic traffic intersections, supervising too many school crossings, filling out motor registration files and enquiries, issuing fishing, explosive licenses and and and ... the list goes on and on.

One day I interrupt his conversation.

'Why did you become a cop, Dad?'

Dad scowls at me. He hates police being called cops and for some reason gets cut if I call his office a copshop. Says it's rude. Guess he takes enough flack from others without his own daughter starting up.

They have no police cars. The constables use their own private vehicles and are paid one shilling (one bob) a mile! The constant arrival of migrants looking for jobs in the area create more work. The district is expanding too quickly. A migrant hostel, in Millers Road Brooklyn, adds to the workload. The many factories and the large abattoirs of Smorgans, Borthwicks and Gilbertsons create more enquiries. And awful smells, I continually tell everyone.

At Kingsville Primary, No 3988, a large red brick building waiting for the young, I am put in grade three. I miss my backyard, my cubby, my green rolling hills and Maree. I am determined to be miserable.

'Come on, I'll walk with you. It won't be too bad. Your father needed a change and now Ian is up on his feet he needs friends and a good school. He'll start at the new one in Spotswood, Footscray High. Now, now Miss Sulky Puss, we're still all together and that's what really counts.'

Mum and me walk up the street past the shops. The greengrocer is a Mr Catalano, a dark man who can't speak much English. Every morning, he carefully polishes and arranges his fruit, particularly the jonathons and Granny Smiths, in crisp clean rows, spreads out banana hands in layers, rearranges firm navels and valencias with their bright orange faces bursting, next to big black purple grapes all frosty-looking. Above, from the ceiling, hang coloured streamers and around the walls soft drink bottles of every flavour; red raspberry, lime green, brown cola, ginger beer, lemon yellow, my favourite, creamy soda, my worst, black sarsparilla, orange, red raspberry, lime green, brown ... oranges and lemons, oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clemens, I start chanting the rhyme sung at every kids' party; chop, chop, chop the last man's head off, off, off, off off, that's how I feel right now going to a new school ... Next door is the fish and chip shop run by a Greek called Nick. On his walls there's Coke pictures and Chiko rolls and a big photo of a girl in a low cut blouse leaning on a long smooth limousine and there's a pinball machine in the corner. Already Ian has had free chips from Nick. You learn a lot in two days in the city. We pass a delicatessen with

strange cheeses and red sausages hanging above the counter. I smell fried onions in the air and it is only quarter to nine in the morning.

And then I enter the other world of predictable things – the State School. No-one talks to me at first. I sit anxious, afraid of failure. Everything is unfamiliar even the spelling but the teacher, a Mr Heffernan, is kind and handsome. Looks a bit like a movie star. He gives me a silver star for my writing and a pat on the head, all before playtime. I relax. At half past ten the bell sounds and we are sent out in the huge asphalt yard to play. I'm lost. Feel sick. Don't know my way out of this big building. Under some stairs, in a cramped little room like a broom cupboard, there's a stern old grey-haired lady with a scaly neck like a lizard teaching English to dark-haired kids. Watching their frightened bewildered faces, makes me less tense. At least I know what she is saying and have a nice young teacher who seems easy to please.

The big noisy yard is full of children running and playing ball, skippy and chasey. I stand apart with that old fear of loneliness creeping up. Suddenly, a girl from my grade comes up to me with a warm grin. She has big hazel eyes, brown hair in long plaits like me but looped up by ribbons. She takes me by hand to the mother's stall and gives me threepence for a toffee.

'I'm Gunta from Latvia.'

'I'm Helen from Korumburra.'

She shows me around and then we play catch with a ball. On the way home I see she lives just around the corner. I concede privately things could be worse but on entering the kitchen put on my very best downcast expression. Mum hugs me and offers me some barley broth which I absorb like a cat warming in front of a fire.

The next Saturday, Gunta and I walk to the Sun picture theatre in Yarraville for the afternoon flicks. I can't believe there are two cinemas in walking distance and four more in Footscray just a bus ride away. The Sun and St George are situated on either side of the Yarraville railway station, about a mile from where I live. It's a long walk but I don't notice. I am keyed up to see how city kids behave by themselves. It's the first time Mum has let me go off on my own to the pictures.

Yarraville is an old suburb with tiny streets and cramped shops selling remnants and oddments. Gunta loves the movies even when

they are about pirates and cowboys. After the newsreel, there is a serial with a vile villain chasing a distressed maiden along a railway track. It looks like the train gets her and all the kids are booing and stamping their feet. My heart is pounding as she goes under the wheels.

'Don't worry,' shouts Gunta licking her black Choochoo bar, 'she'll be okay next week.'

We have smuggled in greasy potato fritters covered in salt and vinegar in our red vinyl bucketbags. At interval, there is live entertainment, like a clown or local tap dancers, and even a magician to keep the kids entertained. Lucky dips and prizes of cupie dolls are given away. This is fun. Whenever there is talking in the film no-one listens but as soon as the chase or the fight or there's kisses the theatre comes alive with whistles, shouts or applause.

'You city kids got no manners,' I say to Gunta.

She ignores me, too wrapped up in the story. I get my Dixie all over my new fuzzy wuzzy pink bolero and my fingers are sticky from chips and icecream. On the way home, we fantasise about becoming movie stars in Hollywood. Gunta sweeps her hair over her eyes and wobbles like Marilyn Monroe. We chew Fantales and read the bios of all the stars memorising lives which we dream about ... Oh to be rich and famous and beautiful with tall dark handsome men who will shower us with kisses, wealth and status.

Gunta lives right next to Clare Street Kindergarten. Her house is a small, white pretty weatherboard. Inside there are ornaments and coloured paintings of angelic children surrounded by flowers and cute animals in pastel shades. Her mother is a friendly woman who gushes with a strong accent when she speaks.

'You Gunta's new friend? Helen? Is it? Come in and sit. I get you drink? Yes? Lemonade? Milky coffee? What you want? You sit with me, we talk unt laugh, yes ... very good.'

Out the back of her house is a little bungalow with boarders in it. They too are New Australians. Gunta's parents lived there when they first came to the country, before the weatherboard was built. Behind her place is a dirty polluted creek running through miles of thistle paddocks where a few new houses have been built on newly made roads etching their way through the barren wilderness. The water is murky grey and oily. I do not meet Gunta's father. He is asleep after long shiftwork in the ICI chemical plant.

On the way home I think of green rolling hills and Maree, so far away from the greyness and the smog. I feel sad. Leaving an afternoon matinee always gives me a headache. The stark bright light of the day unsettles me and always makes me depressed even if it's a beaut movie; the end of the imaginary world heightens some sense of loss.

One Saturday afternoon my family walk up Geelong Road to the Western oval to watch the Bulldogs play. One of Dad's duties is attending sporting fixtures like the footy or races. Footscray is a good team. They won the premiership in 1954. Everyone is excited, shouting, 'Carn the dogs!' Dad buys us all hot dogs and we jostle through the crowd to get nearer the fence. This isn't like a Gippsland game. This is serious. There are so many people. Gunta is not here. She prefers Hollywood.

'Holding the man! Holding the bloody man!'

'You want your eyes tested you mongrel!'

'Shut your face you bastard. Watch the bloody game'

'It's a mark, a mark by Peter Box. You bewdy Boxie!'

'Get into' em demons. Cover Whitten for God's sake. You silly bugger. Kick it. Kick it!'

I look at Mum and Dad but they don't seem to hear the language. Eyes are glued to the game and my father has that look like when his horse is leading the field down the straight. Ian is rapt too. All absorption and intensity.

'Chewy on ya boot. Chewy on ya boot!' he shouts at the Demon's full forward.

I glance around: there's a young man sticking his tongue in his girlfriend's mouth; there's an old lady spitting popcorn everytime she shouts; there's a big grade six kid from my school selling hot doughnuts; there's red-faced men guzzling beer; there's tough teenagers smoking by the toilets; there's women in the grandstand knitting red white and blue woollen scarves; there's more people here than I have ever seen together in all my life. And the man in front has four warts on his enormous nose.

Melbourne wins. It ends up their year. Silently, the Scraggers stream home, elation is quashed. It is odd how quickly everyone's mood has changed. In the cold descending foggy evening, depression

is settling in. We trudge to our house sombrely, re-entering this grey world of chimney and smells.

But a fortnight later we go again . My mother starts knitting footy hats with pompoms. Pompoms. There is a craze for these little woollen balls on everything – hats, jumpers, cardigan ties. In craft at school, we learn how to make them. *The Women's Weekly* has diagrams too. One girl at school starts selling them for pocket money.

Ian is moving better now. He wears a Footscray jumper with his mates when having a kick around the yard. We begin to look forward to these matches on the 'home' ground every two weeks. Grudgingly, I finally admit the V.F.L. has four new fans. Yes, we are becoming Bulldogs.

That November the place comes alive with Olympic Games fever. An influx of overseas visitors swell the capital and adds to the cosmopolitan air of the place. To a girl nearly nine, it's all magic; neon lights flashing, Olympic rings and symbols everywhere, foreign visitors from exotic countries such as Formosa, Bulgaria, Brazil, Bermuda, Burma, Luxembourg ... And then comes the introduction of something that changes everything; the way we see others, the way we see ourselves and the way we spend our time. Television.

Dad drives us down Williamstown Road to the Massey car showrooms to watch an AMV TV in the window. A large crowd are already there on the pavement watching the events on the small screen , the opening ceremony of the XVITH Olympiad. Over 100,000 people are crammed into the MCG and 67 countries are competing. A fat man in front is blocking my view. I push between the adults to get a better look at the black and white blurry screen. After the Duke of Edinburgh speaks, sixteen year old Ron Clarke runs in carrying the Olympic flame. A girl in front of me steps on my toe pushing forward to see. A choir of 1200 voices sing some sort of operatic song which I find out in the Sun newspaper is the Olympic hymn and the Halleluiahs Chorus. A man, next to my dad, starts sneezing over everyone. John Landy, the mile runner, delivers the oath and the huge stadium rings to the deafening applause of spectators. Standing on the footpath, this small crowd huddled together, all clap too and then smile at each other as though we're friends. We drive home in silent amazement, not so much at the Olympics but at that little electric box up the road in the shop window.



Well, that's what I want to remember even though it didn't happen like that except on newsreels and in newspapers. On that first day, Dad had to work directing the traffic at the Geelong Road intersection as Ron Clarke with the torch ran by. The first time we watch the AMV in the Massey showroom it is the fourth Olympic day, the 26th November and we see bits of weightlifting, the press and the snatch, with a lot of ads in between for Remington shavers and Pelaco shirts and Phillip Morris cigarettes, then some qualifying hockey matches between India defeating Afghanistan 14-0 and a few more ads, see parts of the qualifying basketball matches including the USA defeating the Phillipines, 121-53, and a few more ads which we love more than the matches and someone does step on my toes and there is a man sneezing over everybody and we do drive home in silent amazement at that little box in the shop window.

So, this is what happened. But the details are blurry ... I do not know what day it was really. Books say those events took place on the fourth day and that's maybe when we watched TV. I don't really remember what sport I saw or the results; only lots of people competing and lots of ads interspersed with the Games and people shoving and pushing on the footpath to see and a person who stood on my toe and a sneezing man and yes, rapture at that little black and white box in the store front display.

At school we collect pictures for morning talk. In the Sun News Pictorial, giant headlines greet us every morning: **Our Golden Girl** or: **Swimming in Gold**. Betty Cuthbert, Murray Rose, Dawn Fraser, Lorraine Crapp and Jon Hendricks become national heroes. The Melbourne Olympics are called 'the friendly games' and it is Australia's best effort, with thirty-five medals. We prattle it by heart. Australia comes in third behind the USA and the USSR. We skip the pages about the Cold War because we do not understand or are not interested and yet we know that out there, somewhere, beyond Melbourne, across the seas, there is a cold feeling between Russia and America, 'they' are the bad left Reds, the East, and we belong to the good right, the West. Yes, Australia is part of the goodies team, we are swollen with national Olympic pride and all the kids are in training for the great bright future of belonging on the right side.

We love America – the USA. It is goodbye to the wireless; to *Hop Harrigan*, *Larry Kent*, *Private Eye*, *Life with Dexter*, *Caltex Theatre*,

*Jack Davey and the Argonauts.* We watch with envy as antennas start appearing across the neighbourhood. Over the road, then across the street, but we have to wait. All the kids nag to get one. Gunta wants to be a TV star.

'Annie Oakley's on after tea, Mum. Please can I go? All the kids will be talking about it tomorrow?'

'I thought we were going to have a game of cards by the fire.'

'We can do that anytime. Besides *Rin Tin Tin* is on.'

Television alters everything. Cinemas start to lose business and in a few years, the Sun and St George are closed to become a Greek entertainment community hall and a dance studio. Reading stops. Homework, like conversation, is fitted in between the ads. After tea, Ian and I run to other houses as soon as we can.

Our family have been in the city for nearly a year when I hear my dad talking about shifting again. But it is good news. We are to stay in the neighbourhood and even better we are to have a new double-storey! A brick house like rich kids in stories by English authors with names like Phillip James and Cecilia-Anne. My mother is overjoyed. My father can't believe his luck. The Police Department are going to build a new red brick police station and residence along Geelong Road about a half a mile from where we live. Pretty close to the footy oval too! We will have stairs: stairs to climb and stairs to slide down. I will have an upstairs bedroom with a view over the citybound traffic and real venetian blinds to open and shut like wealthy people in their triple-fronted, cream brick veneers. Dad will be in charge of several more men as the area is becoming so busy. Around West Footscray, houses are shooting up everywhere. Migrants have come where land is cheap and work is plentiful. A new house. A double-storey. But the best thing, the unbelievable thing, I will not have to change schools or friends.

'It will be great for you, Helen,' says Gunta, genuinely pleased for me. We play sevens against the back wall trying to break the record. She is faster than me and more physically fit, but I can catch a ball well and present the sort of competitive rivalry required for such a game. We duck and dart throwing the ball under our legs, clapping twice then three times before catching it, inventing all sorts of intricate procedures to complicate seven basic actions.

'And for you too Gunta. You'll have to come over and besides you're the first invited to my birthday party in the new house.' I have made a list of fifteen names already! There's Hanna from Holland, Bernadette from Ceylon, Olga from Germany, Patricia from England, Peta from around the corner, Margaret from Rutherglen and the desk behind me ...

Gunta stops the game and smiles at me warmly as though thinking of something for the first time. I grin at her. My best friend. And then we laugh and resume playing, neither of us interested now in winning.

I can't believe I can plan so far ahead with certainty. And I have a whole group of interesting new friends dying to come to my birthday. What will it be like? At Hanna's, the Dutch girl's party, it is so different. Not a sausage roll or cupcake in sight! We have cheeses I have never seen, let alone tasted before; large slices of watermelon, cantaloups and pineapples; everyone is given cherries to hang on their ears and in everyone's bowl there are all kinds of different nuts and no-one misses the sabs and sauce, the fairy bread, the cream sponge or the cordial. Bernadette, the class clown, chases everybody with blown-up balloons and scissors while we scream with fear and delight.

Gunta and I squeal and shriek with expectation about the parties to come, spinning around in circles, holding hands so that our long brown hair and full skirts fly out behind us; two girls nearly ten on the verge of another adventure.

Yes, I'm starting to like Melbourne after all. One day in Myers, I suddenly realise this when Mum takes me into the lighting department and I'm mesmerised by the beauty of glass chandeliers, rainbow crystal droplets and the countless splendid coloured lights hanging from a never-ending ceiling. A sequined sky in the biggest department store in the southern hemisphere, so they say, but to me the most magical place in the whole world. That is, until one night Dad takes us into D24, Melbourne Police Headquarters, in Russell Street, the tallest building in Victoria. There are no other skyscrapers. Only us on top of the world with that wonderful sky. The city lights beam across the evening heavens twinkling like fairyland, a fantasy realm, not real, but now just right for me with a thousand, no, a million people and girls in homes like mine waiting for their lives to

glow with brightness. I feel electric. Want to be switched on with power that illuminates the universe. For the first time in a long time I am excited about shifting and the future. Can't wait. Yet, I don't tell anyone that I am happy. Don't want to mozz myself, in case it slips away like the last days of the summer holidays. Our old weatherboard with the police office out the back and me being lonely is history. Never be gloomy again. I wish.

## SCHOOL AT SEVEN

*'Signorina Macalei,  
dove sono i Pirennei?  
Professore non lo so,  
lo dicca lei ...'*

As Sergio had on many mornings, he listened from his snug bed to his mother sing and hum the same medley of songs he now knew by heart as she moved about the bare bungalow kitchen. They were mostly snippets of lyrics she had heard in her youth. He enjoyed following the lilt or cadence of her tunes in his head, trying to guess what she would sing next. Most mornings he had liked waking to this familiar, informal little ritual.

*Ridi pagliaccio  
ridi per me ...*

She hummed the rest. Although she sang, today it was not the same. She was ironing. There was an edge, a disarming urgency about her and he was aware of the harsh noises she was making in between those usually soothing songs. As he lay in the dwindling warmth of the bed, he sensed that things were differently the same, and when she called him from the kitchen he went with reluctance. He had coffee and bread without a word.

'No more stones at the rats,' he heard her say as he sugared his coffee.

The sourness he felt spoke for itself. She had him wash in cold water which he hated. She made him put on a pair of shorts, a white top, socks and hard black shiny shoes. He also put on a new shirt. She made him comb out the wildness in his hair.

He followed her solemnly from the bungalow on a beaten track, past the frames of houses, to a dirt road that went to a row of shops, but they didn't go to the shop; they went up Somerville Road. Near the Stony Creek Bridge, a small dog went for them, kept yip-yapping at their heels as they went up the road. All the time Sergio hoped they would turn back.

Maria took him to a huge red brick building. They entered through a wide door into a roomy and cool space with a smell he had never known before. The floor and walls, gleaming and smooth like the pillars going up to the roof.

In a spacious office with carpet, Sergio sat on the hump of a leather chair and waited while his mother and a man with white hair tried to talk to each other. The man sat behind a big desk. Big windows with curtains broke the light in half. The room had the clogged air of office routine. The timid boy thought the woman in a picture wearing a yellow dress, sash and crown, was staring right down on him, so he turned to watch a big clock on a wall pass the time away slowly. He knew they were talking about him because the man kept looking at him over his thick glasses with a certain gravity as he wrote with a fountain-pen. He saw them stand. There was nothing left to say, so they smiled politely to each other, his mother with a nervous condescension. She turned to her son.

*'Adesso devi stare a scuola.'*

*'Non voglio stare qui?'* the boy pleaded.

*'No, non puio vegnire con me.'*

'Don't you worry Mrs Kerne. He's a big lad now. He's seven. He'll get used to school. We'll make him like us.' The man left his desk to join them at the door to his office, 'You leave now. We don't want a big boy like him crying.' Patronisingly, he showed Maria to the entrance indicating it would be a mistake for her not to go away immediately.

When she left, Sergio felt abandoned but too scared to cry out or run after his mother. The white-haired man tapped him on the shoulder, his face expressionless, looming and unknown. Sergio followed him up a staircase and down a corridor, along the walls were pegged layers of bags and satchels. Through the walls and glass partitions, he heard broken chanting, singing, talking and scuffling, all drifting up like dust through the enforced quiet of this different world.

They stopped at a door with glass panels. From the open door of the room, he saw many small faces and went numb. The room was filled with kids.

*'A new one Miss Cato. No English. Name's Sarge or something.'*

*'Hello S ... arge.'* She looked baffled at the principal who shrugged his shoulders and went away. The young, pretty woman took Sergio's hands and led him into the room. A lot of eyes watched and followed. The new arrival was taken across to the middle of the platform. The teacher sat on a chair, he, all new, stood next to her.

Looking down, he got a skin prickling charge from the curious collection of faces looking up. She put a hand around his waist and spoke softly to the class. The air was full of her nice smell. Short smooth hair. She had a kind face. He wanted to stay near the warmth of the young teacher. But she gave him a soft smile, and sat him on the mat among the others. Then she went on reading from a book which to his wonder had the pages turned by a fitful, wizened nutcracker faced glove-puppet. It parroted to him but he didn't understand the words, yet its antics made him forget where he was and why he was there as he joined the others in outbreaks of laughter.

So many things were done and he did them because all the other kids did the same, but he didn't know why. After a bell he was outside. There were masses of jaunty youngsters penned in the yard, twittering, twinkling, skipping and romping. He was amazed to see so many together in one place. Some asked him to talk, then to say his name and then they laughed. Knowing no better he laughed at himself too. A school yard jester. He wanted to be inconspicuous but he couldn't keep away from their awareness. Soon he got tired of it all. All he began to think about was how long would it be before they'd let him run home? How long was he going to be kept in this place? But they wouldn't let him go. The bell went and he found himself in line with the rest. Filing back inside, he felt more lost than when he'd got there.

He watched and listened as the grade had to sing in chorus as some kids acted how a family of goats was able to outwit a troll. He could only smile at the boy next to him. A dumpling. His new friend had fair hair that went straight into his blue eyes. And his freckles went straight over the rest of his face. Raymond had big teeth, a runny nose and bleedy-warts on his knuckles which he constantly scratched.

Raymond shared his pencils. They folded paper, opened it out and wrote letters along the folds. They were given some brown paper and a smudged box of broken crayons. With a compass, Sergio made a circle, inside he inscribed an impressive flower. Raymond wasn't impressed. He just drew elephants. Sergio coloured the geometric leaves red and yellow until he made a mess of the whole thing. Then Raymond laughed and slipped something in his own mouth. He snuck Sergio a caramel which he unwrapped and put in his mouth

too. The young teacher never let the new boy finish the lolly. She tried to make Sergio spit it on some paper, but he didn't want to. She took possession of it by hooking it out of his mouth with her finger. She wasn't happy. Sergio wasn't happy either.

'They were his Miss,' Raymond pointed to Sergio.

'Spit yours out too Raymond, ' she said. 'See me at afternoon play.'

'But Miss ... ' As she turned away Raymond frowned and socked Sergio hard on the arm. Sergio couldn't understand Raymond's misplaced friendship. 'Snitch, just wait, I'll dob you good and proper.'

After school, he saw Raymond out in the street but Raymond turned and ran suddenly howling for his life all the way down Charlotte Street to the creek. A dog howled in sympathy.

A week later, Sergio thought he'd learnt enough and couldn't understand why he had to go back. Why he was made to get up early and wash. He couldn't understand why his mother wanted to punish him by sending him to school. But again, and again at seven, after ironing his clothes, she made him get out of bed. He fought not to go until his insides and resentment were worn and pressed to a kind of miserable meekness from having to do as he was told.

A few days after, Maria told him she wasn't marching him to school anymore. He was immediately devoured by terror, felt unprotected, trying not to think of the preying dog lurking for him. She handed him his leather bag, which he took, half-heartedly thinking to himself that going to school was easier expected than done. He'd tried to reach the Somerville Road bridge a few times but retreated home beaten. Each time Maria would give him a good whack before taking him herself. Going to school was a double dilemma. Things didn't get any better when his mother saw he was growing warts. She decided he didn't wash enough.

He came to the end of the track where it dropped and forked. Now he had to make a choice. One track forked towards the Somerville Road bridge and into the teeth of troll-trouble. The other ran into a shortcut with another drawback: Stony Creek. He chose a narrow part of the creek, one with a clutch of scabby and alga-green rocks he could go tripping over. Then he waited a bit for his nerve. It didn't come. He fell in and walked across. With an incredulous heart hammering



in his ears he felt anxiously safe. This was more fun than crossing the bridge. The wet socks would dry. He'd duped the dog! He'd tricked the troll! He couldn't believe it had been so easy!

Soon after, in the mornings, he and two other kids were taken out of their grade. They went to a tiny room under a staircase. A light in a conical shade hung from the long chain. Inside, was the slope of understairs. No window, just smooth cream walls, a wooden chair and a small desk. In a corner, in a doorless glory-hole, stood an array of brooms and mops. Here, they sat cross-legged on a cold floor. This teacher looked too big and grim for the cupboard. He didn't know why he had to be there. He didn't like it. He especially didn't like what she made them do. So his mind glided elsewhere, over her shoes, over her crossed ankles, up the sheen of her thick brown stockings, to her joined knees, the edge of her skirt, the tight shiny-belt on her waist, her long fingernails, her blue eyes framed in spectacles, her short white hair, her stern-faded face, and the quiver of her neck as she spoke stiffly, holding up cards, forever holding up cards as they followed chanting: 'a' is the sound in 'cat', 'mat', 'sat', 'that', 'hat'. While he pretended to repeat the mantra, he went over the outline of her prim-pinched mouth.

'You,' she stabbed a sharp finger at him, putting a pin into his dreaming, leaving his face looking stupid. Then the dreaded card went up. 'Put this letter into a word.' He gave her a look which he hoped was thoughtful, but when he looked at the card, his mind went blank and his eyes imbecilic.

His lips moved, 'Agggar.' She tried a genial smile, trying to show effortless tolerance, but her mouth was too small while her blue eyes widened until they were almost as round as the rims of her shiny spectacles. She got him to repeat.

'Agggar.'

'What?' she whispered.

'Arrrg,' he eagerly changed it, he didn't want to be problematic, he wanted to get it right and have her point to someone else.

'Arrrg?' she said, and from the stunned look on her face, he knew he hadn't got it right. 'Arrrg?' she repeated, in her bewilderment trying to work out if the kid at her feet was a real numbskull or if he was just throwing chalk in her eyes. She asked the others if they knew where he came from. They innocently shook their heads

'Sergio. Is that Italian?' she asked. 'I-tal-ian?'

He nodded, to say it was, glad she didn't ask him what it meant.

It turned cold and wet. He still went to special classes after the other kids had finished, and he soon got treated as the odd kid out. At lunch he was laughed at because he always had the same thick slabs of bread. The other kids all dispersed because salami didn't have a name, only a bad smell.

One lunch time, in an unusually friendly gesture, Raymond took him down the Somerville Road shops, and shared not only his warts but also something Sergio had never eaten before, fish and chips. After that he threw his brown lunch bag with the funny food in the creek on his way to school. He quickly became ashamed of his name which no-one had heard of and which no-one could say properly. In class, he went through torment when 'Sergio' was called out, because it was so different and because it exposed his difference. It got so that he could never feel at ease, like he always had something to fear. The difference persisted.

All night it poured. In the grey break of the rainy morning everything was soggy and puddled or pooled. A startled flock of starlings went distending and contracting into a feathered cloud. Mud quickly burdened his drenched shoes. As he slithered to the creek, he couldn't believe it wasn't ankle-deep. Overnight it had erupted, flaring to twice its size. It was in full rush, scouring, dragging, grabbing and tugging at anything that was loose. The stepping stones had vanished. Black and bloated, a cat floated, flowed, tumbled and bobbed, borne in the slip and swirl of the water's will. It vanished. Soon his lunch also vanished the same way. The Somerville Road bridge hadn't. An indescribable panic rushed through him.

He got to school late, wet, a muddied mess. He was made to stand in a chilly corner along with other late arrivals, but he didn't care. He felt good, pleased and delighted with himself, surprised at his own courage. He'd go over the bridge again, but only in wet weather he told himself. From where he stood in squelchy shoes and socks, he saw other kids noisily sitting crammed on the floor in their dry felt slippers, drinking milk. He knew he'd be in big trouble for being late. His hands were so icy he couldn't feel them. A cold wetness started gnawing at his feet. Mud stuck to him in crusty spatters like guilt. He started to shiver. He knew he'd be famished by lunch and regretted

throwing his lunch in the creek. From out of the corner of his eye Sergio, saw Raymond with a teacher.

'Is this the one?' asked the teacher, arms folded over his bagging belly. Sergio couldn't stop shaking, not knowing if he was cold or frightened.

Silence rushed in.

'Yeah.' Raymond frowned and sniffled, and squarely looked at the teacher from under his hair, 'He chucked yonnies at my Tuffy, sir.'

'Have you been throwing stones at this boy's dog?' the teacher glared before adding, 'and going to the shops without permission?'

## TWO DEPARTURES

*When the cataracts came down, he remembered ...  
 The old names still resound  
 For me of farms, men, ponies, dogs,  
 The old names that are all that I possess*

*T.H.Jones*

My eighty-two year old blind grandfather, Dad Doc, my father's dad, is dying in Prince Henry's hospital. We get the phone call. But it is a voice we do not know telling us it is my granny who has died suddenly, unexpectedly at 56, just like her husband a few years before. And as expected, a few months later, Dad Doc dies. I look for memories and things to keep. In a Christmas biscuit tin, I place some old letters and other things to remember my grandmother. I have nothing of Dad Doc, only his words in my head.

*Dear Helen,*

*How did you enjoy visiting last Sunday? I was so happy to hear that you will all be shifting to Melbourne soon. I'll be able to see you more often and we could play more cards, another game of crib or five hundred? Prahran is a lovely place to live except for the backyard. Wasn't that strange when the whole lawn caved in? I've rung the Council and they are checking it out. It's quite a mystery really. I'll let you all know what caused it. Helen I know you'll like Melbourne so don't worry about the shift. You will have lots more to do in the city, you can visit your cousins in Albert Park and your two grandparents ! Along Chapel St, there's lots of places to walk and lots of good shopping. I'll take you to the market too. Don't worry about me and do write soon. I like to get your letters.*

*Looking forward to seeing you all soon in Melbourne,*

*Love Grandma*

The first time we country kids visit this single terrace, Ian and I can't believe what happens; the small backyard covered in lawn caves in, sinks right down and an enormous hole appears. Air raid shelter Ian says. And then his eleven year old imagination is in full flight ... a bomb dug out ... underground tunnel ... a bunker like Hitler died in? A subterranean cave? A secret subway? An Aboriginal burial

chamber? A smuggler's cave or a drug dealer's headquarters or a prehistoric animal's nest or an extinct Tasmanian Tiger's lair, they were on the mainland everyone knows that, he says to my disbelieving eyes. Anything is possible in the city, he says. Granny says be careful. Tall stories are in the family.

*Did I tell youse about the time I was a pony express rider up Mallee way? No? Fair dinkum, no joke. Too right I was, used to cover a lot of territory on horseback, back in the nineties. What's that Kath? What did you say? Red Sun in the second ? No, I backed Arcady Boy for a place. Got Warrior King in the next ... Turn the wireless up Kath, where was I? ... Pony express, had to ride miles, not much older than you then Ian, bout fifteen or so. Up at the crack of dawn, manys the time when I ran into strife, fair dinkum I did deliverin the mail, there was one day when I ran into real hot water. Blue Harry, hair as red as your cousin Johnny, now he was a real crook, known all about those parts as an old bushranger, some reckon he rode with Frankie Gardiner, nickname Darkie, now Darkie was a one, often rode with a pistol in one pocket and a tattered copy of Byron's poems in another, said he only loved three things, a good horse, a pretty woman and gold. 'Silver' he once said, 'I have never taken.' But that's another story ... where was I? Blue Harry, well some reckon he was with Captain Thunderbolt but that's a load of cobblers because I know for a cert it was Captain Moonlite who hung out in these here parts now one night on dusk I was ridin ...*

*Dear Helen ,*

*I was so glad that you liked Black Beauty. It was one of my favourite stories too when I was about your age. Here is the recipe you asked me for the other day. It's quite a popular one really, your mum has probably got it anyway.*

*It's named after a wonderful aeroplane pilot of the 1930s.*

### Amy Johnson Slice

#### Ingredients

6 oz SR Flour

Pinch salt

3 oz butter

#### Filling

Rasp jam or lemon

1/2 cup currants/cheese

1 dsp milk

Cake topping

2 oz butter, 3 oz castor sugar, 2 eggs, 1 tsp vanilla,

4 oz SR flour, 1/4 cup milk in lemon icing

Sift flour & salt, then rub in butter, mix to dough with milk, roll to fill 11" x 7" tray, spread with jam and sprinkle with currants

Topping: cream butter & sugar, beat in eggs one at a time. Beat well. Add vanilla, sift flour & add alternately with milk spread over pastry & currants. Bake 350 F. for 45-50 mins. Cool before icing.

I think of Grandma with her crossword puzzles and her small book in which she collects difficult unusual words like *hirsute*, *jackanapes*, *surcingle* .... She likes Latin and Greek roots too: *poly*-this and *poly*-that, *psyche*--the mind is another, *credo*-to believe, *video*-to see, *bio*-a life, *auto*-the self, *photo*-the light and you must remember *grapho*-to write ... She tells me to collect a new word every day. You must keep records. Get it on paper. She sends me handy miscellaneous hints to keep.

Common stains ... Never use hot water on fruit stains, soak before washing. Use metho on grass stains and rub worn and dull leather with beaten egg white to rejuvenate shine.

First Aid ... if you don't have calamine lotion the itch of a mozzie bite can be relieved by rubbing with a raw onion.

Beauty tips ... infusions of rosemary (for brunettes) and chamomile (for blondes) make hair shiny if used as a final rinse.

Gardening soil won't get under your nails if you lightly scratch a moist cake of soap before weeding.

Grandma writes down every little thing; words, ideas, thoughts, and keeps records of spending; she's thrifty she says, mean say others, accounts for every penny from the grocery bill to the newspaper. She writes down wise sayings from the daily notepad calendar:

*The palest ink is better than the best memory (Chinese proverb).*

or

*The surest way to be remembered after your death is to owe money.*

Sometimes she quotes from Shakespeare: *Neither a borrower nor a lender be.* 'That's from *Hamlet*; sound advice.'

In the tin I put a little notebook with lots of her words I have written down ... words good for the Sun News Pictorial Crosswords: dromedary, a one humped camel, ananas, the pineapple plant, Boz, Charles Dickens's pen-name, Thalia, one of the muses. 'You must know your Greek Myths Helen' ... In my autograph book I find her writing:

*Life is mostly froth and bubble  
Two things stand like stone,  
Kindness in another's troubles  
Courage in your own*

'That's Adam Lindsay Gordon,' she told me, 'never forget our poets or their words.'

*Well, the best I ever seen with cards was Loony Joe ... you could never pick it, or get a geek at how he did it, could have knocked me down with a feather first time I saw him deal, never seen nothin like it ... did I tell you about the time I was on the wheat silos, a wheat lumper ... no? But that's another story. What Kath? Who's in front? Jeez not the Saints, what's up with the Swans? Come on South Melbourne! No, what? Should've seen your uncle George, our Geordie, mark a ball. Up above the pack from out of nowhere, every bloomin time. What? Where was I ? On the wheat stacks ... You nippers don't know what hard yakka was like. .. hope you never will. Nellie don't call me Grandpop, Dad Doc will do . . . sounds like I am a balloon bustin ... come to think of it girl, I am a lot of hot air, aren't I? Anyway where was I ... Loony Joe? Well, this codger, Loony Joe's got holes in the knees of his dungarees and a flannel singlet gone hard with sweat and dust. He deals himself another hand, turns the cards down on the table and strike me bloody pink, he reels off a full hand again : ace of diamonds, ace of hearts, ace of clubs and a pair of bloomin queens. But the funny thing he's always there on his Pat Malone, see, talking to himself, silly as a twobob watch. With that trick up 'is sleeve and mind you it probably was, he could've made a killin ... turn the wireless up Kath the steeplechase is comin up!*

Dear Helen,

What a lovely day it was last Sunday going for that drive up into the Dandenongs. Autumn's such a beautiful time of the year with all the reds, browns, and gold of the deciduous trees; the liquidambars, the silver beeches and the elms, magnificent. Thank your father for the afternoon. Did you know that when your mother was a little girl we used to drive up there in a big black Dodge to pick blackberries. I remember one afternoon about 1931/2 in the Depression we counted the cars from Ferntree Gully to Flemington ... there were forty-five. It's unbelievable, isn't it? When I was your age I liked to pick wildflowers to make ...

I will miss my grandmother. I know she could be moody and liked to argue, especially with Dad. Once she threw a kettle of boiling water at him. Mum tells me she could be mean. Yes, she did get cranky and was often in pain with her bunions and rheumatoid arthritis. So different to my mother who is forever smiling, considerate, conciliatory, compromising, new words listed under my page marked 'C'.

Grandma was stubborn. Born in 1902, she, Doris Emily, would fight to the death for an idea. She was a young woman in the twenties when females began to do different things; wear short skirts and trousers, do the Charleston, use available contraception, fly aeroplanes. Grandma loved the aviatrixes Amy Johnson and Amelia Earhart. Kept newspaper clippings about them. Loved the suffragettes too. In 1922 Granny joined the recently formed Country Women's Association and never stopped talking about women's activities and rights. She kept lists of her heroines: Florence Nightingale, the Brontës, Grace Bussell, Dame Mary Gilmore, Miles Franklin, Henry Handel Richardson, Emily and Adela Pankhurst, Marie Curie, Vida Goldstein ...

Geordie was real good but now, your own dad, Noel, was not bad either, fine kick, too right he was and could move when he had to but did his nana on the field too many times, my oath he did, guess it was the Irish blood comin out, anyhow's like I was saying on this arvo your dad grabs the ball and starts to run, he's way up the back pocket, weaves his way through the pack, dartin in and out like a ferret ...



*bounces the ball and runs, runs like you've never seen it right up to Beulah's goals ... what's that Kath? Can't hear the results from here, anyhow, nothin's stoppin him from that winning kick. Ouyen is five points ahead with about two minutes to go ... an open space as wide as a field of barley in front of him and then he sees your mother standing a bit to the left, he kicks and it hits the bloody post!*

'Oh to have been a man,' my grandma often said. 'The choices. The freedom. Nothing to stop them.'

One day she continues on to my mother, 'But on the other hand, men are imperfect females.' Mum backs off, recoiling from such unconventional views.

'I read it, it's a fact,' she insists. Mum just nods but Granny's ready for a good debate. She can't let any issue drop, goes off for an hour searching for the proof, then comes back with her copy of *the Reader's Digest*. 'See Dorrie, see here, read it ... there. See XY male and XX female. The scientists have found out. I was right. See, men are imperfect females.' She had lots of brothers.

'It's not a good day unless there's been a good fight,' I often heard her say.

Yes, lots of brothers.

I liked that about her. Her fervour and intensity. Not to back down for anything. Doris Emily would fight to the death, even over the meaning of a word.

*It was like this, see me and Barney O'Casey began to get terribly thirsty. Nearly a hundred and ten in the shade, nothin like that Mallee heat, anyway, by five o' clock they were a hundred in front with nine wickets down, so I says to Barney, why don't you retire or declare the innings closed, the umpires are getting thirsty and the pubs shut in an hour. No, says Barney, the game's not over until six. So we keep on playin, when all of a sudden the ball goes straight as a rocket at Archie Maher, the umpire at square leg. Now he has four cricket caps on his head, three white jumpers tied round his neck by the sleeves and a couple of watches on each arm. The ball comes straight at him and he puts his hand up and catches it. I appeal to the umpie at the other end. He hesitates then 'Out' he shouts. Everyone cheers and runs off to the pub leaving the batter standin*

*wonderin what rule he'd been given out under. Bet it's the first time youse ever heard of an umpire catchin a batsman out!*

Here are the stamps and coins my granny sent me for my collections; she says I am a *philatelist and numismatist*, other words I have written down ... along with strange countries called Helvetia, Nederland, Magyar, Liberia, Rhodesia, Deutsche, Sverige, Polska. Here is the hanky; with the crocheted edge and my initials embroidered by Granny in the corner – HD. It smells of lavender and of her.

*Did I ever tell youse about the crookest raffle I ever heard about? It happened during the Depression ... funny thing about hard times, the silvertails say the unemployed don't want work and then comes a war and there's no more unemployed. Now where did they all go? Got killed in the war I s'pose. Did you know some people wore herring tins for shoes, had newspapers for blankets, ate rubbish scraps for food and that's if they were lucky! Well, you can see how chook raffles was big in them days ... Christ, this cuppa tea's cold ... she's eighteen that cousin of yours and still don't know how to make a decent cup of tea. Now your grandmother, and mind you, a mother of eight kids still had the time to look after a man's needs ... none of this anything'll do stuff.*

I have been named after this other grandmother, the woman with the ten kids, eight survived, two died at birth. I don't remember her at all. They reckon she was a sweet soft woman with beautiful ways, who died exhausted, who couldn't sleep, who sat on the verandah after a long days' work reading into the early hours of the morning, the romantic *Peg's Papers* and called her sons after all their dashing heroes; Lyle, Lindsay, Noel, Milton, who every morning cleaned all the shoes of these big grown sons. Helen Dougherty. Her name, my name. The first time I see it chiselled deep into a gravestone I feel a chill.

My grandparents have all gone and at ten I am no longer a grandchild. These keepsakes may keep them alive.

## TWO ARRIVALS

After school, on Fridays, Maria reminded Sergio to bring back candles, soap or kero. She pleased herself and watched him, now growing slowly, thin and intense, as he left her at the bungalow for the straggling dirt track that strayed to the deep green fanning marsh at the end of what would become Francis Street. A soft quickening moved under her heart and over her belly to remind her that the time had come to talk to the boy.

At the corner of Francis and Williamstown Roads, Sergio waited under the veranda of the William Angliss shops. Black cars converged on the intersection as if driven by mutual attraction, only to pause and then drive off in different directions. Briquette-trucks roared to and fro. One lot rushing to get more fuel, others straining to get their loads of briquettes to the insatiable Newport Power Station.

The best sight in the world was when one of these carboned trucks drew up grudgingly, and as it shook with the action of its motor, he would see his father and a couple of other men leap to the ground from under a dingy makeshift canvas stretched over a frame.

'Cheerio!'

'Cheerio mate!'

And there Pietro was, his father, after a hard day, the back of his hands cinder-black, holding a gladstone bag, a tired look on his dark face, his eyes white goggles under a gritty fedora hat. The black made his face look older, but when he smiled he looked younger. Sergio hugged and jumped round him like a frisky pup while the truck lumbered off though a convulsion of gear changes that left everything smothered in a fug of blue exhaust.

'And how are you?'

'Good.'

'And school?'

'Good.'

'School is always good on Friday, eh? And Mamma?'

'Good. She wants soap and matches.'

Taking his father's gladstone bag, they entered the corner shop. His father bought with his tongue-tied English, while Sergio looked at the shelves stacked with their rows of tins with parrots and plump

smiling chefs holding biscuit trays, going so far up the back wall a ladder was needed. Brockhoff. Arnotts. About the shop, Sennets, Blue Gillete, Menthoids, Fiesta Milk Chocolate Blocks. On the counter were big glass jars filled with licorice allsorts and mixed lollies. The man behind it wrapped everything in newspaper. He gave Sergio a tiny pack of gum. Pietro then went to the other side of the shop. It had a woven wire screen with an arched opening. There was a small steelyard balance, handstamps, and pigeon-holes at the back. The man came round and removed his leather apron. He put on a dark eye-shade and became the Post Master. Every Friday Pietro would either buy air mail letters or pay for postage. Here his father bought a pen and nib. It was only later that the boy realised that this insignificant transaction gave his father a kind of coherence, preserved the link in the distance that set him apart from his past, gave him a sense of perseverance in a place where he was never to find an outside centre.

To fill in the walk back down Francis Street, Pietro told stories. The boy listened and looked, up and down along the street as his father talked about zio Clemente, a schooled man who in his later years liked to booze, fish and make ships fit inside bottles. And zio Franzile, who after Sergio's grandfather died of TB, became head of the family home. To the boy, Francis Street's new weatherboard and brick houses were so comfortable in their similarity. There was one brick house Sergio always looked at. Its garden of lawn and roses, its curved gleamy windows and pearly-scalloped curtains, peered back at him in a parody of faceless smiles.

Pietro continued, 'Franzile was so mean he would have eaten his own bones rather than spend a lira. Everything galled him except his garden and his pigeons. In summer as the grapes matured he counted each bunch every evening. One evening I met with temptation. From my bedroom window I heard him count, *Venti tre, venti quattro, venti cinque ... venti cinque? Maledizione!* Zio Franzile cursed. The pigeons went beserk. Then I heard him yell getting up on the high garden wall, 'You! You, *ziffut!* You thief crouching there! What are you doing eating my grapes?' And the Jewish boy dobbed me in, 'They were delicious. Pietro traded. I gave him six nibs. It was business.' Then I heard my uncle yell again as he fell off the wall.'

More house frames springing up in the middle of nowhere. Mudholes. Marsh. Winding dirt track.

'What happened after?'

'I'll tell you about the dog whip next time...'

Every weekend his father set indomitably to work and things came into existence. He covered the bungalow's inside frame with sheets of masonite, he painted the rooms and doors, he made a clothesline by linking the akimbo arms. He built a tilting gantry, on which he sat a four gallon drum for washing water, he made a window which he morticed into the new room he'd built, he mended shoes, sinuously carving the sole by candle, he made shelves and cabinets and started a huge grass fire when he only wanted to burn back in the face of a northerly wind. He did handstands and taught Sergio rudimentary somersaults when he had a spare moment from the spadework of digging a trench so they could draw fresh water from the main on Drew Street, after which he made plans for building their house at the front of the bungalow, and he also had replaced the candles and kero-lamps with electricity but not before he'd made Maria pregnant.

Maria began going to Melbourne frequently because she was changing. She had always been bone-thin but now she was putting on flesh, her face softer and plumper. She moved with care like she was holding glass or something precious. One day, after she got back from one of her visits to Melbourne she called the boy inside, gave him some comics and sat him at the table while she sat back in her roomy saffron smock like she was about to pop. She gently brushed her hand over his head, looking at him in a phlegmatic way, smiling quietly to herself, allowing herself time.

'I've something to tell you.' Her voice was soft, her manner softer than he could ever remember. 'It's important you know what's going to happen. You want to know, don't you?'

'Yes,' he said, wondering what the hood in the comic meant by '\*~+##\*@ 'as the Phantom socked him out of the page.

'In a month's time, someone's coming. Someone's coming to stay with us, isn't that nice. What do you think?'

He kept silent.

'Are you listening?'

'Yes.'

'You want me to tell you who's coming?'

He peeped he did. She smiled, straightening her back against a twinge of discomfort, and gently rubbed the sides of her swollen belly, as if to relieve the bulging burden.

'Your grandmother, Nonna Giovanna.'

The new classroom, although bigger, made him feel no better than did the stuffy broom cupboard he knew.

He sat at a desk with a sloping lid. It was scratched and well worn. Ink blots round the empty wells. His seat was by a sashed window. In the frame, two pots sat on the sill.

'It's your turn now,' Miss Taylor said to him, sitting at her table.

Sergio stood to read. The rest of the grade was reading in silence. He heard the kid before him reading,

*There are pale ones wrapped in furry skins  
On the margins of the snow  
And brown ones naked in the isles  
Where all the spices grow'      Christina Rossetti*

'Good. Go and sit, Colin. Your turn Sergio.'

He walked between small desks to get to the front. He held the book with both hands reluctantly. It still wobbled. He gazed, with interest, at the coloured picture of a happy-faced baby, a cat and bright dog, tried to force his mind to make sense of the words by putting them in front of his nose. He began slowly and then began again. Very slowly. 'This is John.'

'John's,' prompted the teacher.

'This is John's s..sss.'

'That's right. John's schoooool.'

'This is John's school.' One less line he told himself, 'Let us ship.'

'Let us skip. Let us slide. Say them again.'

As he did he looked out the window. Between the two pots, through a pane of flat glass, he stared in amazement. Across from the school, in Bishop Street, was his father standing. Sergio finished reading quickly, 'I can slide,' he read. 'I can.' He had lost sight of him and was past interest in the book. The excited boy began heading out of the room but Miss Taylor cut his departure short and firmly forced

him back to his desk, making him sit and stay until lunch time. Once free, he raced to his waiting father.

'I forgot your lunch. Are you hungry?'

'Yes Papa.'

'Don't tell your mother I forgot when she gets home.'

'Are you going to see her?'

'This afternoon.'

Pietro had a full white paper bag flat on the palm of his hand. When Sergio didn't see thick sandwiches he became very interested in the contents. He ate the nicest cakes he had ever tasted, they were square with shiny pink tops. He ate four before he couldn't move his fingers or his mouth because of the icing and custard. He looked round for more.

'Your mother's coming home in a few days.'

'Is she alright now?'

'She's better now. She's coming home with a special friend for you.'

His father smiled.

'Nonna Giovanna?'

'No, a new baby sister,' Pietro said pleased.

Sergio didn't know what to say.

'A little girl,' the father repeated.

'What's her name?'

'Christiana. Do you like it?'

'Yes.'

To celebrate they began with nimble caprioles, where Sergio bent forward with his head near his knees and hands sticking out the back, Pietro grabbed his wrists and spun him to an about-face to have the boy land on his feet. When the tumbles and rolls ended, his father gave him an aeroplane spin. By now their performance had captured the attention of the other kids in the yard, and a curious trickle turned into an exodus, as kids joined the spectacle. Suddenly Sergio was popular. Soon Pietro Cerne had kids waiting their turn to do flying flourishes through the air and laughing. As the schoolyard emptied, the heads of dismayed teachers began to be conspicuous, leaning out of windows, their growing alarm short-lived when someone rang the school bell. The clanging pulled them apart.

When Sergio got back he was met by annoyed teachers who wanted to know who the man was. They told him to tell his father to go to the office next time. The boy just stared vaguely at them with his head full of giddy laughter and the sweet memory of sticky icing. In class everyone was hushed, going on as if nothing had happened.

Now the bungalow was filled with crying and his parents were kept busy with the baby. They only let him look at the little sleeping form in the makeshift crib. He looked at the bundle wondering why his mother hung around like it was risky having him near the infant. He liked its tiny pinched mouth instinctively wanting a teat, its tiny face with its vague look and the wrinkled grimace before it went into a full cry. He also discovered he was more on his own with all the fussing and thinking about the baby, and of course, the arrival of Nonna.

Station Pier was a fanfare of people in the grip of expectation. The crowds grew noisier as the ship berthed with its promise of reunion and rediscovery. As the decks packed with tiers of staring faces above the bulwarks, the wharf reverberated with shouts of recognition and emotion. In that flourishing commotion and swelling noise, Pietro and Sergio walked and pushed their way up and down the crowd, searching for that one face in a moving sea of other faces.

'There she is,' shouted Pietro, catching sight of her, waving his hat.

*'Dove Papa?'*

'There,' he pointed, 'she's looking the other way.'

They ran under the upward curve of the ship's flank, looking up as she turned and looked down sightless into the crowd.

*'Giovanna! Giovanna! Nonna, Nonna Giovanna! Qua! Qua!'*

She became suddenly radiant with exhilaration. She laughed and cried and waved. 'Pierro, Pierro! Sergio! Sergio!'

On land they embraced, while she kept hugging them and clucking, her feelings quite out of control as she talked and bustled and smiled, eyes a flutter all teary and glisteny, all the way to the taxi.

He noticed that his nonna had a speckle of freckles across the flat bridge of her round nose.

'Where's Maria?' Nonna asked.

'Waiting at home,' said Pietro.

'Why didn't she come with the baby?'



'It's too far for them to come Giovanna.'

'And what about this one,' Nonna cried squashing Sergio to her. 'He was just a little seed when I saw him last. Haven't you grown? What are you going to give your nonna? Eh, what are you going to give her? A kiss. Give me a big kiss!'

Sergio was smothered and left all breathless, by her pungent perfume, all her luggage, the hen on the hat sitting on her round head, the shiny leather shoes, the gold rings, the gold earrings, the gold clasps displayed like medallions over her bosom, the glitter of a chunky gold medallion hanging around her neckless throat.

It was not unreasonable then, for this jubilant and effusive woman to be loud, bold and unbashful.

Suddenly life filled the bungalow with celebration and inexhaustible talk. Sergio gaped at his nonna as she talked for hours ...

'And then the gypsies would come and camp near the woods. We were told not to talk to them because they stole kids. They'll take your breath away or give you the evil eye or worse. They always said, 'Little girl, can you tell us if a pig has died around here lately, can you show us where it's buried ... '

As she talked for days ...

'And then the mad woman died. They nailed her feet to the coffin because they were scared she'd wander about the place causing trouble. They put eggs over her eyes to make her blind. And then they all went to the monastery, they didn't go to help the monks escape from the Germans, they went because the monastery had lots of good wine, they thought the monks would let them have a vat or something. They worked hard those beefy stevedores. They were big boozers. After they'd finished loading all the monks' belongings, the abbot lined all the stevedores up, blessed them, gave them another blessing, by now they were dying of thirst. They could taste the wine, strong and heady, red and ... But instead reaching in a small bag the priest gave them each a rosary!

She talked for weeks ...

'And then someone gave me a porcupine, he drowned in the toilet ... And what about poor little brother Peppi? Now that's a sad story. And what they did to poor Giulia because of that sexual *condottiere*, I still cry when I think. But let me tell you ... '

And when she talked for years he finally got used to the fact that she wouldn't stop talking for as long as she lived.

Nonna handed out presents of gold. For baby Christiana, a blanket edged with filigree, gilded gewgaws and baby clothes, for Pietro, a fountain pen, for Sergio, a fine gold chain, for Maria, an ornate brooch and sheets and linen in mothballs, and the rest were never-ending stories and talk because it was like she knew more than all there was to know.

In no time Nonna became acquainted with everything. The bungalow and the rest of them pulsed to her measure and practical lightness. Before long she'd changed the pattern of things: got them to buy new curtains, buy a bigger kitchen table, get an ice-chest, a second primus, lino for the floors, a meat grinder, a percolator, a couple of chooks, more pots and pans, and best of all she took over the cooking and making coffee.

As she boiled delicious coffee, she brewed into their heads the notions of building a big house, a big double-storey house, of working and making money. To them, her views and opinions were so right that no-one ever bothered to imagine anything to the contrary, not even that what she said might be half wrong. She amazed Sergio because in the mornings while talking about her dreams she'd gauge the sky and predict the weather by just looking out the kitchen window.

The arrival of Nonna made all the difference. Pietro left his Newport job to find another in a factory called Davies Coop, where he got more money and endless shift work. Maria found a job in a cotton spinning mill that made towels in Yarraville. Now everything took on a different colour: the colour of possibility, of hot chicken broth and aspiration. Changes came to dominate their family life. Sergio's turn was to come. It came before the end of his third year at primary school.

'Why send him to a State School?' asked Nonna. They'd just eaten a big lunch of gnocchi and chicken cacciatora made from the chooks she now had running about the yard.

'It was the closest,' Maria said.

'To what?'

'To here.'

'What about God?' asked Nonna.

Pietro looked at his mother-in-law. Maria looked at her husband. Nonna looked at her grandson. Christiana chortled.

'In my opinion,' Nonna said with such certainty it instantly removed any doubt, 'a young man can't grow up without God and a religious education.'

The talk went no further. Who was going to disagree with the absolute?

## GROWING UP AUSTRALIAN

*Beyond us, time  
 hung round on the wall; at every touch was home-  
 my brother's laugh, a sunny day,  
 only half grasped, forever melting away*

*Jan Owen*

A different new double-storey house but in the same neighbourhood! Talk about getting your birthday wish. Upstairs in my room, I have a good view across the western suburbs, across the older ones of West Footscray, Kingsville, Yarraville, to the newer ones of North Altona with the oil refinery and Brooklyn with its abbatoirs. Some nights, in the early hours towards morning, huge herds of cattle and sheep go down Geelong Rd with drovers on horses. Their lowing and moans wake me, on the last walk of their lives. I think of Maree and her pet family cow, chewing its cud on the back porch in Korumburra

'Jeez, I worked in the country all those years and this is the first time I have had to worry about supervising bloomin' animals,' laughs Dad.

Lost kids, drunks, bashed women, missing persons, complaining neighbours and road accidents are all in a day's work for him because duties in a city police station never stop. The phone extension rings in our residence even after Dad has knocked off. If people come after hours, Mum refers them to Footscray CIB or D24. The divi van patrols the area after ten at night. But if it's a real emergency, my father goes out to help.

No-one is ever locked up at our joint although there's a brand new jail at the side of the house. If someone is on remand overnight they are taken to the watchhouse in the city. But at my birthday party Dad makes an exception. Me and my friends are locked inside the darkness for one minute. We scream hysterically and shriek with laughter half in fear and half in girlish ecstasy like riding the Big Dipper as Dad slams the heavy door shut and we hear the lock turn. It's cold and black. When we are released from our sixty second ordeal we want to do it all again and when parents come to pick up my friends no-one wants to go home because it is so much fun being

imprisoned by a real police officer in a bare one-room cell with a concrete floor and a built-in dunny in the corner.

Dad now has two more constables to supervise the 30 square kilometres. At times, late in the evening, loud abusive people swear at the cop shop with its 'Back At' sign but the light in our house attracts them next door and we hear their worries or complaints. Ian and I peep through the curtains and eavesdrop on the urban woes of hard-working battlers.

'I'll bite your toe off, I'll bite your toe off,' the blond three year old spits at my dad. He is lost but proudly defiant. My mother knows how to handle him and takes him into our kitchen to eat. The toddler won't leave when his mum comes. It happens often with lost kids who like our copshop home. Dad tells stories and sings to the littlies. Mum fusses all over them. The toddler's mother says he's uncontrollable and comes back a week later to ask if my mum will mind him. She and her husband have to go away for an overseas holiday. So for the next few years Michael and sometimes his brothers become regular members of our household and continue to demand and cajole. 'I wanna see a firecart, I wanna see a firecart, I wanna see...' Michael continues this for 48 hours until we drive him to the firestation. When confronted by the huge red trucks and giant hoses, he starts bawling, petrified of the monsters.

One lost little girl talks incessantly about a big tall white house, a big long white house, we ask around the neighbourhood, no, Dad makes more phonecalls ... no ... When her parents finally do arrive we find out her father is a lighthouse keeper along the western coast of Victoria!

The vacant lots around us are being built on. Over the road is a large expensive house on a huge block of land. Down their backyard is a huge vegetable garden growing all sorts of unfamiliar vegetables like strange lettuces and longish tomatoes. It is a wonderful house full of lively kids, noise and warmth. Inside there is the first grand piano I have ever seen. The sound of classical music and opera wafts from the living room. It belongs to an Italian lawyer Joe Perillo, married to a serene, self-contained Irish woman, Moira, the musician, who never makes a fuss. Their offspring are a lot younger than me but they're beaut kids who love our house too. Much later I find out Joe migrated as a boy in 1934 and was detained during the war as an 'alien' at the

ACC (Alien Construction Corps) camp, Stanley, near Beechworth, Victoria. But I do not know this at ten, and am not really interested. A friendly intelligent man, he is certainly not alien to me but he is different. He is the first man I ever meet who likes to cook. After his studies at Uni were interrupted by the war, he finally became the first Italian migrant to graduate in Law from the University of Melbourne. This also does not mean much to me. But the smell of frying peppers and garlic floating with soaring operatic arias across the road does.

Dad works right next door in the new police station so we see him a lot. He comes home for a good lunch with Mum everyday. We hear him talking and shouting in his own way to everyone, sometimes to New Australians whose names he cannot write and they cannot spell. Mum is happy, soothing his growls with homecooking and smiles. Ian is busy sticking pictures all over his room and I float around worrying about dictation tests, social studies projects, getting in the marching squad to perform at the annual Yarraville oval sports and looking more like Gunta.

The Miss Australia Quest is televised and we become obsessed with beauty pageants. Gunta joins the society and attends all sorts of functions with famous people. And beautiful young women. She is going to win one day. She hates her foreign name. Wants to be called Lucy Taylor, go on overseas trips representing our country. I feel jealous.

'How can you be Miss Australia?' I challenge her. 'I'm Australian.'

'Well, what on earth am I then?' she insists. 'What am I?'

I do not know how to join things or even how to change like her. She looks a lot older than me now with close-fitting blouses and full whirling skirts, can-can petticoats and a bouncy pony tail. On fashion, makeup and popstars, she is the expert. Her body is that of a young woman, mine is still a girl's. Mum has told me all about babies and periods, about finding someone to love and then making life out of that love. When I was four she told me that babies 'grow in a small bag inside the mother fed by the blood of her heart.' So at ten, I know more than most girls my age but that makes it even harder waiting for change, I feel left out wondering about other girls like Maree. What does she look like now?

One day after school, a boy of fourteen whistles at Gunta. She turns and flashes her eyes and walks sort of differently, like on air. She is nearly eleven.

At lunchtime, we walk up to Sam's Coffee Pot at the junction of three main roads; Geelong Road, Somerville Road, Roberts Street, (later it becomes Macs Snack Bar and then McDonald's, a meeting, eating place for two generations) a roadside cafe for truckies and local workmen about to leave the urban metropolis for Geelong or further still to Mt Gambier or Adelaide. We play the juke box using our pocket money to hear Paul Anka wail:

*You're so young and I'm so old  
This my darling I've been told.  
I don't care just what they say ...  
You and I will be as free  
As the birds up in the tree ...  
Oh please, stay by me, Diana*

'Why don't you wear a pony tail like me?' Gunta urges.

I try but look funny, skinny awkward, a kid out with her big sister.

In the school bookshelf, we discover a novel called *Sandra of the Silverblades*, the story of an orphan who wants to skate. Unknown to Sandra, her real mother is a famous overseas ice dancing star and after years of trying finally discovers fame and her true identity. We swoon at the thought of such discoveries and want to do the same, find out who we really are, reveal our real origins, discover something exotic or strange in our past which will make us special, significant, different to all the other girls. Or perhaps we could become famous movie or sports stars or royalty or even more exciting, could there be the delicious, tragic possibility that yes, we are adopted!

On the concrete back area of the police station we pretend to skate with graceful ease. It's so easy for me to make believe but Gunta prefers reality.

'Why don't we go to St Moritz in St Kilda?'

Mum takes us. It's full of hundreds of kids, mostly teenagers, all shouting, shoving and pushing in a huge clockwise motion around the rink. Gunta skates off confidently the first time on ice. Not so for me. I slip and fall to the loudspeaker tune of Elvis singing, *'I Wanna Be Your*

*Teddy Bear.* I don't go again, preferring to dream or read about such things, gliding on concrete in my backyard, imagining the spotlight on my curvaceous silhouette, skating the rinks of Europe.

Ian is very tall now and stoops when standing with friends, self-conscious of his height. They are talkers, his mates. They have dreams of forming a rockband, cycling in the Melbourne to Warrnambool, training for athletic trials, winning the race double. His room is a jigsaw of sports photos and World War 2 illustrations of Spitfires, Tiger Moths, Messerschmidts. He builds model kit aeroplanes and ships all the time. I am still his 'bub' who reads and thinks too much. After tea, I watch him draw incredible scenes of war on paper while he dramatises every military action with appropriate sound effects; the Battle of Britain; the Dam Busters raid, the storming of Iwo Jima, all are fought once again in Footscray. He tolerates me, even at night when I wander into his room looking for solace in this boyish sanctuary of aeroplanes, racehorse photos, plastic models and smelly fourteen year old socks.

I see myself as a city girl but at night dream of different places with orange trees or apple blossoms and rich purple grapevines entwined with lush green Gippsland hills, old gold diggings and paddocks full of cows and horses where friends in pigtails run to greet me with games and words and dress-up fun and happiness bursting out of being a child rooted in the country like a growing plant.

I want to see Maree again. I want to show her my new house. It has been nearly two years and her face is a blur in my mind. I nag my folks.

'When can she come? In the September holidays?'

She arrives at Spencer Street and my dad and I go to pick her up from the station. She looks older, tired, different. She is now eleven. She has breasts like Gunta.

'Hi Maree, how are you?'

'Beaut and you, Helen?'

'I'm good. I've got a room upstairs now and a playhouse out the back but it is not as good as those old chookpens or cubbies like Misselthwaite.'

'Misselthwaite, what's that?'

I feel hurt, 'Oh nothing.' I bite my lip with disappointment.



In the following days, we run out of things to do and say. We start to quarrel about which games to play; she doesn't climb up doors anymore and she hates chasey. She hasn't even heard of Ricky Nelson.

'Mum, Maree's not the same. She's sulky. Tries on all my things all the time but won't play. Can I invite Gunta over?'

'Two's company and three's a crowd. Sad but true honey. It's not for long.'

'All right, but she's not wearing my new party frock and that's that.'

We walk to the shops and buy the new fad icecream, Dairy Snow, but are out of things to enjoy together. She says she hates the smell and noise of the suburbs. I ask her about the butter factory and she refuses to answer. Says she doesn't like all the wogs everywhere, in the shops, on the corners, in the Footscray streets. I suggest a game of cards but she wants to visit the trees by the creek where all the tough kids hang out. I'm not allowed there.

'Besides most of them are migrant kids anyway,' I say defending myself.

'Really?' she says surprised. 'They seem like Aussies to me!'

'Want to build a playhouse like we had behind those hedges back in Korumburra?'

'No, that's baby stuff.'

'Want to play dressups?'

'No, but could I put on your new dress you got for your birthday?'

'I suppose so.'

The times passes slowly. I wear my hair in a pony tail and talk about things Maree's never heard of like fashion magazines and the top ten. We fill in the time by playing sevens against the brick wall and hopscotch in the drive. In the evening we watch television at an old lady's up the street but at night I dream of green ferns and whispering girls giggling behind them.

We argue over silly things. For the rest of the day there is silence between us. Mum makes bright noises to cheer us up but I am very dark. Something is missing and it's all those happy times I've clung to for months which now seem so childish, so long ago, as though they never existed.

The day of parting arrives and we say goodbye. Maree holds out a beautiful vase for my mother.

'Thank you for having me Mrs Dougherty. It has been great.'

Mum gives her a big hug, 'No need for this. I know how much your mother had to go without to give me this. You're welcome anytime, dear.'

'Say hello to the kids at school,' I say.

She picks up her case and walks away. Suddenly I run to her and throw my arms around her.

'Give my goat a pat and my horse a feed.'

'We might see each other next year?'

'Yeah sure,' I say.

We both nod but know we won't. And then we smile at the same time like we used to, maybe thinking the same thing. The train pulls in and she climbs on board waiting for the whistle and the wave. Then she is gone from the city back to Gippsland and her future, taking my country self away forever.

I never see or hear from Maree again but when I think of Korumburra I still see her first; climbing trees with worn-out second-hand runners, doing handstands with holes in her pants between her cow and the blackberry bushes, making my life richer. Where are you now Maree, Eddie and Elizabeth? I lie awake no longer dreaming of houses and faces in rural towns.

'Can't you sleep Bub?' Ian asks half asleep.

'I feel bad about Maree.'

'Oh, forget it. She'll be okay. Probably didn't even notice.'

'Why do things have to change?'

He opens his sleepy eyes ,

'Jeez, do you really want things to stay the same? I don't.'

I think of my thin girlish frame. No way.

Sometimes Gunta too gets bored with my imaginary childish games but luckily not with me. In front of the grade we act out little invented dramas and get an enthusiastic response, especially from the teacher who sits back with her feet up. I secretly think about becoming a serious actress, not the sort in the movies but on the stage. In the newspaper I read about plays being produced in Melbourne by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, new plays with Australian themes for the first time; tragic plays like *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* or *The Shifting Heart*. I want to see them but the family goes to Hollywood films or happy American musicals like *Oklahoma* or *South Pacific*.

This new play, *The Shifting Heart* by Richard Beynon sounds achingly wonderful; it's about racial conflict, the death of Gino, the son of an Italian migrant family, the Bianchis, in an inner Melbourne suburb, but it ends in hope with the birth of a son to Gino's sister and her Australian husband Clarry who finally accepts the cultural background into which he has married. I think of the tough Aussie blokes at Sam's Coffee Pot at the junction of Geelong Road and Somerville Road who swear at the dagoes congregating on street corners, turning our milk bars into capuccino joints. At ten, I am scared of these grown-up New Australians, with their loud noises and rude gestures to pretty women like my mum. Their different food and ways, their swarthy intense faces searching the streets for friendship or female company, frighten me a bit. But on the Guiding Star bus, one day a young dark man with a sombre face biting his fingernails, suddenly starts shouting uncontrollably in another language at the passengers and the driver. He then bursts out crying, fleeing from the vehicle at the next stop. Everybody looks bemused and someone even laughs. I suddenly feel sad. He looked so lonely. The young man is how I imagine Gino in the play. But on this bus there are no Clarrys. For some, there does not seem much chance of happy endings in 1958.

In grade six, Gunta and I are still friends but things are different. We both get a crush on the same boy. He is tall, blond and a cute cool Tech boy who must be over thirteen. Japanese transistor radios, the new rage, blast rock n' roll in our ears as we stalk him on weekends, track him down to his part of the woods, try to get closer and closer, move in for the kill. Then he suddenly stops dead in the street and turns on us.

'Piss off, you little pervs.'

Broken-hearted, we sob for a week.

It's almost time for a move to High School. Our teacher talks of endings and beginnings, about puberty, about the difficulty of being the head of the school and then being babies again, about changing roles, becoming women with responsibilities. With my flat chest and freckled face, I am not ready.

'Let's go to the city to see the new film *Cinerama*,' says Gunta

'I don't think I can, we've got visitors on Saturday,' I lie knowing I'm not allowed to go to the city by myself until I am a teenager.

'You do want to see it, don't you?'

'Yes, of course,' I say, not admitting I have never heard of this new 3D film extravaganza with multiple screens and viewpoints.

'You want to see something else?'

'No, not at all,' I fib again because for ages I have been longing to see Walt Disney's new film, *Sleeping Beauty*.

## A.M.D.G. with FEATHERDUSTER

It struck Sergio while at Corpus Christi, Kingsville, that, although his nonna had him go there to open his eyes to the light and learning, she had a religious feeling all of her own. She lived in a kind of primitive piety where she gave dreams the weight of miracles, solely for her secular good. The dead often came to her in her sleep and they had long conversations which often ended with *le anime dei morti* giving her incomplete lottery numbers just before she woke from her darkness. But first the weather.

*'Oggi sara vento e sol ... questa notte o sognato ...'*

For Nonna, there was no contest of good over evil: if one was ungodly, then one simply prayed to God to make them good. God knew his way about and understood everything even if she didn't. For her there were no riddles, just simple faith. She had no doubts about what she believed, there was no conscience of soul in her thinking. And when it was all told, we are here today, gone over there tomorrow, and everything would be all right.

'What's that Nonna?'

*'A lumin.'*

Sergio and little Christiana watched as their nonna poured oil in a shallow bowl, to which she added some water before stirring the liquid.

'What's it for?' he asked.

'A reminder to God,' she whispered, making what she did meaningful.

As they watched, she thread a wick through a small metal triangle, at each end of which, she had pierced wafers of cork. She floated this trinity in the mixture. 'We have to let him know we are here.'

'Does he forget?'

'No, but he's human too.'

She struck a match. A wobbling flame bodied into brilliance. He saw it pulse mysteriously, hopefully, in the dark of his grandmother's eyes.

'Nonna, what about if you're not kind?'

'God forgives,' she gave a knowing laugh, 'I've met more people trying to be kind than unkind. Unless they're devils of course.'

The flame's flicker stirred his conscience.

'I was unkind to a girl.'

From his tone, she knew it was just a boyish feeling and nothing else.

'She'll get used to it,' Nonna said with a kind of inner resignation, knowing that he could never share what she meant. 'Women do.'

But he wasn't sure she understood.

On a Monday, in May, he began at the Catholic school, Corpus Christi. A bell clapped and clanged along a dingy corridor. He followed the little brown nun who wrote his name in a book, asked him for school-money and marched him to his new grade. The room was packed. The big sets of windows were boarded on the outside with mesh-wire. He was sat in an empty seat next to a girl. Shuffling followed giggles as kids hid their faces in their books with the scratching of their pens, or behind desk lids. They were doing arithmetic and he opened his new workbook.

'You write A.M.D.G. on top of every page.' He heard a voice next to him whisper behind hands. It was then he saw the dark girl he was sitting next to, and because she understood he was too shy to ask questions she inked the nib of her wooden pen, and showed him what to do. She had thin pale hands and fascinating long fingers. He heard more giggling as she wrote in his book. She half looked at him through the tat of her black hair, half blushing, before going back to her blotter and subtraction.

At playtime, he found himself alone even though he was dressed like all the other boys in dark Stamina shorts and navy jumper. At the end of playtime, he was avoided and the last in line, along with the girl who sat next to him.

'If you want them to play with you, you'll have to sit with someone else,' she said softly without looking at him. She had a lean look, dark bushy eyebrows, faded freckles dotted her drawn cheeks. There was something inexplicably shadowy about her, something of dreams, of darkness, of mystery, of invention and most of all, sadness. She didn't have a blazer or a uniform.

The straggly line of kids poked and shoved keenly, like it was great fun, to be away from her.

'They're just doing it to tease me,' she said quietly like it was her fault.

'Why?'

'Because she's got fleas!' some kid they all called O'Brien yelled. 'And so have you! So tig someone and pass them on!'

'Turnip fleas! Turnip fleas!' They chanted the taunt.

He passed the tig along and the dreaded tig raced from kid to kid, 'Turnip fleas! Turnip fleas!' He was laughing too, one of them.

She caught him with a brave but sad smile that couldn't hide the hurt no matter how hard she tried. After that, she sat on her own until one day she never came back. No-one knew why. Nor did they care and the tig stayed at school long after anyone could remember her; but Ann Turner, the lean dark girl with the wild black hair and the odd clothes, who showed him how to write A.M.D.G. (All My Work Done for God) on the top of each page of his books stayed like an ink smudge on his conscience.

The rest of the time was spent in unmemorable learning.

His last year at Corpus Christi saw the arrival of a new nun. She stormed into class just as Sergio was yawning. The class got to its feet, and then sat knowing its place. The silence was absolute. The wags, Bruno and Boris, sat looking confident and cheeky. She looked at them until their smile and cheek lost its certainty. And even Aldo with his one black arching eyebrow slouched and tried to conceal himself under his thick black mop of frizzy hair. Aldo who refused not to eat garlic. Aldo who kept and bred rabbits. Aldo who disliked Poms because he was told they had killed his grandfather in Africa ...

'What's your name?'

'Me? Aldo Uccello.'

'I'm going to call you Birdsnest,' she said fixing him with a demanding look through her thick glasses. She sounded like she was used to people doing what she demanded. He sat up unwillingly as she tucked her hands in her wide sleeves above the crucifix caught in the thick belt round her middle. Long strands of beads hung to the floor over the heavy folds of her brown tunic. Her wimple and collar were as white as the eucharist wafer. Jesus didn't come down from the large picture at the back of her, he just looked down. Sergio knew he couldn't see but that he saw anyway, with that mild look on his kind face and that finger forever pointing at his exposed burning heart.

'I'm Sister Leoncia,' she said in a voice full of starched enthusiasm, 'I know we're going to be good friends. Aren't we?'

The class sat still and unblinking like a lot of plaster saints. 'I'm sure you're all going to help me, yes? Aren't you?' There was still no answer. 'Of course you are, we're going to get along just fine. I'll look after you, and your guardian angels will too. We are going to work hard and do God's will. God will reveal the defenders of the faith in the class. Are you yawning again?

Sergio froze mid-yawn. He went red and found his tongue.

'Yes, sister.'

'Did you go to early mass?'

'No, sister.'

'Then stop yawning in my face. It's rude!' He saw her teeth move.

She gave the class a big smile, standing rigidly with her hands folded in front of her. All listened attentively while she talked of the children of God and how Jesus loved them. And how the saints loved them. How the Pope loved them. And how there were those who did the right thing by telling, what had to be told, especially to her. But we'll get on well together, won't we, she urged. Oh yes, we love each other in God. They would learn all about good habits and character. Bad words were sinful, she said, and they were to avoid bad influences and all that wasn't Catholic. She went silent as his mouth opened on its own, and before he knew it he was standing with his back to the class with sister Leoncia's face, the colour of gesso, her voice sharp as cold as glass saying, 'I told you it's rude! I told you not to yawn!' He heard the swipes and felt the sting of the feather duster as he collected six of the best. Through warm watery eyes, Sergio saw Jesus high above in his lofty world of the wall. Amen.

He learnt that bodies were the temples of God. They had to be kept pure. He knew it all had to do with girls. Sergio thought about girls. He wondered what they would look like without clothes. Sister Leoncia spoke in metaphors about the human body as temples and tabernacles, as under her eyes, the boys got hairy and the girls began showing breasts under their tunics. Bodies were a temptation. Bruno and Boris and Sergio were looking for girls to touch. Aldo boasted he did it. The real thing. He was a girl-killer. He said he knew of lots of crumpet hangin' to be shagged down the West Footscray lanes. His



personal sex stories had the boys huddling together all horny, heads swimming, and asking him for more.

Each week they had elocution and singing with a Mr. Drill. Mr Drill was a bachelor, in his forties, with wisps of hair oiled down about his ears. He talked with his hands. When he taught, Sister Leoncia always stayed in the room, her eyes like sharpened pencils, as if she was waiting for something of which she could disapprove.

Mr. Drill spoke with studied clarity, rounding his mouth sweetly to the shape of a doughnut to which he gave an added emphasis, especially when his hands got away from him. He would poke out his tongue and say, 'Think', 'they', 'therefore', 'that'. No, no. Make the sound. Shape the sound. Unhinge those jaw muscles.'

The second part of the lesson would be taken up with learning new hymns and old derry airs. Sister Leoncia radiated approval.

'Now, once more from the beginning.' Then he would scrupulously strike his tuning fork. Piiinnngggg. Piiinnngggg, and the choir would wait open-mouthed for the cue, the key of C, to carry it into song.

Before long, when the rote got stale, they began singing out for a rest. Then Sister Leoncia's would lift her head, and Mr. Drill went jumpy. He vibrated with emotion, and his voice did a chord change trying to prop the crumbling enthusiasm of the choir. The ever-worsening lyricism of his efforts brought nervous bubbles of perspiration to his forehead. In this excited state, he ransacked his satchel until he found what looked like a deck of cards which he displayed in a line along the blackboard ledge. These cards turned out to be watery-coloured holy pictures which he handed out for good effort after renewed intervals of song.

It was only on one occasion that they saw Mr. Drill in a different light, and then they never saw him in any light again.

'I'm going to teach you a new song,' he enunciated much to the horror of the class, 'but not a hymn. I'm sure Sister won't mind,' he said, like it was a small act of mercy. But everyone knew why she wouldn't mind. She wouldn't mind because she wasn't there, she'd gone off down the corridor, closing the door behind her. At that moment they even seemed to have forgotten her invisible presence.

'It's a Maori action song. The Maori women sing it as they dance.'

He told them who the Maoris were, where they lived, what they looked like with carved patterned faces as with amazed eyes he gaped and grunted, flicking his tongue doing the *pukana* like the Maoris. He had instant class control ... Suddenly the world soared, it spun, it sparkled, it pulsed, it had become alive, defying all they had been told, was acknowledged as proper, right and true. In the new light, restraint, piety, conformity and inhibition faded away as Mr. Drill dazzled them, manfully fanfaring along while Jesus clapped and shimmied in his flax *pue pue* and lavish feathered cloak, throwing his arms in the air in such a way that Sister Leoncia would have found disarmingly pagan. It was remarkable how it caught on because even Jesus knew that it would be the closest they'd get to rock an' roll, at least at Corpus Christi. And they all jumped in locomotion, in the aisles and on the desks of that marvellous Maori village, with Mr. Drill, in full cry, his face purple with tattoos, wisps of hair flying about his ears, quite out of control and primitive, leading the tribe with swinging arms and legs and hands and hips as they all sang with savage abandon:

*Tiny ball on end of string,  
Hear the Maori maidens sing,  
Kirita, kirita, pois porotiti, parua patua  
HEI HA HEI! HEI HA HEI!  
Hear the music play!  
HEI HA HEI!  
HEI HA HEI!*

And then, the geyser erupted and in the shock, that had the spectacular dimensions of no less than the Last Judgement, Mr. Drill vanished in a pitiless cloud of brown steam and moral outrage, while the terrified natives ran to the safety of their desks, back to what was proper, right and true, back to the old light of restraint, piety, conformity and innocent guilt. Jesus conveniently hung himself back on his wall out of harm's way. The room was once more filled with the familiar asphyxiating vapours of mind and soul. Sister Leoncia was back.

'You're a snitch O'Brien!' Aldo spat at one of her smug goody-goodies Robert O'Brien. 'Religion's turned you into a rat !'

'At least he doesn't wag like some of you!'

Most of the class looked on loyally straining to understand. Sister Leoncia's porcelain teeth moved, and so did she. In one lunge, before he could cry out, she had Aldo by the hair, pulling his head and the rest of him out the front. Clinching him by the neck, she pushed him down into the floor.

'We told you to use Brylcreem,' Bruno and Boris yelled, but by now Aldo was rolling, screaming and squirming, one moment screwing up in pain, the next throwing fresh-air punches in the folds and tentacles of Sister Leoncia's beads and habit. Her teeth clicked and clattered and slag went spraying all over. The air was a flutter with the downy feathers of the duster. Bruno and Boris were so scared they began to laugh and so she turned on them, dropping the feather duster by her chair. They were out of their desks, scrambling through the door, tumbling in a squarking heap in the corridor, crashing into walls and bag racks, trying to escape the nun's wrath.

Unchastened, Aldo worked himself back to his feet, he wasn't going to take this lying down. In the doorway he yelled, 'O'Brien, I'll get you, you bastard!'

O'Brien launched himself into the chase. The thumping uproar tumbled and rumbled, and echoed down the corridor like a storm.

'You'll never go to another Catholic school again! Come back, back, baaack! Birdsnest! Birrrdsnest!' shrieked Sister Leoncia in full cry.

'Get fucked! Get faaaaaarrcked!' was Aldo's last retort before everything went deathly quiet. The corridor dust rolled in through the open door like smoke after a battle. The class sat frozen in the appalling quiet, the last shameful retort ringing in their ears because *fuck* was a sin. Sergio wondered how human Jesus really was, and did he care when the world was unfair and unjust? Where was Jesus right now? And where was Ann Turner and Mr. Drill? Did Nonna know what she was talking about?

Sister Leoncia slumped in her chair, windpanting breath, ruffled, ashen and sulphurous; her eyes a glassy mist. Her presence was like a crushing quiet, reclaiming the room. As she sat she scanned the class coldly. Sergio wondered if she was going to keel over? But she was going for the featherduster. She then repeated the whole thing with the fourth member of the waggors.

Much to his nonna's dismay, the following year Sergio found himself at the new local Footscray High School, located a couple of kilometres in the opposite direction from Corpus Christi. Although Corpus Christi never opened his eyes or mind to any light between Sister Leoncia and the Sacred Heart, it didn't stop Nonna from talking about what she believed existed between her heaven and earth.

## CATHOLIC NEIGHBOURS

*'Christ you walked on the sea  
But cannot walk in a poem  
Not in our century'*

*James McAuley*

'Little girl, will you get my ball?' a voice calls from the top of the fence.

I throw it back, eyeing this girl, around the same age as me, up and down. About eleven I guess. She is my new neighbour and I have been watching and waiting for this moment for days, ever since they moved in.

'I'm Lorraine. Who are you?'

'I'm Helen.'

'Which school do you go to?'

'Kingsville Primary. What about you?'

'Corpus Christi. We're Catholics.'

So what, I think, but on entering her house am confronted by belief. Each room has a picture of a crucifix or tortured saint; religious statues are everywhere. She sleeps under one tormented soul shot through with arrows that gives me the creeps.

'That's horrible,' I say recoiling from the images of pain.

'No, it's Saint Sebastian. He was a martyr to his faith.'

I look at the wounds and the blood and this new girl and wonder about a world where such things take place. Casually, she shows other pictures of suffering as if we are looking at snapshots of distant cousins down on their luck. She feels I need instruction.

'This is our Lady of the Perpetual Succour. You wouldn't know about her but...Sister Bridget told us about what you Protestants believe ...must be awful to be going to purgatory but...'

She hands me little religious pictures and starts telling their stories.

'This is St Alban ... he was a Roman citizen who lived about 1600 years ago in Britain. He refused to deny his new Christian faith and was put to death. Decapitated, I think. This is St Bernadine of Siena ... he always preached with the letters IHS in front of him, this means in Latin *Jesus Hominum Salvator*, Jesus the Saviour of men ... we say everything in Latin in our Church ... you don't, do you? This is

Saint Catherine. She ate pus to show her submission to the Lord ... and this one is ...'

This new girl tells me about saints who have wonderful visions of Jesus and his mother Mary, women I have never heard of like St Bernadette and St Hildegard and St Elizabeth on her deathbed:

*Mary, mother of Grace  
Mother most merciful,  
Protect us from the foe  
And take us in the hour of our death*

And then Lorraine's voice goes very quiet as she whispers about the female saints who plucked out their own eyes rather than be seduced or succumb to bodily temptations. Whatever they are, I think. 'St Lucy was a young and lovely virgin ... see, here she is carrying her offering to God, her eyes on a plate.'

I am bemused intrigued and already can feel the flames. I go to Sunday School, sometimes say prayers at night like 'The Lord's Prayer' and always say 'God Bless' to Mum and Dad when off to bed. At eleven, God is someone always around but sort of on your side, watching over so things are okay, especially at Easter and Christmas, but I have never thought about judgement before or things called sins, or '*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*' or the need to suffer.

'This is a scapula I wear around my neck and this is my catechism and here is my missal.'

She hands me her treasured holy objects of personal identity. I have nothing to show her.

'We're sort of Irish. I have two brothers and a sister. I'm good at running, basketball and Irish dancing. Want to see all the medals I have won? This is my tartan kilt and black velvet sash. I wear this when I dance in competitions and every year on March 17th when we march behind Archbishop Mannix, you know, on St Patrick's Day? '

And then suddenly Lorraine whispers, 'There are some things too terrible to talk about.'

'Like what?'

'Things to do with your body ... You know, things to do with ... sex.'

'What about it? Mum says it's between a man and his wife.'

'Sometimes it's not!'

'Who says?'

'Frankie Cassar and Aldo. They told me things after school in Cain's Lane which are not nice at all. Real mortal sins.'

'What's that?'

'Don't you know?' she says, horrified.

'No. Besides what would those boys know anyway? Bet they're real dills always hanging about up back lanes, smoking and fibbing, with nothing better to do.'

'But Sister Leoncia said so too. Said we must keep our hearts and minds chaste for the Lord.'

'Sounds like this Frankie is doing a bit of chasin',' I say.

Lorraine blushes and then laughs and we both giggle, realising we will be friends after all.

'Helen, we had better pray about it.'

She takes me up to her spartan weatherboard school Corpus Christi, across the back paddock, a few hundred yards from our house. Other kids in dark navy uniforms stay away from me like I'm contaminated with the plague or something ... 'a proddy dog.' In the front of the schoolyard, a little statue of a sweet-faced lady is set in a grotto.

Lorraine points to it, 'Our Lady ... the Virgin Mary ... the Mother of God.'

Her voice goes quiet. Before tea, we shoot some goals with a basketball. I see Lorraine is good at sport.

Later, I find out she takes after her dad who was a cycling champion and runs a popular bike shop in Footscray. He is interested in politics and is always on about the newly formed Democratic Labor Party and his distrust of the commies, whoever they are, and the English. Her mum is friendly but very strict about chores, homework and boys. Every Friday night Lorraine and I walk up Geelong Road to buy fish and chips because Catholics can't eat meat on Fridays, and besides, both of us have fallen for a boy who walks greyhounds and from a distance of 200 yards looks gorgeous.

I like Lorraine and her house which is different, dark and strange; a hidden world of Christ and Rome and someone called B. A. Santamaria.

'Do you believe in hell?' I ask my mum one day.

She stops what she is doing and looks at me seriously.

'Well, yes and no. Not in some burning place with pitchforks, brimstone and demons but I do think ...'

'Lorraine says that's where we're going.'

Mum laughs, 'Oh Lorraine, she is a one, she is.'

She goes on with her washing and then says, 'There's enough hells on earth without worrying about the one after you're dead.'

'What kind of hells?'

'I hope you never find out, honey. I was lucky. I married your dad.'

'What's marriage got to do with it?'

'Nothing if it's good, everything if it's bad.'

'But what about after? What about dying?'

'That's a big question honey, too big for me. I know there's something. For me it would be separation, away from you all, away from any kind of love. Yes, that would be hell for me.'

'Separation from God?'

'If God is love, then I guess that's what I mean.'

'And heaven?'

'Heaven is getting this washing out before the sun goes. Now does that answer ...'

Lorraine is the first to buy lipstick, hairspray and a bra. She wears it over her singlet and stuffs hankies down the front to fill it up, hiding it from her mum. When we go up the shops near Corpus Christi, she puts her hair in curlers for half an hour before we leave because you never know who we might meet on the way – Frankie, Aldo or even if we are in luck, the mysterious greyhound-walker. Unlike me and Gunta, she does not want to change, just wants to be a woman with a boyfriend.

On top of the flat concrete roof of the jail we sunbake, comparing our bodies to the models in the American magazine, *Seventeen*, trying different hairstyles and pouting our lips like mannequins on parade, pulling our waists in tighter so that our full skirts with their can-can petticoats spread out like fairy cakes. One day we wave at the



cars going down Geelong Road, counting how many beeps we can get in an hour. Dad drives past in a police car and gives us a foreboding nod. With the transistor blaring we do *Jailhouse Rock* shaking our bodies like Elvis, Johnny O'Keefe and Fabian, becoming the dancers on *Six O'Clock Rock*. At night, I get a talk from my parents about the right way for young ladies to behave and Lorraine has to go to confession, say endless Hail Marys and is sent to her room for a week.

## WHO ARE YOU ?

'Let me ask you,' Mr. Norman said, 'what is an Australian?'

The class looked too disinterested to be alarmed by his voice.

By 1960, at Footscray High School, because classes were huge there was plenty of anonymity; there were Latvians, Estonians, White Russians, Italians, Germans, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, Dutch, Poles, English, Irish and of course the predominant Australian-born. But in some ways all the boys were one; in the classroom, in the yard, in the dunny, all speaking the same language, the hard-edged masculine working class slang of the western suburbs. Only in their surnames, in their families and inside their homes were they different.

High school was the place for Sergio. The building had grey brick wings, white-sashed windows, yards of asphalt, and the teachers were either old or dead. Here, he drifted like he was out of sight, in a fluttering glandular sea of grey school uniforms, listening to the weekend pranks of other kids, and talking about *The Untouchables* while his sex hormones directed his eyes towards the older girls as they played he-she, she-he has a crush on you with the senior boys, who spent a lot of their free time in the boys' dunnies, soaking the air of old piss and cheap disinfectant, while incessantly combing their hair and squeezing blackheads in a foggy mirror.

Here he mucked around, feeling himself scarcely noticed in the atmosphere relaxed and less restricted than Corpus Christi. His efforts were minimal because he believed 'it'll be right', only to be surprised when it wasn't. Here he learnt little because little was demanded of him. Yet here he was lost in a world with many prospects, all of which he managed to ignore; here where if you said you wanted to be a garbo you were considered serious, if not outright ambitious.

'Let me repeat ... what does it mean to be an Australian? Well, what do you think Cerne?

'It ... it ... means ...' Sergio went into a knot.

'Well ... what gives us our identity?' Norman studied him for a few moments with no expression on his face or around his eyes, 'Where do we get our national spirit?'

'The pioneers?'

'And who were they?'

'A pop group?' someone shouted from the back.

'What is a myth?' asked Norman.

Another shout, 'A female moth, sir.'

'And our forefathers?'

'Ask Tony's mum ... he's got four fathers.' The class rocked with laughter; by this time Mr. Norman looked like he was trying to hide a headache.

'Do you understand what I'm asking? '

'He dunno, sir,' cut in Griffio. Everyone listened because Griffio only talked about nags, how he smoked two packs of Craven A a day, and how he had the face that attracted girls, in spite of the blackheads on his face the size of pepper grains, and hair red enough to stop traffic. But Griffio also did what the rest of them grudgingly admired him for, and that was staying out late at night. Actually, it was not just late at night; when he told it, it was early morning.

Norman took a step closer to Griffio, 'You're not going to help him by making excuses.'

'No sir,' Griffio gathered the question, 'being identical? Yeah, um ... my old man reckons it's havin' a beer an' pie with ya mates.'

Norman wasn't impressed. 'Is that all?'

'Aw, no sir. Goin' ter the nags. Gettin' a new Falcon. Holidays at the beach, fishing, chops an' mashed potato, baked pumpkin,' then he added with no uncertainty, 'and barrackin' fer Footscray.'

'Carn the Dogs!' someone said.

'And gettin' a fair go in the school of hard knocks.'

Norman said nothing, turning he chalked the essay topic for the following week, *What it means to be an Australian*.

Like they did most Saturdays, Sergio's family ate a long lunch. Nonna, caught in a fresh apron, fussed with the fidgets, talked brightly about anything that came into her head. It was like she had to unburden herself. Yet, she did warm the air with the smells of *pollastrini panati*, white-bait, polenta, *vitello ripieno* or *polpo ripieno* with radicchio and rocket salad. The food was washed down with glasses of red wine.

As Sergio listened to the tabletalk, the kitchen was transformed, and through the alchemy of imagination and wine, the invisible became the visible. Nonna's face beamed and flushed with the strong smell of dung and tobacco. She said, '*Mio padre*.' And suddenly there

he sat, in the kitchen, a side-whisker peasant with a big moustache. Sergio watched as uncle Peppi, with the funny leg, sat on his nonna's knee. And the rest of her biological tribe of bare-footed little brothers and sisters, who would have been thirteen in all, if some hadn't died, burnt up by typhus, stared at the bowl with the remains of soggy *radicchio* on a crude table.

'Tell me Nina what did you do today?'

Nonna went wide-eyed and shrank on hearing her father's deliberate voice. From inside her a girl blamelessly answered, 'Mamma gave me a hiding.'

'All beltings are heaven sent,' he said giving them a searching gaze which went to the willow switch above the door. 'Behave or that switch will jump off its perch if you're *cattiva*.'

'Nina dropped Peppi on his head.' The kids chorused as their father drew the salad bowl to himself shaking his head slowly, soaking the last heel of corn bread.

'Papa, can we have some?' they asked, their faces from small to tall telling of their hunger.

He swirled the bowl saying in a radiating voice, 'No, no, no. This is not for children, my little seeds. This is only for grown-ups like me and the priest.'

As she stopped remembering, Nonna grabbed the bowl, seeing her father in a different time and at his meanest.

'Nonna, can I have a taste?' asked Sergio.

'Here.'

He took a sip.

'It's bitter.'

'*Sine moj, e amaro come i ricordi della mia gioventu.*'

Sergio watched as Nonna vigorously swirled the dressing before downing it in one slug, just as her father had done, not a moment ago, when he was still visible and waxing his moustache.

Sergio thought about school and that essay.

Nonna spoke again, 'It was Peppi who wrote me to come to Fiume after Giovanni died of tuberculosis. I shut all the house windows so his soul couldn't get back in ... What was a young widow with a kid going to do? I couldn't wait to get away from the country mud. So I went to Fiume.'

As Nonna spoke the Golfo di Fiume glittered like cullet. The past became the present. Sergio smelt the sea air in the kitchen just before he caught sight of the *vaporetto* arriving at Molo San Marco. And there she was, his nonna, a young rustic widow with a young daughter, all mesmerized and excited by the bustle and the prospects of the city, and by the anticipation that young Peppi would meet them on shore.

'But you didn't, did you Peppi?'

'If only I hadn't fallen in love.'

'This time it's love, eh Peppi?'

'But this bad leg on my hip ... Anyway Caterina didn't want a cripple.'

Nonna fell silent for a moment.

'So I enlisted as a volunteer for Spain.'

'That's where you got killed, isn't it?'

'I was looking for death. With bullets flying everywhere you'd think I'd have found what I was looking for, but I came back without a scratch.'

'So where were you Peppi?'

'A few days before you and Maria arrived I saw Caterina again, and then I saw her in everything I did. But even with my medals she wouldn't have me. So the day before you arrived I shot myself, after shooting Caterina. That's why I wasn't at Molo San Marco when you arrived.'

'It's better than your last story, Peppi.'

'That's the truth Nina.'

'Peppi, your truth changes each Saturday.'

'But Nina if it doesn't change, then there's no truth.' Peppi smiled, 'Anyway, memories can't be trusted. The past that was, in the long run differs little from the past that wasn't.'

Nonna then recalled Via Valscurignia where she found a small room.

'Giulia also gave us the porcupine for the cockroaches,' said Maria.

'Poor *balilla*. How he ended in the dunny, I'll never know.'

Before Nonna could go on, now Pietro's *zio* Clemente appeared from the past, 'I'll have another red. Maybe I should have a couple.' The kitchen walls oozed wine.

The wine made *zio* Clemente's head sing and then his throat sang,

*Trieste mia, che nostalgia  
Tu sei il mio grande amor*

'Let's go fishing. It's the feast of *San Vito*, I've the boat, bait and grog.'

It was the *Festa di San Vito Modesto* and lighters, barges, clinkers and *barghozzi* were out on the dark water. Pietro and his *zio* had their boat garlanded with bunting, mock chains, and lanterns. Joining the small flotilla they all saw from round the table, the onshore fireworks sheen and boom gracefully like frizzling stars on the ceiling of the kitchen sky. After the spectacle, they jigged for calimari by lantern. Later drunk *zio* rambled,

'I've met a few strange men since I got my captaincy. I met this family. English or Irish. In Trieste it was. The father was a writer. Said he was going to write a book to make the dead speak. I said doesn't everyone who writes do that? His name was Gianni ... no Giacomo ... Giacomo Joyce.'

'Giulia was a good woman,' Nonna cut in again as she shook her head sadly. Sergio saw Giulia prinking, fixing her ample bolster, he heard her fart, still in the sweet erotic mist of the night before. He watched as she got out of bed, still pinched in her corset, to squat her buttocks over a pot. She was all smells.

'Throw it out of the window there, little man,' she said stepping back into bed. Sergio, in his mind, opened the window, returned the pot trembling. '*La Buona Via* was packed Nina,' Giulia said from her bed languidly. 'The best in Fiume were there for coffee and liqueurs after the show at the Verdi. I met this exciting Italian gentleman with one eye who offered me cognac. He drives a black motor and lives in a palazzo with a pet eagle. His name's D'Annunzio ... the poet!'

'Hey, Serge! Serge! Sergeeeeoh! Hey Serge. Are ya comin' out?'

Distracted, Sergio opened the flywire door. Steven and his meaty brother Clarry. Piggy-faced. Loose black shorts. Spindly legs. New footy boots with stops. Both looking like real footballers. Both reeking of eucalypt ointment. Sergio heard the umpire's whistle call the game at Angliss Reserve.

'Are ya comin for a kick?' said Steve, holding his misshapen footy.

'I can't. I'm havin' lunch now.'

'What about after?'

An outbreak of yells the other side of the cypresses. 'Maybe.'

Going back into the kitchen Sergio wondered with faint envy, why Clarry and Steven had everything. Piles of comics to swap. They even had a Pye TV!

'When I was a little kid,' his father continued, 'I saw D'Annunzio as a *fascista* posing as if for a monument. With an eagle on his arm he found many people with stray cats assembled beneath the parapet of the ex-governor's palazzo. It had been announced that he would speak and give a performance, and Zarathustra thus spake to the people. After three hours of oration, even the sun disappeared and the crowd's incomprehension became fatigue. Someone in the crowd called out, 'When are we going to see the eagle eat the cats?' After the eagle killed and gutted a mangy kitten, the mob yelled, 'Viva D'Annunzio! Viva D'Annunzio!'

In his head Sergio was always ready but never prepared for the piercing howl of death as Nonna said in a dull panic, 'Poor Giulia. They killed her while that Italian marionette saved his skin.'

'I had to rush to Paris,' protested D'Annunzio.

'To your French tarts. Where's your conscience?'

'Signora, what's conscience? I'm a great artist. An aviator-poet, a dramatist. A gentlemen! I understand women perfectly. I always give them pleasure by taking my clothes off first.'

'On that I can't comment,' Nonna said, 'but as a man, you're a *mascalzone*, a pervert with the seeds of all infection in you ... So they went and killed her, poor Giulia, they flung her body from her top window into the street! While D'Annunzio buzzed and throttled dizzily round the kitchen light as if it were the sun, in a beautiful toy two-winger with strutted spoke wheels, Sergio, hardly daring to breathe, saw Giulia's darkening dumped corpse rounded by onlookers.

'You Fiumani! You vipers!' Nonna choked — not on tears, but what must have been a chicken bone.

'Remember when Il Duce visited Fiume?' said Maria with youthful enthusiasm. 'I was about twelve. We *balilla* children waited for hours with little flags. The crowd was yelling with hearts fluttering. We were all bursting with curiosity and excitement, when I felt a hand grab me by the back of the neck, and drag me back. You could have waited until I saw him Mamma.'

'Maria, you had lice walking over your hair!'

'But I wanted to see Il Duce so much. That's all we had talked and sang about for weeks. All for nothing.'

'Nothing? You get lice waiting to see *quel buffone, quel figlio de...*'

'We did mass exercises in gymnastics. All to music.' Sergio's father disagreed, his voice betraying a tinge of pride. 'I recall Il Duce saying it was a fine display of disciplined manly toughness.'

'They were shaven-headed fanatics,' cut in Nonna. 'Capable of doing anything they wanted with or without half a litre of castor oil.'

Sergio's mother went on remembering. 'My infancy was the most serene and undisturbed period of my life. There was nothing bad or upsetting in the papers. I never heard of anyone doing anything wrong. No crimes, nothing. We were told not to worry, everything was being taken care of, everything was all in the hands of law and order. We were encouraged to keep quiet minds.'

'Quiet but with our tails between our legs,' Nonna muttered grimly.

'The fascists organised seaside summer camps for war orphans. The worst of it for us kids was getting up early and saluting the Italian flag while singing *Sole che Sorgi* and smelling the sour armpits of the other girls.'

'We wanted Fiume independent,' his father said seriously. 'And all I was interested was *dopo lavoro* sport. Who had time to meddle in politics?'

'And the devil got Fiume anyway,' said Nonna.

'We were abandoned in the chaos.'

'To arrests, torture and shooting.'

'And now we're Austalian,' said Sergio.

'You and your sister will be Australian. We're going to be what we are,' his father said. 'Our past is always with us.'

'Not like some Fiumani in Australia who put on airs and graces,' Nonna went on, 'ones who've forgotten that not too long ago they washed like cats and wiped their bums with newspaper.'

'I'm glad to be in Australia,' said Maria.

'Me too,' said Nonna, 'this is the promised land. But it's for them to be Australians.'

Sergio waited for them to go on talking about Australia, but all he heard was the little they were prepared to acknowledge of their



existence in this country. Their reality here had no meaning. He suddenly realised why they returned again and again to the familiar facts they knew, because they were absolutes that kept them together on common ground. Absolutes that gave their universe a purpose, otherwise their lives, their personalities would be meaningless to the point of extinction.

So at home Sergio acquired a mosaic heritage of ghosts and places encased in a world in which 14 Bromyard Street, Yarraville became Fiume ... the railway station which faced a large tobacco-factory, Viale Benito Mussolini to the right to the Piazza Cesare Battisti. On the left the Gothic church of the Capuchins completed in 1927, on the right the Capitaneria di Porto, with the little Museo Marittimo and an aquarium... they continued east along the Riva Emanuele Filiberto to the Piazza Dante. The theatre Verdi was backed by the Canalle della Fiumara, an old arm of the harbour, now the frontiera ... little to the north was Piazza Scarpa and the Cattedrale (Duomo), the oldest church in Fiume, situated in the old part of town. From Viale Venti Settembre approached by a flight of 230 steps ... Nonna argued it was 235, his father had the notion it was 238, his mother wasn't sure ... then there was the Parco Regina Margherita. The Piazza Dante was bound by il Corso. His father said the right, Maria said the left. Nonna said they were both wrong, the Torre Civica was straight ahead. By passing underneath this tower and crossing the Piazza delle Erbe they reached the congested Citta Vecchia ... Abbazia, Trieste, Susak, Piazza Braida, Monte Calvario and the War ... This was a place of many places where a few living and a multitude of dead came together to be remembered with love or resentment or both, before they were progressively pressed into amber until the next time.

Nonna handcranked the coffee grinder to make fresh coffee, filling the kitchen with her restless presence as Sergio wondered, how far did he belong? How much of him was Australian? At home on a Saturday, they were loud and happy but outside, on the bus, or in the shops, or at the doctor's they had no voice and he was the one who had to speak for them. How he hated the difference then. He remembered the time at the local butcher's when the loud big Aussie who called everyone 'love' and 'mate' turned on them. When his mother had said, '*Basta, basta*, enough, enough,' to some meat being weighed, the butcher became black and mean, kicking them out of the shop with a, 'Go back

where you come from you ungrateful dagoes ... I'll show you what a real bastard is!' That butcher was an Aussie. Sergio felt the clash within himself. Just being able to speak English, like his schoolmates, was reshaping him. How was he going to write about the Australian identity when he wasn't sure about who he was? How could he put into words what he thought he might be? Would it be any easier to write about his European one? But how much of it was *his*, how much was his *family's* ?

'What are you doing?'

'I'm not sure, Nonna. I have to write, *what it means to be an Australian?*

'Why not ask your friend Clarry or his brother?' To Nonna it was simple. 'They're Australian.'

'I just don't know. It's like being in two places. I don't feel all one. If I'm Australian, then I'm them and they are me. I'm one with them. Oh, it gets all jumbled. When I'm at school I think I belong but when I am here, I don't. When I'm here I think of out there.'

'Everyday, I ask myself the same question,' said Nonna.

'Don't you know either?'

'I'm a very absent-minded woman. Sometimes I hit the furniture and say, 'Who is it?' And when I look in the mirror I ask, 'Who are you?' Nonna gave an enigmatic laugh.

At fifteen, Sergio could not articulate the contradictions, the dilemmas he felt. How to define an identity? Did it come from the ruins and distortions of one's heritage, one's history or from memories?

'Anyway,' said Nonna, 'whatever you say, say something nice.'

He stared at the blank page in front of him, *What it means to be an Australian?* Being, being... becoming. He began trying to find some coherent idea that might fill the page, but he did it slowly, with difficulty.

## FOOTSCRAY HIGH SCHOOL

*Summers spent hiding ...  
Reading a book while the others wash up*

*Jennifer Rankin*

In 1960, I arrive flat-chested among a class of buxom girls obsessed with dates, diaries and doing their hair into hard stiff-teased, spray-canned beehives in front of the toilet mirror at recess, lunchtime and after school. Everything seems new, modern – long corridors of shiny linoleum floors along grey cement-tile classblocks with ubiquitous wide venetian blinds behind endless rooms of glass. Everything so different to the old double-storey red brick Kingsville Primary built in 1919.

17-2 -1960

*Dear Diary,*

*I'm in love. His name is Robert. Bob. He's in my form. Tall, dark and dreamy. Sits behind me in every lesson. I'm miserable, happy and silly all at once. Go all red when he comes in the room. Feel like I'm waiting for the dentist everytime he passes me. My friends haven't guessed yet but I'm bursting with it. He never looks at me. The form captain Debbie is after him. He's old, nearly 13.*

The first week at high school is great. A different room and different teacher for every lesson. New lockers and keyrings on silver chains which we swing around our fingers every recess trying to look tough and in the know. Lots of kids swear and tell jokes I don't always get. There are science laboratories with bunsen burners, art rooms with real easels, and sewing rooms with electric machines instead of the one pedal apparatus in the corner back at primary. After a few weeks, classwork is boring. Only a few periods stand out from the monotony of rote dictating and copying from the blackboard.

One day in science, we chuck orange peels which escalates into an out of control fruit fight which is terrific fun. My gang is sent to detention where we have to do several pages of nine digit long multiplication sums for punishment, reinforcing all the girls' hatred

for Maths. The only period which I enjoy in this bewildering subject of Mathematics with its new- fangled algebra and geometry is when we draw Egyptian hieroglyphics. Our teacher, who is Irish, and one year off being a medical doctor, starts reading aloud Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. This unearthing of the enigmatic mysteries of human lives seems more relevant to me than discovering that  $x=3$ ,  $y=2$  and Maths = boredom. One day in French, after three months of lessons, we suddenly realise, that 'Asseyez - vous ' means ' Sit down.' No wonder there is so much confusion at the start of every period. Another lunchtime, an anti-smoking film of a lung cancer operation in full living colour on the big wide screen of the school demonstration room causes chaos. As the black decayed organ is pulled from the chest every second girl faints. We all end up in a very overcrowded sick bay for the rest of the day missing out on a double period of yes, you guessed it, Maths.

23- 7-60

*Dear Diary,*

*I 'm dying. Robert, Bob, Bobby, my sweet Rob, likes Debbie. At the form party last night, he kissed her over a hundred times. I know, I counted. Every time I ached with agony. I'm going crazy. I went home early and vomited. Mum thinks I'm sick and won't let me go to school but I have to see him. I'm mad - at him, at her, at myself for wanting him. Loony. Going round the twist. Insane. Mad, quite, quite mad. Maybe Mum should lock me up!*

It is an academic streamed school. Forms are ranked from A to E but even in the A form where I am put after an entrance test anyone who talks about their academic results is seen as a show-off or skite. Quickly, I opt for a low profile and lots of friends. It is a 'melting pot' of nationalities and backgrounds. I do not know about assimilation policies of the government but do know that students come from all over the place and nobody really cares as long as they act like everyone else - young Australian women or men. Gender roles are important. There is no identity crisis. The real endeavour of every girl is to catch older boyfriends or even better, real men with cars. Most of the first formers' main aim in life is to grow up fast to be a woman with such a man. Someone with a hot rod and money who will take you out to the drive-in for a petting session you can brag

about in school. No-one talks about careers or ambitions, just about the weekends. We chase senior boys up and down the corridors and one afternoon on the way home, ambush one heart-throb in a telephone booth forcing him to give us his autograph, then wonder why he avoids us forever after.

Behaving like a good girl is enforced at home too. Mum likes me to do well but Dad is uneasy about it. Says it is easier to stay in the middle of the pack than out in front. At primary school, when I win prizes as dux of the grade, Mum is thrilled but Dad is not, says all sorts of things about it being too hard to keep that up and not getting a big head and that it makes life too hard especially if you are a girl who is only going to get married anyway. Maybe he knows how hard it is for a woman to get ahead in the world. A professional career for a female is rare. You hear about it but never see it. I do not know any women in the area who are doctors or lawyers or business executives or just full-time white collar workers apart from a couple of teachers or nurses. My mum is the only mum of all my friends who actually works and her job is just part-time, as a washing machine demonstrator. Maybe Dad wants me to be happy, fitting into this system that he understands. Or maybe Dad knows me better than I know myself ... that I am a nervous worrier like him, a bit of a perfectionist who likes to perform well, putting the pressure on even at a laidback school like Footscray High, even to the extent of getting sick. At school, I want to do well but have the sense to keep my results quiet. I am not easygoing like my brother who takes school tests and pressures in his stride without losing sleep. On the morning of exams he always says, 'Well, let's see how good my teachers are!'

Built in 1954, Footscray High School, Wembley Avenue, Spotswood, is the first secondary school for the more academically-minded students of the western suburbs. Mum tells me that ever since the Depression, there had been a call for such a school but the Footscray Tech for boys and Footscray Girls Tech have been the only option in state education for the whole area. From 1930 to 1954, brainy kids continued to trickle on to Williamstown, MacRobertson Girls', Melbourne or University High. By 1965, my final year at the school, there are 904 students of many mixed nationalities, some rich but mostly working class kids with battling parents trying to make ends meet. Despite what we consider a good standard of education, a

few kids still choose to leave Footscray High after year 10 to try the so-called better schools across the river. To us they are defectors or deserters.

After a few weeks in the place, I learn that the school's motto, *Vera Quarere* - to seek the truth - is interpreted by most as the right to stand up for ourselves and be proud of who we are no matter where we come from. Most kids like to muck about, break the rules but particularly to challenge authority. School uniform - having to wear your cap or hat coming or going to the place - are seen as a bit of a joke, particularly after third form. Leave passes, class attendance, respect for teachers, detention measures are all enforced but in an inconsistent way. There are a few tyrants and a few great teachers but it is only the principal, Mr Page (1954-1967) that most of us respect. He is a kind man of integrity who in his quiet leadership encourages academic and sporting achievement. Generally, however, rigid consistent discipline is lacking. Every class has one or two ratbags. The real nutters with psychopathic tendencies who torture other kids or throw mad four-letter word fits with stones or glass bottles are quickly expelled. Generally, there are typical petty offences such as talking too much, booby-trapping the room for unsuspecting teachers, changing names, hiding the duster, removing or chucking chalk, never bringing the right books. Then, the more subtle tactics, asking impossible questions to nerve-wracked, conscientious, new or jaded teachers. The best targets of all are the smart young things straight out of Uni or even better, student teacher try-hards, still idealistic, all intent on winning us over, wanting to be friends, inspiring us to write poetry, draw intricate maps, calculate angles, act in plays but instead getting a riot in every session.

In February, Phys Ed is fun, getting the tumbler mats out, runners on, sports skirts on, the horse set up. By May, it is too cold and we can't be bothered, offering up all sorts of excuses such as flu and asthma and unexpected painful cramps. Producing fabricated letters from parents about why we have to stay in the warm changing room to discuss our love lives is more sensible than running around a freezing muddy oval getting tired.

We do not know then we are reflecting the working class ethos of mateship and egalitarianism but learn quickly no-one is allowed to stand out above the crowd. Everyone has to be like everyone else and

play the game according to the peer group rules: don't suck up to teachers, and don't show off with top marks or individual performances, even on the sports fields unless part of a team. A group can brag. Team spirit is encouraged with our four sports teams – Red, Blue, Green, Gold which later become, Goble, Hoadley, Gent and Shepherd, named after local politicians or historical male somebodies that nobody remembers. I am put in Red (Goble), the same team as my brother Ian who is a senior prefect and suddenly am popular with lots of older girls who have a crush on my tall handsome brother.

26-2-61

*Dear Diary,*

*Oh God, thankyou, thankyou. My prayers have been answered. I've been picked to star in a play with Robert. Bob is to be my husband Captain Keeney. It's 'Ile' by Eugene O'Neill. I'll play the part of the loony wife, Annie. I can't believe my luck. To act with him. I want it to be good. I want to be great. Hysterically mad in front of everyone. I want him to notice me. Oh to have such lines to say to him in front of the whole school ...*

KEENEY: (disturbed) Go in and rest, Annie. You're all wore out cryin' over what can't be helped.

MRS KEENEY: (suddenly throwing her arms around his neck and clinging to him) You love me, don't you David?

*To be on a stage at last! And with him! Alone rehearsing! Oh bliss! Rehearsals together, just the two of us for five weeks!*

The teachers of Footscray High School are a mixed bag of the gifted and the hopeless. One Science teacher wears his pyjamas under his clothes and when we bait him about biology and human reproduction, he always leers with his daily invitation: 'If you want a full demonstration I will be happy to stay behind after school.' No-one ever does. Then there is the Music teacher, a stately lady with a blue rinse and ample chest who plays the piano beautifully and demonstrates how to sing, 'From here, from your bosom girls!' She is romantic, in love with Paladin in the TV series *Have Gun Will Travel*. One night before a listening test we go to her house to ask

for help but she slams the door in our faces and shouts, 'I never, never, work after four.' As we cycle away we hear Rachmaninov being banged out.

At 13, we think she's funny, a ludicrous figure, lusting after a young actor at her age. All the senior women teachers are old and unmarried. They are never seen as role models, just pathetic frustrated old bags with no-one to love. At that age, we do not think of old menopausal women being capable of yearning, let alone sexual desire. They have our scorn but never our understanding. Like the needlework teacher who is my nightmare. My worst class is sewing. She is fifty or so, has streaky hair, a gravelly smoker's voice and a lined face with silver hairs above her upper lip. Every lesson she shouts at us, 'I learnt to knit on four inch nails!' I quake every time I have to show my embroidery sampler which I have to repeat over and over again. On Sunday nights I lie awake dreading the Monday ordeal. I fail the subject. It is the worst mark of my whole life. My future as a housewife looks grim.

Our Geography teacher is a kind lady who cuddles you if you get sick. Then there are the two senior Maths teachers who teach with an iron will so that we all can recite the formulas but do not understand why. And there are several wonderful English/ History teachers who introduce me to Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, the classics of Dickens, Austen, Hemingway and the eternal dramas of human experience. One art teacher is a crazy man with wild hair who talks to himself and is rarely there but when he is, he paints miraculous tropical jungles with dark fecund forests where anything is possible. We accept him because he can do something really well, the first real artist I ever meet. His name is Hope, which seems appropriate.

And then there are the teachers whom students giggle and gossip about - the teacher with the huge boobs that all the boys dream about who is having an affair with one of the married teachers at the school; then the teacher's mistress who comes up to the school drunk and sits on the lawn refusing to go home until he appears; the two female teachers who are more than friendly; the tall bearded teacher with a paint-stained corduroy suit who sings in cafes and is a real communist beatnik, who owes the school canteen sixteen pounds for his lunches and on whom I have the most passionate crush, to my mother's complete astonishment and total disapproval.



At last rehearsals have begun.

KEENEY: You know you could have all I got the power to give ye,  
Annie

MRS KEENEY (wildly): Then do this for my sake, for God's sake -  
take me home! It's killing me, this life, this brutality and  
cold and horror of it. I'm going mad. I can hear the silence  
threatening me. I can't bear it. I'm going insane.

12-3-61

Dear Diary,

*It's all off. Bob wants to pull out. Says there's too many  
lines to learn. Says the play's a drag, the whole thing. He asked me if I  
agreed. What could I say? I want to play the part of the wife so much.  
I wanted to go crazy with him. But we told the teacher we both didn't  
want to do it. We're in trouble now. No-one else wants to do it  
either. I just couldn't do it to him or without him.*

I hate changing in front of other girls. I am underdeveloped  
compared to most of them. In Pix magazine, I read a story of a girl  
who changes into a boy and start worrying about my body. There's  
plenty of time but try to tell that to a thirteen year old! All the girls  
ever talk about is their bodies and their periods; when it is due, how  
long it takes, what the pain is like, what to do for cramps, what to do  
in an emergency ... I get on the scales and wonder why I am so thin,  
aching to be a woman. And then one day I have a dull pain in my  
lower back for hours and then I know I am normal after all. Everyone  
talks about how horrible it all is but I feel elated, almost celebratory.  
The menarche. Initiation rituals. I read in a history book about rites  
of passage, cultural pain tests in the Pacific islands, which take on a  
new meaning for me. I too want to walk on hot coals, get a tattoo,  
brand myself with fertility symbols. Even better, a big Barmitzvah  
just for me, like a friend of my cousin's over in Caulfield, sounds the  
thing. I am a young woman on the verge of her adulthood, but  
confirmation in the local Anglican church has to do.

At the school sports at the Yarraville Football Ground, Gunta and I  
run in the relay. My mum is working on the Mother's Club stand  
selling Jubbleys (cardboard triangles of cordial which cut your mouth)

and hot dogs does not recognise me with my sport skirt tucked up in my pants.

'No, that's not my Helen,' she says to another woman pointing me out as the immodest girl running with her dress way up, showing off all her legs in a rather brazen fashion. My dad arrives to watch us compete. It is a happy day for the family. First, I am running which seems to please my sports-minded father and as well Ian has been in training for the main event, the mile. The whole school watches as ten fit boys jog off around the oval. I look at my brother running straight and strong and think of Mildura doctors telling my mum he will never walk without a limp. He runs past us beaming, just glad to be out there with his mates running in the sun. Suddenly he passes the favourite and a few others. Then he is in the lead. His severely broken leg is long forgotten. I glance at my parents. My mother is crying silent tears and my father is biting white lips. It is very close but Ian comes in second. Dad, all emotional, pats him on the shoulders and Mum just glows with her hugging look. It confirms there are some things better than winning.

Weekends are spent swapping clothes and beauty secrets, practising the latest rage - the twist - and reading adult books with my new friends, Dianne and Robyn. Robyn smuggles them out from her mother's bookcase. They have racy titles like *Angelique*, *Peyton Place*, *Mandingo* and even *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. We read each other the dirty bits and learn more about sexuality than any biology course can give us. We have not heard of Freud or Sade but in our early teens we think there is nothing we do not know. Nevertheless, form parties are a bit awkward. Girls pair off with boys and start kissing in corners. One girl has the class record ... she reckons 2,345 times. My gang of four is a bit more choosy. At fourteen, we get the reputation as being a bit stuck-up. Innocents, we pretend to be very experienced but we are not the ones from our grade who meet boys behind the school in the long grass of McIvor Reserve. These are the girls who leave school sadly, secretly, living adult lives with families in Housing Commission flats while we continue to wonder and whisper about them. I see one on the Footscray station with her baby. She looks away so as not to say hello.

*Dear Diary,*

*Robert sat with me the other day and talked about stuff. Started remembering things from form one and two. Laughed about getting out of the play. Asked me what I was doing next weekend. It wasn't an invite or anything but I think there's a bit of interest. I've tried to forget him but I can't. I still ache for him. It's always him at the back of my mind. Still go all hot and cold at the sight of him. He's going out with Nicole in form five. She's a year older than him!*

Along the school corridors are many encounters. 'Do you believe in sex before marriage?' A pimply large boy is breathing down my neck near his locker. He paws me as I pass and I move away repulsed, thinking how strange that some day, somewhere, someone will love this young man with his nervous breathing, sweating palms and longing hopeful eyes. Outside the art room, I see a painting on the wall, a portrait unlike any art done by another student at this school. It is a portrait of a young girl, about eleven or twelve. The dark eyes have such depth and the face, a look of intense yearning that I can't pass by to class. I stop. Mesmerised. The stare of the searcher, naive innocence contrasted with worldly longing.

My first date is uneventful. I go out with well-meaning boys from church and 'nice lads', as my mum calls them, from school. A 'date' is to the pictures in Footscray or to the school social. A farewell kiss and an occasional grope is expected.

In my mid-teens, I rediscover skating. Gunta suggests the outing and our gang heads off one Saturday for St Kilda excited about the ice, the music, the possible guys we'll meet.

I lace up the boots quickly, elated to be there at last, having a go. It is cold and noisy, crowded with teenagers moving on the chilly wet surface smooth as glass. Unsure, I step out and within seconds have fallen over in terrible agony, my left leg twisted painfully beneath me. Two young men carry me off.

My friends laugh. 'Helen will do anything for a bit of attention.'

The leg hangs askew. I know it is broken. I sit in a backroom refusing help, asking for my parents. The man with a first-aid bag says it is just a sprain but I know better and wait for Dad. I end up in the Footscray Hospital for a week with a very bad spiral fracture of the

tibia and fibula. I do not walk unaided for six months. Crutches and a caliper become part of me.

At fifteen, I become the girl at home, sitting, eating in the lounge, watching midday movies and quiz shows. I miss a month of high school and a half a year of socialising. Robyn and Lorraine, my next-door neighbour, visit often and I start thinking about favours and friendship. On crutches, back at high school, I stagger around the corridors to shouts of, 'Watch out! Lady with a pram! Lady with a pram!'

I am filling out, becoming shapelier and quieter. Start writing stories and reading poetry, sometimes until dawn, but do not tell anyone, in case they think I have gone queer with my plastered leg. Everyone is sorry for me. Mum cannot do enough. Dad is forever telling me jokes and Ian is kind, bringing me home special treats like oysters and chocolate. He now has lots of spare cash working for the Public Service. The doctor says I will have to wear a caliper for a while and I'm self-conscious in front of people, especially boys. But it's not too bad, reading and thinking. And I play up to all the sympathy glorying in my Romantic melancholy of being a crippled girl cut down in the prime of her youthful dancing years.

I hear my mum telling Ian to make me laugh. He tries but it's no use. It is my turn to be the centre of attention. It is my turn to be the girl at the window staring out at the world.

\*

\*

\*

*Dear Diary,*

*Bob, Bobby, Rob, ( my Robert), has asked me to his brother's wedding. To go as his partner. To be with his family. To accompany him by taxi. To sit with him all afternoon and night! I can't believe this joy. Five years of waiting for this moment. I am pinching myself in ecstasy.*

### THE FINAL PERFORMANCE

ROBERT: Want to watch me play in the ruck next Saturday?

HELEN: Suppose so.

ROBERT: I'm usually a forward. Did you see me kick the winning goal last week?

HELEN: No.

ROBERT: You should've seen it. Went like a rocket. Coach reckons I've got a chance to make the seniors with my form at the moment. How about a walk around the block, you know, outside for a bit ?

HELEN: Yeah, okay. If you want.

(Aside, to the audience )

A bit of what? Oh God, take me home, the boredom, it's killing me ... I 've been with him for half an hour and already I know I don't love him. I don't even like him. I'm going mad. I can feel the threat in the air. I can hear the silence. I'm going mad. Insane. Mad. Totally mad.

## SEEING THINGS

*Hawaiian Eyyyeei!*  
*Hawaiian Eyyyeee!*  
*The soft island breeze*  
*Brings us strange reveries,*  
*Exotic mysteries,*  
*Under a tropical ... ?*

What? Weather? Sunset? Heaven? He could never remember the last line. The words wafted about in his head as he crooned and drifted through the untropical suburban paradise to get to Footscray High. Hawaiian Eyeeei! ... at Footscray High.

One morning, Sergio was asked to leave class. The secretary who looked like a woman because she wore a dress, led the way. At the end of a corridor, he was left outside a black door. As he waited, he began feeling an awful uncertainty. Why was he here?

'Sergio, is it?' A round woman turned without waiting for an answer. He followed the back of her wavy dark hair and snow-white coat.

After filling in a card, she said with a thin smile that made her plump face plumper, 'I'd like you to go in there.' She pointed to a heavy drape over a doorway, it suggested some privacy. 'Take your clothes off and leave your underpants.'

'Where Miss?' he asked with mounting uncertainty.

'Preferably on,' she said, this time using her stethoscope to indicate the draped doorway. He stripped. When he emerged, the flesh on his arms and legs had gathered into prickling pins. Shrunk with cold, shy and shivering, he was glad his undies were clinging to him. Without a word, she proceeded to investigate him with vigorous taps to the chest, the abdomen, and then surprised him by asking him to cough as she looked down the front of his jocks instead of his throat. Finally, as he stood bristling with discomfort, she asked him to cover his left eye and read an eye chart with his right. He did.

'Good, now the left. Read down until the letters blur.'

**E**

**F N E B P**

**ndabe ??**

'Again.' She considered him with a suspicious look. He clearly saw her podgy fingers go for her glasses riding the gentle well and swell of her body.

'En, Bee, Bee Dee?'

'Try the line under please.' Now her voice sounded clinical and concerned.

'Um, e ... um ... tee?' He hit a lot of fuzz.

'Sit close to the TV, do we?'

'We haven't got one yet, Miss.'

'Good. Bad for the eyes and brain.'

The result of all this was unsettling. He needed glasses. It now meant no faking, and he had to sit near the blackboard, getting burdened by work and teacher attention, both of which he didn't want. One thing though he was pleased about, teachers no longer told him to stop talking, as he didn't have to ask what was written on the blackboard. All this lasted until he got his new horn-rimmed specs in Footscray one Saturday morning. With new eyes he had to adjust to everything around him.

After the usual big lunch, when his parents and Nonna began reviving the customary dramas of their past, Sergio noticed that they now added new things like the importance of hard work, rectitude, sobriety, honesty, morality, the cleanliness of their front windows and the whiteness of their washing compared to that of their neighbours, and what an impression they made on the neighbourhood, or so they thought. And other virtues, values and proprieties, they believed the Cerne family had, and the world wished it had. They went fancifully on with notions about themselves, until Sergio felt there was no room for anyone. So he escaped the confined enchantment of their memories and what they invented of themselves by carefully sneaking off to meet his mates.

Angliss Reserve. With bikes slung round him he saw Aldo trying to look cool, hunched behind trees, choofing a Craven A, hoping no one would see the smoke and waiting for something to happen. There was no home game. No-one to leap in the ruck or fly for the mark. No crowd, no yelling, no screaming, no rough stuff, no umpires' whistles, no heckling, no abuse. 'Can't ya see, ya white maggot!' 'Dob it through the sticks, ya blind mullet!' Nothing. In fact it was worse than nothing. It was boring. The empty ground was dead

with boredom, alive only with swarms of gulls pinking for grass bugs.

'Cop this,' said Aldo. 'What's Serge wearing?'

'Looks toffy,' said Griffio, who stopped singing *Shakin' All Over* to suck a gobful of air and smoke, moving his eyes from Sergio's feet up to his face. He was hanging upside down from a big branch.

'Don't ya get fed carrots ya bunny?' asked Aldo.

'What's with the specs, pal?'

'I don't want to walk under a truck.'

'Inter early old age, eh?' Aldo split his joined eyebrows laughing.

Sergio wasn't cut, but he could have kicked Aldo's funny bone just the same. Griffio let go by stretching his arms in a kind of handstand and swung down to his feet. Then straddling his bike, and sagging from its apehangers, he hoiked something gritty out of his chest and slagged it into a tree.

'So what's happenin'?' he said. The others looked so bored they seemed incapable of thinking. 'This pisses me off, let's find sugar to shag.'

'Griff, there's crumpet up the lanes,' said Aldo suddenly excited. 'There's all these Mick sheilahs with the hots for a pash.'

Griffio looked at Aldo. He tried to smile. He looked away. He turned away. And to enhance his presence he pedalled away. And they hurtled after him into the heady, dishevelled world of West Footscray; a maze of narrow lanes and shabby backyards, shoddy tin sheds, chicken coops, clothes-lines, grubby fruit trees and miles of weathered, ramshackle fences covered with tangled-rampant couch. Here they roamed and went twitchy spurred by the promise of crumpet with which Aldo had mozzed them.

Eventually, near a chookshed, they drooled, through the cracks of a rickety fence; eyes stuck on a well-developed young woman hanging clothing on a line. Aldo had a hand in his pants saying she had tits he could eat. Rooted on the spot, they perved until the young woman got alarmed by the flap of chooks. They laughed when she ran to the fence, calling them lots of names, none of them theirs. And they ran for their lives when she sooled the dogs after them.

It was in the rollicking adventure of that aimless afternoon, they got a whiff of the warm, lingering aroma wafting from Cains Quality Bakery. And they got nosey. Aldo impetuously slammed his bike



against the brick wall, and using the cross-bar, scaled over, disappearing for what seemed ages.

'Hey Aldo!' Sergio called. 'Are ya there?'

'Give'us a bunk.' The waiting was a strain on Griffo. He just wanted to chuck himself straight over.

'Hang on. I think he's back.'

Aldo's frizzy hair and eyebrow came up over the wall.

'Spot anything?' said Griffo impatiently.

'It's like a tip mate.'

'Any bread Aldo? I can smell it,' said Sergio.

'Na. Hang on. I'll see for dough and smokes.'

In no time they met inside Cains Bakery. Crouching, clinging close to the wall, wary of surprises or alarms, they thread their way through overgrown thickets of mallow, clusters of fennel and clumps of spiny weeds. They unobtrusively skirted heaps of construction litter. The place reeked with the ravaged remains of discarded bakers' carts, disused horse gear and junk that mouldered, rotting in dingy dilapidated stables.

They emerged near a huge newly built shed.

'Look! This is gunna be a steal, fellahs!'

They smashed lockers looking for stashed loot, then they combed the place for anything else that might be of value to them. On shelves they found a squashed packet of Turf and a tray of stale buns and eclairs which they bit and pelted about the place. It was then Griffo saw what they hadn't been prepared for.

\*

\*

\*

Concealment. Sergio lay low, keeping to the familiar, waiting under the withy cover of sagging willows by Stony Creek. To him, its familiar murkiness and sumpy pungent stink was like the smell of safety. It had been a close call. The memory swirl of what happened still made him shaky. He repeated uncomfortably to himself that it had only been a scare, he was in the clear. He was alright. He hadn't been ... he cleaned his new glasses trying to feel confident, putting them back on he eased himself to make a move and get himself home.

A break in the traffic on Somerville Road saw him about to cross safely, to get to the dirt track beside the shops. He'd be in the clear. He'd be gone. So, trying not to appear too eager he turned to make sure he was leaving a clean trail.

A car stopped near him. An old bloke with a no-fooling look leapt out. He grabbed Sergio and shoved him into the back where he met Griffo's frightened-guilty face. They sat there dumbly together. Sergio's new glasses fogged frequently.

\*

\*

\*

'Right. We'll take care of this pair,' a young copper nodded to the old bloke. He looked at Sergio and Griffo like one does trapped prey.

'Now about charges, Mr Cain ...' Sergio couldn't hear the rest because they were standing in the entrance of the red-brick Kingsville Police Station, but he supposed it had to be no good from the way the copper kept looking at them.

'How did they know it was me?' Serge asked Griffo.

Griffo didn't answer.

'Okay Mr Cain, we'll be in touch. Right you two in here.' The copper held up a bench top like a drawbridge. He let it slam behind them. Blazing neon strips gave the room a chilly buff.

The policeman went and sat on a desk, one hand toying with handcuffs caught on his belt, the other hand tapping a pencil on a black phone. Griffo stood beside a pin-board with a wanted poster.

'So, what have you two to say?' the constable asked taking them by surprise. There was no threat in his voice, in fact it sounded unexpectedly friendly. He even gave them a smile. 'What's the story fellahs?

'What story? We've did nuthin.'

'People don't come here for nothing, they're here because they're in trouble or because they're causing trouble. So who else was with you?'

'No-one,' replied Griffo.

'I see.'

A tinge of irritation in the copper's voice told them he knew it was all lies. Taking a pad and biro he said, 'I'll give you one more

chance, before I disturb the Senior's afternoon rest. Now, what's the story?'

Griffo began by telling about his brother who was a newspaper boy, and who gave up university to buy a new car, and how his old man had a glass eye and worked as a seagull on the wharves. The young copper put down his pen and pad and walked out of the office. Griffo smirked and sat himself on one of the office chairs like someone who had just come through a well-acted performance.

Whoever was approaching had the loudest-echoing voice Sergio had ever heard. But worse, it carried with it a tone of annoyance.

'These kids here for a social call or for a reason?' asked a solid, big-boned man with thick-black hair. White skin. Two silver V's on his forearms.

'A reason, sir.'

'Co-operative?' he asked making his way behind his wide desk. 'Or have we got a pair of clams?'

'One's a clam, sir ... '

'What's your name?' the Senior asked.

'Len Griffon.'

'What have you got to say?'

'Got a glass of water?'

The Senior leaned forward on his elbows. 'What about a cup of tea with scones?'

Griffo thought a second. 'That 'ud be sweet.'

'And while we're at it, what about an air-gun or a pocket-knife?'

Griffo considered, 'Ya wouldn't have a new footy?'

'Better still what about, a driver's licence?' The tone turned humourless and hard. 'Stop messing with me son. What's been going on?' he asked Griffo like Sergio wasn't there. Sergio wondered what made him invisible. Maybe his glasses? Were they a screen? Maybe the cop didn't want to be faced by glasses? The big man spoke to Griffo again, 'What were you doing up the lanes?'

'Seeing girlfriends.'

'Shouldn't you be playing sport? We got a call from a woman. Were you boys snooping?'

'Weren't us, we don't perve on old girls.'

Sergio felt caught between Griffo's evasive cheek and the policeman's hard brashness.

'And who was driving the delivery vans in Cains?'

'Weren't us.'

'Stop wasting my time son.'

'Can we go then?'

The Senior Constable's jowl tensed up just a bit.

'Don't be a joker son. I've just the thing for jokers with bad memories!'

With the cop's voice in his ears, Sergio heard the van roar, the gears grind, and he saw Griffio let go of the clutch which threw the van forward with a sudden leap followed by a metallic crunch before it stalled. Griffio emerged from the cabin wobbly, coughing, ears ringing with a concussed-wrapped look that yelled, "FAAARCK!" After that, they all got into clutching and grinding gears. In no time they were thrashing the guts out of those vans. They herbed down the concrete centre-strip and hit brakes just before head-ons at the end wall of the shed. The air was choked with exhaust and frying engine oil ... Sergio waited to hear the shattering sounds of glass and metal-mangling.

For him it was like being in the eye of the storm.

'Right, I'm going to stick a pin into you, dummies. Hello? Russell Street. Senior Constable at Kingsville Police Station here. Withholding information. Yeah. A couple of uncooperative delinquents. Send a divvy. The Watch House. No, they won't need pyjamas, the cold will do 'em good. I'll have them here when you come round. Right.' He downed the phone and stared at them. His face said they were waiting for court, prison, cold cells, hard beds, leg irons, no pyjamas and isolation along with all the other unknown joys of prison. 'Anything to add?' he asked.

All Sergio could find was a swallowed voice, 'You see we ... we ... '

'You!' the Senior exclaimed, 'I don't want to hear from some smart alec in specs!'

Griffio stepped up to the Senior, 'Listen mate ... can ya tell me why we're here?' He said it like some friendly wise guy who wanted to strike up an acquaintance. The Senior's face looked surprised, he grinned from ear to ear as his hands moved off the desktop. When they returned, it was Griffio and Sergio's turn to be surprised. His hands held a truncheon, the size of a lamp post. For a moment everything seemed to hang in mid-air, suspended, as the cop squared

his shoulders and let go by walloping the desk with a vigour that matched his rage. Everything in the station either jumped, rattled, shuddered, shook or ting-a-linged to the banging, while his voice thundered and blazed like it was about to knock down walls, doors and cave in the ceiling. The next instant the Senior slid the drawer shut with a sharp bang. He looked all satisfied, hands peacefully together on his desk as he yelled over the desk he'd almost pulverised.

'I'M NOT YOUR BLOODY MATE! RIGHT? I'M NOT YOUR BLOODY MATE! I WANT THE WHOLE STORY! THE WHOLE BLOODY TRUTH! RIGHT!'

They went to pieces. And *did* they talk. They couldn't tell the truth quickly enough. How it was Joey Biancucci, this pair Bruno and Boris, Bubi the Kraut, Allen Nestor, Nipper Battistella, Tom and Jerry, Snowie Brown, Ricky Nelson, the Swan Brothers, a kid called Krew Shev, the Dave Clark Five, the Latvian Twins and their mate ... yeah... their mate whatsisname? Yeah, you know. Oh, yeah Jerzy Abcdefghijkowski and ... and ... and ...

'Hang on. What was that last name?' asked the bewildered Senior.

'Want me to spell it?' Griffo's cheek had gone. But not out of him.

From that day on, and a long time after Sergio got to know what it was like to live life in fear. His conscience was tortured and persecuted. He lived like there was no tomorrow. Every time he heard a car going by or pulling up within 500 yards of his place; or if there was an ad on TV he'd find an excuse to peep between the venetians knowing it was the police. But it was always a false alarm so he finally settled to watching *Pick a Box* or *Homicide* or some show like that. In spite of all the false alarms it took him a long time before he showed any interest in learning how to drive.

Griffo ended by having to leave High School for factory jobs. His first one was glueing carton boxes somewhere in Spotswood, then as a welder at a Cyclops factory in Yarraville; but Sergio heard on the grapevine he got the axe because he got aggro and tried to weld some bloke's nuts together over a bad bet. After that Griffo got work as a boner in Gilbo's; for the first two weeks he rode his bike wearing ovies, then suddenly was behind the wheel of a back-dropped Yank tank.

A big Ford pulled up by the gutter beside Sergio. Its window went down. 'Hey, whatcha doin' pal?' asked Griff. Both hands running over the steering wheel. LOVE was lettered in purple under the knuckle of his right hand.

'Just going down the street.'

'Hop in. I'll give you a ride pal.'

Sergio scrambled into the front seat. Griff wore a red shirt and a well-greased hair-do. His eyes and face shone. They kind of matched his dazzlingly hot streamlined car which was all duco, gleaming chrome, throbbing engine and loud blurry radio. The car throttled forward. Inside, it reeked hair oil, aftershave, stale grog and tobacco. Sergio tried to talk several times over the car's bopping radio but couldn't.

'Still go ter the footy weekends?' Griff shouted.

'Na, haven't been.'

'Whaddya say?' He touched a dial. It made a slight difference to the screech on the radio.

'Yooo?' yelled Sergio. Yelling under water would have been easier.

'Me? Weekend's not long enough. Cricket, nags, shags and wild beer-ups. Saturday nights I get smashed off me scone. Ave a ripper time. Seen Aldo?'

'A bit. Works. Does night school at Footscray Tech.'

'He hasn't got much goin' for himself. Aldo's become a boring prick with a one track mind, if ya ask me. Got a girlfriend?'

'Not yet.'

'So what do ya do?'

'Nothing much. Read.'

'Yeah? What?' Griff yelled.

'Books.'

'One's with sheilas in the raw?'

'No. Words.'

'Shit! Is that normal?'

'What are you doin'?' Sergio yelled back over the radio.

'On the prowl to pick up some sugar, pal,' Griff shouted, taking a look at himself in the rear vision mirror, dragging a comb through a stiff head of hair. 'Take 'em for a ride. I'll go first, then you can have the back seat.'

*Love, Love Me Do* came over the radio

For an hour they drove round deserted streets looking for a backseat blonde, but all Sergio saw was row after row of flanked-duplicated Kingsville front yards, with their three-bedroom weatherboards, their empty porches with frosted glass front doors; the gardens all the same, some pretty and others in need of a prune or a mow; low wood-wire fences, single drives and letter boxes stretching along miles of bitumen. All the time Griffio raved like sheilas were waiting just for him. Sergio, looking out of the moving car, wiping his specs clean, asked himself as the air gushed in, could Griff really see anything? Suddenly he felt apart, pissed off and uneasy.

He said, 'No foolin Griff, you dobbed me in to the cops, didn't you?'

Griffio pulled his Ford over sharply. He lent over and reached for the door on Sergio's side yelling harshly, 'Okay, piss off pal!'

'What?'

'I said piss off, you're out of touch.' He flicked his smoke out the open door. 'I can do better on my own. Ya look too toffy in them specs. See ya round pal.'

Griffio reached over again and slammed the door back. He dropped into gear, and let go with a fast U-ee and thrashed off to Queensland, where he married a nice blonde with flat feet who was the daughter of a sugar plantation farmer.

Aldo got an apprenticeship with an engineering firm in Footscray. He went to night school and when he saw Sergio all he talked about was chucks, vernier callipers and crumpet; cutting edges, micrometers and crumpet; tool shanks, spindles, gripping jaws and crumpet and all with a tang of garlic on his breath. One day he stopped mentioning crumpet, eating garlic and seeing Sergio all together. Aldo got a Holden, soon after he was joined in the front seat by a pretty-homely Pommy girlfriend who had already begun to bun before they married and went to live in one of those new backblock dream home estates with English names like Kingston Gardens or Windsor Heath or Watership Down.

So Sergio went his way and turned indoor and inward. Maybe Griffio had a point? He felt himself intensely out of touch, preferring to be slack and lazy, escaping into daydreams and hiding in books that

offered the possibility of going somewhere else. He didn't mind where.

In *Thirty-nine Steps*, he became a spy. In *Prester John*, he was one of the kids on the rugged cliffs who saw the African negro pastor performing pagan rituals round a beach fire. He whitewashed the fence and sailed the Mississippi on a raft. He met Shakespeare and other 'poets' who struck a chord in him. As did modern jazz. He also made it to more racy books like, *The World of Suzie Wong*, which he read and romanced over, wantonly visualising Asian women in cheongsams and wondering if there was a Nam Kok in Melbourne. He became and remained honorable number one groover-son through Michener's *Sayonara*. One day when he put on his glasses and opened a new book and began reading ... *Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo ... the East vanished.*



## WHERE'S HOME?

*The long and winding road that leads to your door  
will never disappear, I've seen that road before ...*

I walk along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead.

One night, after a jazz dance, a stranger takes me home across the city to West Footscray. We get off the Guiding Star bus at the Ormond Road shops and walk past the tall shadowy cypresses. Unfamiliar with my neck of the woods, he sees the blue police light in the next block and starts up, 'Is that a cop shop up there? Must be funny living near the police. I'd hate it.'

I say nothing wondering how to tell him I don't live near it, I live in it.

We walk on. I go silent.

'Whereabouts do you live? Much further?'

'Just a bit.'

I try to think what to do and say. Maybe if I go in Lorraine's and pretend it is my place. What if her mum comes out? I like him. He's so cool. Must be over 18.

'Jeez, you do live close to the cops,' he says as we stop outside my neighbours'. He is tall, dark and serious. I want him to like me. I want him to ask me out again. I want to show him off to my friends. He has a Ban the Bomb sign sewn on his duffle coat and talks about civil rights and man's inhumanity to man. I want to wear him as a badge in company. Tenderly, he puts his arm around me and opens the gate to Lorraine's.

Suddenly I say, 'No, I don't live here. I live there, next door. My father is in charge of the Kingsville Police Station.'

He looks at me with utter contempt like he is going to spit or something. Instead, he bends quickly, gives me the brief kiss of death and then is off, out of my life to rebel against what he calls the fascist forces and totalitarian regimes of Menzies and Bolte. As a policeman's daughter, this happens to me several times but the first rebuff always hurts the most. God, what am I to do?

I have to walk along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead. It's where I live. At least I have four of his love bites on my neck, small impassioned red tokens given on the dark dance floor, trophies to

show the girls on Monday. I decide to wear a concealing purple neck scarf tomorrow and to tell Mum it's the latest jazzer fad.

In 1963 the Melbourne teen world is divided between jazzers and rockers. In Footscray, west of the river, everyone is a rocker, everyone, that is, except my gang. We choose to leave the conformity every weekend and cross the Yarra to 'trad' jazz dances and coffee shops of the eastern suburbs where everyone dresses in dark dufflecoats, black and purple polo neck jumpers, pointy boots. Everybody who is a jazzer wears their hair long with ubiquitous unisex fringes hiding their eyes. At school, teachers get my gang confused with our identical hairstyles. Peers see us as oddballs, stuck up, because we refuse to associate with boys sporting greasy Elvis haircuts, loud shirts and matching bright fluorescent socks.

We go to sophisticated city nightspots like 431, Opus, Keyboard, Powerhouse, The Purple Eye, Downbeat and Storeyville. This is where the Uni crowd hang out, discussing politics and liberation, singing freedom songs in folkclubs with the lyrics of our US heroes Joan Baez and Pete Seeger. We hear about solidarity movements, peace rallies, struggles for liberation and civil rights marches. Clubs like Frank Traynor's become regular meeting places where the soulful lyrics of balladeers activate our conscience for the downtrodden suffering and politically persecuted. There's only one jazz dance north west of the Yarra and that is Jazz Junction, across the Maribyrnong. We catch the bus to Moonee Ponds Junction and dance to the sounds of the John Hawes Jazz Band. They are real good, we reckon, because they have released an EP.

At school form parties, we refuse to rock to the predictable beat of empty pop songs and ignore the puerile attempts of boorish oafs asking for a dance. To do so means betrayal of new found commitment or even worse ostracism by the jazz clique. To dance with a boy in a leather jacket and a yellow shirt is to be a traitor. In dark rooms, we sit listening to the modern jazz sounds of Brubeck, George Shearing, Count Basie and Ahmad Jamal, espousing universal peace and love for one's fellow man while treating classmates as dirt. It never occurs to us that these rockers with their greased hair, tight jeans and garish socks are part of humanity. At sixteen, we understand everything.

And yet, my brother Ian is a rocker. Wears his hair like Fabian and wants a hotted up car to cruise around in. After months of his preening and dressing in front of the mirror, brushing and combing, endlessly showering with aftershave smells wafting through the house, we finally twig he has a girl. They both work together in the Public Service. One night, he brings her home to meet the folks and me. Dressed in the latest fashion, she is a slim pretty blonde called Marlene. Not quite a rocker, I note. But then not a jazzier either.

*The long and winding road ...*

*It always leads me here, lead me to your door.*

I walk along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead.

One night, my friends and I saunter home in our black coats and matching clothes. It is about nine o'clock. We are returning from a youth meeting at the church. Across the well-lit highway we run, jaywalking, shrieking with uncontrollable laughter as only sixteen-year-olds can, without a care in the world. Suddenly, from behind a bush, out jumps a policeman. I do not recognise him. He must be new. Conscientious, cleaning the streets of riffraff, he bustles us into my police station and starts rubbishing our appearance, demeanor and morals. Out comes a warrant book. He's charging us with disturbing the peace.

My friends think it's a joke. Think it's one of my dad's pranks. Think it is a setup. Think they are being had by me. Then, they look at my pale face and trembling mouth and it sinks in what is happening.

'And where on earth do you think you girls are off to at this time of night? Dressed like that? Look at you. A disgrace, an absolute disgrace.'

'Tell him Helen, tell him,' my friends urge now ashen-faced too.

He looks at me hungry with power.

'Answer me girl, where are you going?'

'We were coming here,' I say at last.

'Here? Here? Why on earth would the likes of you be coming here? To Kingsville police?' he screams. His face is purple and there is a vein about to burst on his red neck.

'I live here. My father is Senior Constable Dougherty, your boss.'

There is an awful silence.

'We were just coming to watch TV,' says Gunta.

'Yeah, we were just coming to Helen's,' says Robyn.

The poor man looks ill. Starts pulling his navy tie so he can breathe a bit better. He turns away. Mumbles a few inaudible words and lets us go. When Dad hears the whole story he is livid. Mum is horrified. Both are furious that their own little girl can't come home. Even a jazzer needs somewhere to belong, Dad says.

It is another culture being a jazzer. We are a loyal and avid cult, true obsessives flocking in our thousands to concerts in the Melbourne Town Hall to hear local bands like the Red Onions and the Yarra Yarra Jazz Band and Judy Jacques revamp classics from the thirties and forties. We stamp and clap especially when a solo from a drummer beats us into a frenzy. In each bracket, a muso does his improvisation and we love the unpredictable riffs that come discordantly to our ears. We do not scream like mindless rockers. We cheer and clap appreciatively. This is not like rock n' roll with its repetitious throbbing beat and superficial lyrics. For us, this is art.

Jazzers dance differently too. We do not twist or rock but shake hands and walk in circles with a sort of jerky beat to the syncopated rhythm of old standards like *Sweet Patootie* and *Dixieland Stomp*. Over this music you can talk to your partner. You can actually hear what he says.

One day the gang surprises my friend Robyn by popping in for a home visit. '*I Want To Hold Your Hand*' is blaring from her room. Gunta and I raise our eyebrows and listen to her excuses for the defection to pop music.

'It was my brother's record ... it was the radio ... it was my sister's,' she stammers.

'Come off it Rob, we heard it. It's from your room.'

We condemn her outright. The Inquisition lives again.

The whole world has gone crazy for the Fab Four, the Beatles, but so far we have refused to collaborate with this subversive enemy, an English fifth column penetrating our American-inspired vision of musical reality. Liverpool, England. What could come from a place like that ... a place like our own world ... Footscray.

Robyn blushes then confesses.

'Okay. It was me. So? I can't help it. I like the Beatles.'

There is a brief awkward silence. We hesitate, feigning disgust and then ask, 'Do you like one or all of them?'

'Well, I like all their music, I really do, but I love Paul. I've got all his photos and newsclippings in a book. He's gorgeous.'

Robyn gives a sigh of relief, confession feels good for the soul. She bites her lip, waiting for absolution or punishment.

Suddenly Dianne says, 'I sort of like John.'

'Me too,' giggles Gunta.

They turn to me waiting for judgment.

'I like George. Thin and serious.'

And then we all laugh, talking at once about what we like and which records we have and how many news cuttings we've got and how silly we were not to confide in each other.

The Beatles change everything, blurring the differences between rock and folk and jazz. They dress like us but sing like them. Folk themes, jazz chords and political rhetoric are part of their repertoire. They have something for everyone. Even mums and dads like them. Every girl in the world is in love.

Within months everyone starts to look alike. Boys at Footscray High School sport clean shiny mop-tops with fringes and dress in neat dark clothes. Suddenly they look interesting, like jazzers. At the next school social we accept their invitations to dance, much to their surprise and our resignation. To the sounds of 'Love, Love Me Do,' we rock, witnessing publicly to our defection, belonging in the community – for a while.

*What would you do if I sang out of tune  
Would you stand up and walk out on me?  
Lend me your ears and I'll sing you a song  
And I'll try not to sing out of key.*

But when I can, I still venture down the school corridor to see the painting, the portrait of the sensitive young girl trapped amidst the noisy passage of vulgar fifteen-year-olds having punch-ups or smoking. Why do I find the image so powerful? It belongs neither to the world of jazzers or rockers. This is a painting of another vision, another reality that belongs nowhere here. The face of the solitary searcher. Timeless. Universal. I keep wondering who painted it.

Someone tells me the name. I don't know it. But I know the intense searching look of this girl. It's a personal icon for me. I go down the smelly corridor full of loud boys to see it again. The wall is blank. Empty. It's been taken away. I feel a real sense of loss.

*Many times I've been alone and many times I've cried,  
Anyway you'll never know the many ways I've tried  
But still they lead me back to the long winding road ...*

Mum tells me Dad is going for promotion. He's studying for the exam to become a sergeant. 'With a memory like he's got, it should be easy. You know he graduated top of his batch.'

Dad starts up, 'Have I told you what happened one night when I was in eighth grade? Well, there's a knock at the door and there's my teacher wantin to see my old man, your grandpa, Dad Doc. Well, he comes inside and says what are you goin to do with that boy of yours? My dad does his block. What's the little bugger been up to this time he says, gettin ready to wallop me. Nothing says the teacher, but he topped the class again and needs further education. He reckoned I had the scone to amount to something.'

Dad is getting warmed up.

'Something? I'll tell you somethin. I had to leave school at fourteen to lump wheat on the Mallee silos. Talk about blisters and backache. But it was work and I was glad to get it. It was 1930, start of the Great Depression. You young people don't know how lucky you are! Now when I was fifteen ... '

'We know Dad, ' I say, killing his enthusiasm for another yarn.

'Reckon Mark Twain got it right. Reckon you had to leave school to start your education.'

I glance at my father staring up at the ceiling and wonder what would have happened to him if he had gone on at school. Mum says he has too fine a brain. Doesn't sleep well and sits in the dark by himself always thinking – a product of the Celtic twilight and its melancholy heritage. I glance at my mother and think about her lost chances, which she would dispute. Says her life has been rich and full with those she loves. Intelligent and well-read, she too topped her classes but she never dwells on that. She has that rare knowledge few

people get through education or book learning - the understanding to live each day as a gift.

In a dream I run toward my home, along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead. The police sign is beckoning and I rush inside only to find bars on my windows and handcuffs on my wrist. I twist and turn to escape. Trapped in prison, I hear screams then recognise my own voice.

'This is my house. This is where I live. Let me go. I want to be free, this is my place ...' I see the painting of the girl on the wall. I run to it but it disappears. It's not a picture anymore, it's become a mirror. It's my face, all distorted.

*You left me standing here, a long long time ago,  
don't leave me waiting here, lead me to your door.*

I wake in a room I do not know. It's the wrong colour. I'm sweating. Where am I? The room smells all musty. I look out the window and do not recognise the street. I see the sea. Suddenly, I remember we have shifted again. After seven happy years at Kingsville, Dad has been promoted but there is no police station vacant so we are renting a double-storey flat in Williamstown on the corner of the Esplanade and Victoria Street until a police residence comes up. Mum is working full-time to help pay the rent. Everything is changing. Ian is only twenty but is talking of engagements and marriage, about superannuation and house payments, all so mature and responsible, not like the boy who played Tarzan in the peppercorns and lived a million fantasies in the backyard. He talks of promotions, land purchases and the future. Nearly twenty-one, he is due to get a large payment from his accident insurance. It is almost ten years since the car accident in Mildura. He never talks about it nor about the massive scar on his leg. Seldom home now, he's too busy being an adult. We miss him even though he hasn't really gone. What happened to the carefree boy who could out-talk, out-play any kid on the block?

We wait for Ian's court settlement. Suddenly, he comes home with a big smart Holden. He has presents for everyone, laughing and joking like when he was eleven. At full speed, he drives off with Marlene into the sunset, talking about being a black knight on a

white charger rescuing damsels. Now that's more like it, I think relieved.

The sea opposite our flat is beautiful, unpredictable and beguiling. In summer everyone visits. Friends and acquaintances arrive to sit on our balcony sipping long cold drinks, eyeing the talent on the beach, looking real cool. We live opposite the Williamstown Lifesaving Club. At weekends, there are jazz dances. I leave home in a dress but change in the toilets into tight purple bermuda shorts and bare feet and have every dance. In summer, I'm very popular. But in the cool of autumn everything goes quiet. I am alone again, walking by myself along the foreshore composing little poems about peace, justice and having recently discovered Camus and Salinger, existential angst. I know no-one in this suburb. To do matriculation I don't want to change schools so I catch the Willy-Moonee Ponds bus back to Footscray High. This seaside historical suburb of Williamstown is charming but strange to me. We are just visitors passing through. Everything is different.

The noise from the rifle range keeps Dad awake. In April, I watch the water turn grey and white, under cloudy skies. Depression sets in. The waves lap the walls endlessly. The wind chills the autumn air. Everything is changing. We all miss Ian. I am not very helpful sitting alone in my room, studying or reading. When Mum comes in, tired from work, nothing is done. I make no excuses and she demands none. Monosyllabic at mealtimes, I live in my thoughts more than the lounge. Dressed in black and purple, I am in perpetual mourning for the past. We all want to turn the clock back.

Dad is ill with nerves. Wishes he could knock back the promotion and go back in charge of Kingsville Police Station.

Mum is anxious. Wants the family how it used to be.

I am moody. Want to be a jazzier.

*Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away,  
Now it looks as though they're here to stay,  
Oh, I believe in yesterday.*

I want to walk along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead.  
We all want to go home.



## MEETING

*'And on my way  
passing a certain door I stopt, remembering  
how once I stood on its threshold, and my life  
was offered to me.'*

Christopher Brennan

Form Six. Matriculation. The dreaded all important exams at the end of the year. Everything riding on a three-hour paper. Only one chance. Only one bite of the cherry. Only one crack at a professional future. It doesn't seem fair. Everyone tells you stories to give you the jitters. Like the clever girl who went blank last year and wrote her name a thousand times. Like the boy who mixed up the times and missed his English paper. Like the dumb kid who suddenly did well because he is the nephew of the Government printer. Most of my friends have decided to give it the flick. Leave and get jobs. Why do all that study when you could be earning good money in an office job? Makes sense too. I put off even thinking about it. Only a handful at Footscray High ever pass, let alone do well. I start the year in numbness. Leave the Williamstown sea cold and flat as glass.

The first days are bleak. One teacher starts writing dreary platitudes across the board everyday to jog us into action. *I wasted time now time dost waste me.* All we do is copy notes and write, write, write. Gunta and I are the only ones of our gang left to put up with this incessant preaching and monotonous routine. We form sixers have been given our own rooms in the new wing at the side of the school. Supposed to feel privileged, we feel in Pentridge. The common room for so-called relaxing is full of lockers with one moth-eaten sofa and a Dimplex heater that doesn't work.

There are a few new kids to get to know. Some from other schools. Some repeating. A tall dark good-looking guy I'd noticed last year is in my class. A bit of a loner, he seems preoccupied. Stands by himself a lot, staring into space. Always has a book in his hand but usually not one on any course. Why am I here, I keep asking ? To be a teacher. I've said that since I was six. Now I don't know if I mean it. Not so for Gunta. She wants to be all sorts of exciting professional things. Uni is the big goal. Together we study English Literature and discover Chaucer, Milton, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and other great male literary luminaries.

'Do you think people really live such turgid lives?' Gunta asks one day after we've read the biographical dark secrets of Tom and Viv, David and Frieda. We both hope so, aching to live and suffer. But the papers are full of others suffering. Vietnam. In April, Menzies, (I can't remember a time when this big man in his double-breasted suit and bushy eyebrows didn't head the news for all of my seventeen years ) has just committed the first full combat unit to Vietnam. Australian boys are now being conscripted into National Service to fight overseas. Some kids seem excited at the prospect. Most do not even worry. Only one student wants to protest. It is 1965.

'It's not our war, the communists aren't coming here! It's all American Imperialism!' says the only radical in class. 'It's unfair to be sent to die by ballot, don't you all see?' We are too absorbed in our private lives to even think about it .

\*

\*

\*

'He's not himself lately,' Sergio's mother remarked one morning as Nonna entered the old bungalow kitchen, in her usual bluster, in each hand a flopping pair of chooks, meant for the killing trough in the laundry.

'He's probably in love. He's found girls,' Nonna said amused, turning to Maria from the laundry doorway.

'He's got school to worry about!'

'He's at that age.' The chooks, wings akelter, twisted their necks to right their alert heads, in a sort of friendly curiosity. 'Anyway Maria, you can't keep him round your feet.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Mamma.'

'The boy's smitten.' Leaving the doorway, Nonna shouted from the laundry, 'You two men, get in here!'

Sergio had gone to Williamstown many times, but not like the last time when he went to find her like someone beguiled. He liked her the moment he saw her at school. Everything about her interested him: her hair, her face, her smile, her voice; for him an air of distinction, a softness, an undiscoverable otherness which drew him quietly like a law of nature. From far away, he would look at her talk and laugh with her friends, in a world where he would like to be, but was obviously unlikely to inhabit. He found out from a new classmate she lived in Williamstown near the beach.

That morning he could only think of her. Sergio knew his mother suspected something was distracting him. She said nothing but from her look he knew she would be having words with Nonna. While he thought, he heard the chook in his hands squawk, watched as his father unwillingly forced its neck feathers upwards, looking for the neck. With a quick slash his father cut. The chook thrashed about. Blood began trickling in the wet trough. Sergio saw the glazed unseeing, staring eye. Small tremors. His father washed the knife under the tap, while nonna talked about this and that waiting for the pot to boil for the scalding and plucking.

Sergio sat at the laminex table in the fussy dust-free kitchen and drew on inspiration to write, scribbled some ideas before jumping to the conclusion that it was not good. He tried again. He heard his grandmother growling. Drawers were being torn open, cutlery clattering over the walls and floor. In the commotion she yelled,

'What a pair of men! Can't kill a chook. Leaving it to me to slash their necks!'

His sister Christiana looked up from her book.

'What's the matter with Nonna?' she asked with a little giggle.

'I think Dad and I left the chooks alive in the trough.'

'Don't say anything,' she said from behind her hand, giggling, 'or Nonna will gut you alive.'

Sergio heard water being poured. Nonna came out of the laundry with the steaming chooks and the smell of hot-wet down. Small feathers stuck on her apron. Trying to look busy and self-possessed, she was still huffy. She plucked briskly, eventually picking at the remnants of stubble on the prickly skin. When finished she forced open each chook's back cavity, put her hand inside and pulled out a mulch of innards. With bloodied fingers, she sorted the organs she wanted; the heart, stomach, liver, lungs, while the rest she tossed in newspaper.

'What are you writing about?' Christiana asked softly.

He wanted to smile but stopped himself. 'A girl.'

'Can I read it?'

'If I finish.' He didn't reach for his pen. 'I've got to find out what happens. I'm going to Williamstown after lunch to see if I can work it out.'

His sister went back to her books and he continued thinking about Williamstown.

\*

\*

\*

The quiet, dark, handsome student starts talking to me. He has an interesting face and seems to like the same things as me. His name is Serge. His hair is tight black curls and he wears glasses. We are both studying History, Art and Lit and have joined the school Drama club. Matriculation is becoming interesting. The Williamstown to Footscray bus trip no longer such a drag. The Drama teacher asks Serge and I to go into Melbourne to select scripts for the school play. We talk all the way. He is not as serious as he looks. A wacky sense of humour undercuts every remark, especially about himself. Back in class, he never looks at me, hangs around now with two boys. One bets on horses and drives an old silver Jag to school. He is the great grandson of a famous local family, a leading civic founder of Footscray and Yarraville. Only eighteen, this boy can out-debate, out-party, out-drink any kid in class. Never in school uniform, he wears suede jackets, sometimes even cravats, and always rolls his own. The other of Serge's mates is a new arrival at school. He wants to be a solicitor and says 'notwithstanding' and 'indubitably' all the time. These three are oddballs at Footscray High. Smooth and sophisticated, I think to myself. Up themselves, says everybody else.

\*

\*

\*

A furling sea clawed at the slanting beach. Gulls hung soundlessly in a dull sky. With a seawind on his face and no-one else in sight, Sergio sauntered back along the Esplanade, going towards the Life-saving Club. Uncertain, he looked again and again, at the big house on the corner where she lived. He wondered, unknowing, if she was inside, but knowing she had no idea about the wandering, hopeful figure on the outside. Eventually, reluctantly, despondently, he turned for home. He'd made a mistake. He didn't stop to look behind him, he'd reached the end of his uncertain destination.

There was no bus so he walked along Victoria Parade to the Rifle Club Hotel. A bus went by on its way to the beach. He waited for its return. When it arrived, he got the surprise of his life.

'What are you doing here?' he asked with hectic incredulity because she had come out of nowhere. He stared at her, still unsure

she was actually there. He knew then, with a kind of overwhelming finality, that he wanted her to love him.

'I'm going to visit Gunta. Where are you going?'

'I'm ... I just went ... ' He felt precarious, wanting to hide the truth with excitement. 'I was making a visit,' he said, rather than telling her how many bricks and tiles made up her house, the shape of the balcony, how many shrubs grew outside her front door, the colour of her doormat, how many spider webs there were in the corners of her porch, how many breaths he took while walking up and down ...

And then all of a sudden she was standing.

'Where are you going?'

'This is my stop.'

He walked her to her friend's. At the gate she asked if he wanted to come in, but he said he had things to do with a mate when all he wanted was to be with her. 'Maybe next time, when you haven't something to do? Bye.' She disappeared, as did the pleasure of being with her. At home he said nothing, impatient for Monday, like one caught between illusion and reality.

'He's ill,' said Maria. 'Didn't I tell you?'

'Tell me what?' asked Pietro.

'Sergio's not himself.'

'What's the matter with the boy, Giovanna?'

'He's found love,' said Nonna again, amused.

\*

\*

\*

'Do you want to go sketching on Saturday?' Serge asks me suddenly at school. One wet blowy arvo, he comes to Williamstown but it is too windy for drawing so we stay in the lounge and end up talking about writing, art and life. I play a jazz record and pretend to be aloof and warm at the same time. I want to sit next to him. Look cool and grown-up. Sophisticated like his friends. Instead I sit on the window ledge and stare out at the ocean lapping the foreshore. It looks beautiful.

'I love modern jazz too,' he says.

I look at his face. He seems to mean it.

After a while I show him my poetry. He reads each one and comments. Yes, he sometimes feels that. He offers to type them all out for me because he has a typewriter. He's the first boy from Footscray

I've dated who wants to get into uni. The first person to challenge my limited ambitions.

'Why not go to uni? You could study History or Philosophy or Art or Modern Lit? '

'I want to be a primary teacher.'

'You could be anything you want.'

'I want to teach. I've always wanted it.'

He looks away. He does not understand.

'What if you're called up?' I ask him.

'It might be all over before I hit twenty.'

He looks out across the sea. Dark clouds gathering.

'You're Italian, aren't you?'

'Well, sort of.' He seems embarrassed. Evasive.

'Sort of?' I persist.

'I was born in,' he hesitates, ' part of Yugoslavia, used to be Italy before the war. Bit confusing. Don't really know what I am.'

'Why?'

He laughs. 'I have enough trouble with my weird name let alone my muddled-up history. Hate having to explain it to people. '

'They're just curious. Most don't know who they are either.'

'Seem too. Bloody act like it anyway. Know where they're going and where they've been.'

He goes quiet.

'You know, I write too,' he says, changing the subject.

'About what?'

'Lots of things. Bit of poetry. Some prose. I worked on a novel for most of last year instead of studying. Flunked matric.'

'What was the book about?'

'People mainly. My family. How they are, how they feel. I just enjoy words, I guess. It's a bit like painting, applying the layers so that you recognise something out of the chaos of living.'

'Is it chaos?'

'Yeah, gives me the shits most of the time.'

'But you seem to like so many things?'

'Things, ideas, yes. But most people annoy me. My mother always says, *'I amici sono come i pesci. Dopo un poco comincia puzare.'* In English it means, 'Friends are like fish, they start to smell after a while.'

'That's awful,' I say.

'Maybe ... depends on your experience.'

\*

\*

\*

'Would you like a record on?' Helen asked him as he sat on a soft red sofa. 'It's Ahmad Jamal, a jazz pianist.'

Sergio was surprised and pleased.

'I like him too. I'm into modern jazz.'

She returned with a portable record player. After putting on the LP she sat on the window-sill looking out across the ocean. She seemed near and remote, all at the same time. They listened to the music.

'I'm home dear,' he heard a warm, busy voice. Helen turned from the window and smiled at the well-dressed woman entering the room.

'Oh, hello young man.'

'Mum, this is Serge. He's just called in.'

'Hello Mrs. Dougherty,' he said to the lady who now figured in the well-furnished lounge.

'Nice to meet you.' She gave him a measured smile from her flushed round face but turned her full smile to her daughter. 'The traffic was bad from Ashburton.' She removed her gloves with a brisk thoroughness, calmly putting them away in her handbag. 'I better see to your father's lunch.'

After she'd gone she left him with her sense of presence, as people in a position of influence often do after they leave a room. But it was her bearing of confidence and self-assurance that told him she belonged to a completely different world from that of his parents and Nonna. Everything about the woman was in the present and, just like the vase of flowers standing across the room, she had an inner tranquillity. The sort of peace the clock nearby didn't have.

'Serge,' Helen said getting up quickly, 'I'd like you to meet my father.'

The big solid man shook his hand with a firm grip. He had a head of dark hair and a loud voice.

'Nice to meet you, Sam is it?'

'No Dad, Serge.'

Sergio sat startled.

The man ignored the name. 'At school with Helen, are you?' he asked without pausing for an answer. He moved across the lounge to an unlit fireplace before turning his back to it. He stood there a moment before he asked, 'What sort of sport do you play?'

Mr. Dougherty stood and waited, seeing the young fellow's face get confused over a simple question. He looked at the thin young man for another moment, sitting there in glasses, stamped with that dreamy bookish air that he didn't understand. All this made him a little puzzled, especially about his daughter's intentions.

'We've been talking about books, Dad.'

'Some good games on today. Do you follow football?'

Before Sergio could recover and find his voice, the man diverted his attention, with a key in hand opened the glass face of the clock and wound gently, mindfully.

'That's a wonderful clock. Kept perfect time all these years.' He turned once more to the young man with a quick, inquisitive and presuming look. 'What team did you say you barracked for?'

'He didn't, Dad,' his daughter said with an edge of annoyance. 'He doesn't follow footy.'

'He should,' Mr Dougherty answered in his best sanguine voice. 'It's a good interest to have. Sport. Important to have a real interest in what's going on. Do you like cricket?'

'No.'

'Oh,' he dropped his mouth and nodded to himself unsurprised, like he ought to have guessed. Just as quickly as he had come Mr Dougherty walked off as though he had forgotten them because he had just remembered something else, somewhere in another room. Next door the radio began to gallop with the call of the races.

When they found themselves alone in the front porch, Sergio chanced to take her hands in his and she didn't draw away.

'I've met your father before.'

'Don't mind him.'

'God, I got a shock!'

'What's the matter?'

'He recognised me. At least I think he did.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing now, I hope. A couple of years ago your dad gave me what for because of bread vans.' As he told her it all came back, a reluctant memory. Helen laughed. 'Anyway I just went blank. I don't



think I could have answered his questions even if I did follow Footscray.'

'And you don't, do you?'

\*

\*

\*

The following weekend we go to the National Gallery. Sergio is a fine oil painter. In class the rest of us watch his mature technique and clear eye for detail. As we cross the busy street, he grabs my hand firmly and I feel somehow secure.

After school, his so-called mate driving me home in his silver Jag tells me, 'Don't get tangled up with him. You'll get burnt!'

Each weekend Sergio and I talk and walk. My friends want all the lurid details but are disappointed by my silence. They resent me withdrawing from the group's activities.

'Doesn't he ever take you out on a real date?' they ask disparagingly.

'Well, we go sketching or walking or to the library.'

They say nothing but I hear them snigger behind my back.

I ask myself why don't we go to dances or the movies, caring more for peer approval than my own satisfaction. How can I tell them how good I feel. This overwhelming sense of wonder. There is never enough time to say to him all that is inside me. I feel different. Changed. Someone else. I look at myself in the mirror. No longer know myself. The afternoons together vanish so quickly. I am often late for tea, which Mum hates. It is the worst crime in her book.

'Why can't you go out with someone who's normal?' she asks.

'What's normal, Mum?'

'Someone who ... at his age knows what he wants to be or has a job or ...'

'An Australian, you mean?'

'No, I mean someone with a future.'

'And why hasn't he got a future?'

'I'm not talking about him. Just about you and your choices. Always have to go for someone offbeat ... like that weirdo beatnik teacher or that boy on probation last year.'

'Don't worry Dorrie,' calls Dad from the lounge, 'They're just kids. He's a student, for God's sake. They've got years to go.'

But when Mum is off guard she tells me he has warm dark eyes like her father, soft brown eyes that you can see your reflection in.

We have to shift again. Dad has a new police station at Windsor just near St Kilda junction, the other side of the Yarra. This is a real migration for me. The eastern suburbs of Melbourne are as foreign as Europe. I do not want to change schools mid-year. I tell my parents it would be too disruptive to my form six education but I am really scared of losing my tall dark friend. Luckily, a teacher who lives nearby offers to drive me back and forth from school.

We live around the corner from Chapel Street in Prahran. This area is another world of bookshops, antique dealers, trendy boutiques, nightclubs and east into St Kilda, brothels. There are music and drama clubs to join, little art galleries in shops waiting to sell their craft. The winding streets with hundred year old double-storey terraces overgrown with ivy intrigue me. Not like the outer suburbs of West Footscray with their ubiquitous weather-boards, bare scotch-thistled paddocks and flat empty blocks waiting to be sold.

After school, I saunter along the cobbled back lanes drawing dwellings with attic roofs and outback dunnies. I spend my pocket money on secondhand books at Halls Bookstore with ideas I think I'm ready for. For only sixpence I buy old orange and blue Penguins: George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, H.G. Wells's *A History of the World*, Herbert Read's *The Meaning of Art*. I find a copy of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* who my English teacher reckons will be the first Australian to win the Nobel Prize for literature. I feel ashamed because I haven't even heard of him! Sixpence. It seems theft to me. Gunta thinks I'm so lucky living on the other side of the river. She reckons enjoy such bargains while I can. Her Economics teacher says that the new decimal currency will cause inflation and change everything. At night, I cram my head with contradictions I try to understand.

One night about 11.30 pm, after getting off the tram on the way home from the pictures I am followed by a car cruising for sex. In an unknown house I hide in the dark. After several minutes I come out of the shadows but the man is still there parked by the curb waiting. He thinks I'm playing titillating games. He opens the car door.

'How much? Come on darling, what do you charge?'

I've been followed in Footscray several times at night but no-one before has offered me money. He's getting out of the car, coming at me.

'Go away, I'm going home,' I protest.

He grabs my arm. I pull away, start to run and he follows. I'm scared. But it's not a red light up ahead for him but the blue light of Windsor Police Station. He thinks I'm going to report him. He stops, takes off and I realise there are some benefits living in a cop shop after all.

\* \* \*

At first Sergio thought Helen was playing on his interests. Some girls pretended all the time. Soon he realised they were her interests too. Little things in common were uncanny. Jazz piano, painting, literature, writing, theatre, bookshops, seafood, and the sea. And silence. She liked to observe like him. Words were fine but their absence had meaning too. She liked her own space. Independent. No demands. She didn't ask much. Neither did he. They seemed to give each other room to become whatever they wanted. Sergio knew he had never felt this way for anyone, a kind of rising joy at being with her.

\* \* \*

My tall dark friend catches a bus then a train then a tram to see me on weekends at Windsor. We walk hand in hand down St Kilda pier, eyeing other couples watching the sea. On a park bench he kisses me long and deep. At about six, he heads off again across the city to the west, refusing my mother's invitation to stay for tea. And a sweet ache stays in me. My parents think he's distant, aloof but I know he's just shy. Prefers his own way of doing things.

'Why don't you stay?' I ask one night.

'I haven't been in too many Aussie homes before, not for tea anyway.'

'I bet we eat just what you do, meat and vegies,' I say but don't insist.

'Yeah, I know it just takes a while to get used to things. Takes me a while anyway.'

To please Mum and Dad and to test my feelings, I go to local dances like Powerhouse on Albert Park Lake. My girlfriends and I, coming from the west, are strange to some boys. One polite redheaded boy with an MG and a mansion in South Yarra takes me home to meet his parents; he calls them 'Mummy' and 'Daddy'. We swim in his pool all afternoon. I wear a modest two-piece. His mother interviews me about my family, my school, my background and my future plans. We dine at a long mahogany table. They have a cook, he tells me. I sit blushing under the gaze of interrogative eyes.

'I must say dear, I don't usually hold with brief bathing costumes but your swimsuit is very tasteful,' says his mother.

'Thank you.'

'And which university or College do you hope to attend?'

'I applied for Melbourne Teacher's College but I think I'll be sent to Toorak now that I live in its zone.' University seems beyond my dreams.

'Oh lovely. Gordon hopes to go there next year. You can attend together.'

She smiles at me sweetly and I realise I meet her approval.

'And you must join the Young Liberals too. Gordon has. They have such happy times.'

I finish dessert and notice Gordon is not eating. He's just staring at me like I'm from outer space. He leans forward and strokes my arm, 'I've never met anyone from Footscray before in my whole life.' Suddenly I feel special, quite exotic.

His manners are immaculate, he writes notes of thankyou even after just a cup of tea.

'That's what I call a gentleman,' says Mum impressed. 'Breeding.'

'But I don't know what to say to him.'

'Just be yourself, that's how to be.'

'Well, I can't with him. Sure he's nice but I'm not interested.'

'It's just as easy to fall in love with someone with money as someone without. He can't help being wealthy.'

'I do like him and his family for all their carry-on but I'm not comfortable.'

'Look Helen, you know I don't want you to just marry for money ... it's just that, money eases the pain.'

'Does there have to be pain?'

'There's always some sort of pain, even if it's good.'

'Did you know any rich men, mum?'

'Yes. I was courted by several wealthy farmers in the Mallee.'

'And what did your mother say to you?'

'The same thing I'm trying to tell you.'

'But you married Dad?'

'Of course. Once you love someone it's different. There's no choice.'

'That's what I thought.'

## EPILOGUE

After months of sharing words and ideas, Sergio invites me home for a meal with his family. He lives in a small white weatherboard in Bromyard Street, Yarraville. Gunta lives just across the creek in Clare Street. Out front I see a sign, 'Beware of the Dog' on the wire fence. Two oleanders dot the meagre lawn. Nervously, I open the gate and a large Alsatian appears and sniffs me all over while my heart pounds as fast as its tail wags.

'Down boy, down.' I hear a familiar voice.

'What's his name?'

'Rin Tin Tin.'

I laugh because I expected something Italian like *Lupo* or *Nero*. The bunch of flowers bought at Flinders St is wilting.

Sergio takes my arm and squeezes it tenderly, ushers me into a hallway of polished floorboards so shiny I can see my reflection. Glass doors are closed to adjoining rooms. A woman of about forty or so appears. Small and dark, her hair has a few grey streaks and she looks tired but there is warmth in her expression of greeting.

'Mamma, this is Elena.'

'Hello Elena.' She takes my hand affectionately and I give her the red carnations. In the green laminex kitchen, a fluorescent light bounces off tubular steel furniture. Everything is clean and glossy. The smell of mothballs and floorwax mixed with the aroma of strong percolating coffee hits me.

A man enters with a kind face. Formally, he bows to me and holds out his hand. His benevolent grey eyes meet mine with acceptance.

'This is Pop.'

'How do you do, Mr Cerne.'

He grasps my hand firmly and ushers me to the table.

'*Antipasto?*' He offers me a plate of savouries.

'It's just salted meat and pickled vegies,' reassures Serge.

I take an olive and what looks like a paper-thin piece of red bacon-*prosciutto*; I leave the *gardiniera*. His parents disappear and a young girl, about twelve, enters. I recognise her from school. She has a pretty face with dark wavy hair. Her eyes are dark, deep as black pools.

'Christiana.'

I feel I know her already.

In the back room there is the sound of another woman - a loud earthy voice speaking quickly in Italian. Everyone is nervous too, I realise.

'They're cooking out there. They never cook in here in the kitchen. Too smelly. Always out in the old bungalow. See that wall. That's where we first lived.'

Sergio's father rejoins us at the table to eat. We are served chicken broth with noodles by an old bubbly grey-haired lady with a round beaming face. Around her neck is a thick gold chain with the Madonna. A floral smock is wrapped around her thick body. She grips my hand fervently with tears in her eyes and says, 'Oh Yelka, Yelka, Yelka.'

'That's Yugoslav for Helen,' Serge whispers to me. 'This is my grandmother. Nonna - Elena.'

We nod at each other effusively and she starts fussing over me like a mother hen.

Afterwards, we eat garlic chicken with rosemary and strange green salad called *radiccio* dripping with olive oil and dark balsamic vinegar.

Mr Cerne tells me about opera and physical education in Europe. He was a gymnast there.

At first their English is hard to decipher but soon everything is clear. If I slow down a bit and don't ask questions they comprehend me too. Besides the words do not really matter. We understand each other. I am offered a glass of milk which I haven't drunk since I was six but I want to please so I swallow it.

Mrs Cerne does not sit down to eat. She waits on us, standing behind the table joining in the conversation. Claps her hands together suddenly for emphasis. Nonna retreats to the back preparing more food. Sergio's mother starts reminiscing. 'When we first start factory work I not see Pietro for all weeks. I would go in the morning shift and he go in the night.'

'That must have been hard for you'

'Mine goodness God, terrible. Unbelieved. '

She looks across at her husband and smiles contentedly. Pietro nods in agreement. He has perfect posture, sits upright in his chair like a statue.

'Dopo ... ah ... after nightshift on his way home, in morning, he would stop in middle of street. You believe me? Take off his hat. Bow

to me on bus. Me going to work. A crazy man.' But she looks at him with an expression of complete devotion.

Strong black coffee is served in tiny china cups. It is too pungent for me, not even used to the bland instant brand in jars at home. I gulp it quickly so as not to offend.

\*

\*

\*

I feel both ill at ease and a pressing awkwardness for everybody so I leave Helen there and go into the lounge to escape the family fuss. It's all been a bit much for them and for me. They've been stirred up since the morning. Been cleaning and buffing for hours. It's been worse than their usual weekend ritual. They're in a high-tizz, nerve-ends nearly shot with excitement. I feel between stone and silence. To break this I play around with jazz chords on the piano and hope Helen will come to me. I wonder what she thinks of us? She won't say. Always on guard or is it tactful? How does she feel about them? What does she really think about me ?

\*

\*

\*

Helen excused herself and followed the sound of the piano. The glass door opened and she was struck dumb. There on the wall was the missing painting from school - the painting she'd looked at for months, the painting of the face of a young girl, the lonely searcher.

'Did you paint that?'

'Yeah, it's my sister Chris. Made her sit still for hours.'

'It's very fine,' Helen said then went silent. Sergio played a few more chords. She stood fixed, staring at the portrait, unable to move. Finally, quietly, she said, 'I used to look at it everyday last year when it was outside the artroom.' Suddenly she remembered the name, *Sergio Cerne*. Of course. It had to be. It all fitted into place. He kept playing and she heard fragments of melody recognised. The chords completed the harmony.

\*

\*

\*

Helen keeps staring at my painting. I guess she likes it. Gone all quiet. Uneasy or something. I get up from the piano. Put my arm



around her. Watch her. We sit close on the sofa. I don't say anything . My specs begin to fog up so I take them off and wipe them.

'I missed you.'

'I know.'

'It's been three days.'

'No four. Thanks for your letter.'

Suddenly she looks away like she is shy or afraid of something. Holding my glasses I feel naked. Is she seeing me for the first time?

\* \* \*

The room was small. Everything covered with antimacassars or cloth to keep it clean. Nothing out of place. Even the slats of the venetian blinds individually buffed. The shiny wooden floor was slippery and Helen was on edge in case she fell over and made a fool of herself. This house was different to hers - the spoken muffled sounds through glass doors, the smells of Italian cooking, the fastidious domesticity of the women, the reticence of the men. She used to live in Yarraville but not this way. It was a world she didn't know and yet somehow felt comfortable, at ease, in this compact dwelling with its alien atmosphere and foreign ways. The couple sat talking of nothing in particular but everything to them. The sheen of the polished coffee table mirrored their image, caught in the wood like a bas-relief.

\* \* \*

I watch Helen opening my large sketch book of familiar places drawn in pencil; the factories along Francis Street, the boats at Williamstown, the nothingness of Stony Creek, the back lane of Cain's bakery, Yarraville surroundings, all defined on paper. She recognises and shares places and people in my school photos I had long forgotten, like Raymond at Kingsville Primary with the ubiquitous runny nose, the English class in a broom closet under stairs, and Aldo at Corpus Christi who had us hot believing we'd find Mick sheilas in the back lanes of the west. Footscray High and the teachers with dubious reputations. We laugh. Past myths become more real in remembering. Somehow, I'm not outside of it all any more.

\*

\*

\*

Helen thought of all the houses she had lived in and all the people left behind by circumstance. She saw her mother having a cuppa with a new neighbour getting acquainted,

'How can you stand moving around all the time?'

'Oh it's exciting, you never get bored.'

'What about friendships?'

'We keep in touch. Besides it's easy if you're with the ones you most care about. You have to go where they are, don't you?'

Christiana entered the room and offered Helen and Sergio a chocolate. The face on the wall now alive. Sergio told his sister to stand still so they could compare her and the painting. The portrait's paint was applied boldly yet each stroke blended into the delicate texture of living skin. Christiana blushed. One image the life in art, the other the art in life. Helen and Sergio both smiled at the same time.

'That's it! Enough! Cut it out!' said Chris, whacking her brother with a cushion, beating a hasty retreat behind the glass door. Her giggling echoed down the passage. And then they were left alone for the rest of the afternoon. Their small talk meandered through present, past, future. All one time.

We sit talking all afternoon. Numb to the world. It's November. Spring. We are all hope and romantic optimism, lovers ignoring everything. The realities of the dreaded matric exams in two weeks; of living in the mid-mad-mod 1960s; of getting into tertiary courses. Only the media headlines causes a kafuffle: **THE SHRIMP SHOCKS CROWD**. This penetrates our complacency. Light Fingers won the Melbourne Cup but no-one really noticed because shock, horror, Jean Shrimpton ( the shrimp), British super model, was gloveless, hatless, and gasp, mini-skirted at the big race! We ignore future problems: the Vietnam war escalating, Serge being called up, us growing apart.

Faces mirrored in shiny glass surfaces. Once clear windows now opaque images. See our reflection. Silence surrounds us.

Shut the venetians so others can't see. Close the door. This is the world. This tiny space the universe. Not Yarraville. Not Windsor. Not anywhere but here. A different landscape. *Un nuovo posto*. The hour, a misty dusk of dreaming. Two of us.

Others need passports. To come here.  
Time to shift. Into the unknown.  
On the margins. Of something else.

A new place.  
Another language.  
Other passwords.

*Questo momento.*  
Another country.  
Our colony.

Whispers.  
*Segretti.*

Oblivious.

*Insieme-together*

## References

Chapters by Helen Cerne

- Barton Paterson, A. 1930, 'Clancy of the Overflow', *The Sixth Book, Victorian Readers*, reprinted 1986, Ministry of Education, Melbourne, p. 115.
- Beveridge, J. 1986, 'Streets of Chippendale', in Hampton, S. & Llewellyn, K., (eds), *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Penguin, Ringwood, p. 254.
- Beynon, R. 1960, *The Shifting Heart*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Brennan, C. 1976, 'The Wanderer', in Heseltine, H. (ed.) *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Cerne, H. 1956-1965, Private letters, notebooks and diaries.
- Cerne, H. 1994, 'In-Laws', *Australian Multicultural Book Review*, Papyrus Publishing, vol. 2, Ferntree Gully, p. 24.
- Coleman, P. 1980, *The Heart of James McAuley*, Wildcat Press, Sydney.
- Concise Encyclopaedia of Australia*, 1980, Horwitz, Sydney.
- Dawe, B. 1980, 'Drifters', in Wallace-Crabbe, C., (ed.) *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Curey O'Neil, Melbourne, p. 160.
- De Witt, R. 1930, 'What Bright-Eyes Wanted', *The Third Book, Victorian Readers*, reprinted 1986, Ministry of Education, Melbourne, p. 67.
- Hampton, S. & Llewellyn, K. (eds), 1986, *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Hardy, F. 1977, *The Yarns of Billy Borker*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Heseltine, H. (ed.) 1976, *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Hodgson-Burnett, F. 1909, *The Secret Garden*, reprinted 1980, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Jones, T. H. 1976, 'My Grandfather Goes Blind', in Heseltine, H., (ed.) *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood. p. 325.
- Lack, J. 1991, *A History of Footscray*, Hargreen, Melbourne.
- Lawson, H. 1980, 'The Roaring Days', *In The Days When the World Was Wide*, Curey O'Neil, Melbourne, p. 15.

- Lennon, J. & McCartney, P. 1977, 'The Long and Winding Road', *Fifty Great Songs*, Wise Publications, Sydney.
- McAuley, J. 1980, *The Heart of James McAuley*, Coleman, P., Wildcat Press, Sydney, p. 90.
- Neruda, P. 1982, from 'Book of Questions', introduction to Wolf, C., *A Model Childhood*, Virago, London.
- O'Neill, E. 1917, 'Ile' in Rees, L. (ed.), *Modern Short Plays*, 1960, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Owen, J. 1986, 'Ice-Oh', in Hampton, S. & Llewellyn, K., (eds) *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Penguin, Ringwood, p. 162.
- Perillo, J. 1995, *In An Alien Land*, J. Perillo, Melbourne.
- Pirandello, L. 1978, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Heinemann, London.
- Rankin, J. 1981, 'Green Ash', in Wallace-Crabbe, C., (ed.) *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 206.
- The Sun News Pictorial*, 1956-1965.
- Shaw Nielson, J. 1976, 'The Orange Tree', in Heseltine, H. (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Townsend, H. 1988, *The Baby Boomers*, Simon and Shuster, Sydney.
- The Victorian Readers*, 1930, Ministry of Education, reprinted 1986, Melbourne.
- Wallace-Crabbe, C. (ed.), 1980, *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Wallace-Crabbe, C. 1976, 'Melbourne', in Heseltine, H., (ed.) *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood, p. 410.
- Wright, J. 1976, 'South of My Days', in Heseltine, H. (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood, p.281.

Chapters by Sergio Cerne

- Baedeker, K. 1930, *Northern Italy: Handbook for Travellers*, Allen & Unwin, London.
- General Muir Bulletins, 1952. Daily bulletins issued to ship's passengers of events/progress. Documents in family possession.
- Joyce, J. 1916, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, reprinted 1966, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Lobl, T. 1995, Letter, Red Cliffs Historical Society, Mildura.
- Rosetti, C. 1930, 'Babies', *Second Book, Victorian Readers*, reprinted 1986, Ministry of Education, Melbourne, p. 32.
- Santarcangeli, P. 1969, *Il Porto Dell'aquila Decapitata*, Vallecchi, Officine grafiche, Florence.
- The Sun News Pictorial*, 1956-1965
- The Victorian Readers*, 1930, Ministry of Education, reprinted 1986, Melbourne.

***SHIFTING: THE CREATION AND THEORETICAL  
EXPLORATION OF A COLLABORATIVE  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL***

Helen Cerne

**VOLUME TWO**

CONTENTS

Volume Two

	Page
Commentary: a theoretical exploration of the collaborative autobiographical novel, <i>SHIFTING</i>	iii
Contents of the commentary	iv
Commentary	1
Bibliography	57



A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF  
THE COLLABORATIVE  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL,  
*SHIFTING*

Helen Cerne

1998

**Contents of the Commentary**

<b>Chapters</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	1
1. Collaborative Writing	5
2. Heterosexual Collaborative Writing Partnerships	18
3. Collaboration: Shifting Cultural Identity	28
4. Collaborative Autobiography	39
Conclusion	52
Bibliography	57

## Introduction

Collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more people with complementary skills, interacting to create a shared understanding. This shared meaning may be about a process, a product, or an event. Collaboration is a relationship with a dynamic, often different from ordinary communication. Successful collaborators enthuse about the advantages of sharing writing projects. Schrage in his theoretical study of such practice concludes: 'There's an alchemical, almost mystical quality to the best of these collaborations; a sense of creation that transcends individual talent and skill' (Schrage 1990: 41).

Formal collaborations can involve structures and processes such as meetings, book reviewing, editing, workshopping, redrafting; informal collaborations may involve conversational sessions and single episodes such as note-taking or sharing ideas. There is no definitive mode of collaborative writing. Rather, there are a number of tasks deeply embedded in specific political, social and ideological contexts. The degree of authority, agreement, dialogue and negotiation between collaborative partners are important aspects for successful shared writing projects.

*Shifting* is a collaborative autobiographical novel between myself and my partner, Serge, which tells the story of an Italian boy and an Australian born girl growing up in Victoria during the 1950s-1960s who share experiences of displacement and dislocation. Serge migrated from Italy when he was five and I, the daughter of a policeman, shifted frequently in my youth. We were often at the same places or schools at the same time without knowing each other. In the novel the characters finally meet in the closure of the narrative. The dual process of writing this story made me interested in exploring collaboration further for my Master of Arts commentary.

Collaboration can take many forms which are varied by successes and failures. Many projects become problematic. The joint writing of the novel *Shifting* raised many questions. Are the best collaborative endeavours built on principles of equality? When does cooperative writing necessitate a univocal or polyvocal approach? Can a man and a woman, let alone a husband and wife, work equally together or is one silenced by the other? Does collaboration involve some shifting or fusing of narrative identity? Do women collaborate better than men? Who owns the text? How is a collaborative autobiography a

construction of a metaphorical narrative of the self? The dual concepts of autonomy versus compromise, individual artistic success versus cooperative responsibility, are dilemmas not easily resolved.

The first chapter of my critique discusses the historical background of literary collaborative theory and then examines various collaborative tasks such as working with an editor, dividing the written task or fusing the narrative. My analysis of *Shifting* underpins the discussion which examines the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative creative writing and diverse process models. This leads into an analysis of collaborative theory and the notion of 'dialogic' discourse. Theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Ede and Lunsford (1990) and Wayne Koestenbaum (1989) emphasise the idea of language as a two-sided social act, which involves significant relationships of talk, trust and, in some instances, sensual duality in collaborative projects.

The second chapter discusses examples of heterosexual collaborative writing and compares them with *Shifting*. Although there are many theoretical studies of feminist collaborations such as Doane and Hodges (1994), Laird (1995), Leonardi and Pope (1995), in my research I found I needed to theorise heterosexual collaborative writing practice. In contrast to feminist collaborations, the differences between men and women who collaborate are usually related to gender expectations or socio-economic domestic circumstances. I also discuss cultural roles and stereotypes of the 'male' as the dominant active creator and the 'female' as the emotional nurturer or passive muse, which may further inhibit heterosexual collaborative writing practice. In Australia, the constraints of familial and social life on shared creative writing in marriage are exemplified by couples such as Ruth Park and Darcy Niland, Charmian Clift and George Johnston and Vance and Nettie Palmer. I therefore examine several creative writing partnerships to analyse their work practice and domestic arrangements and the tensions in heterosexual collaborative practice: the duality, for example, between individual expression and shared creative responsibility. Radical feminist theory is critical of heterosexual collaborative partnerships where the power differential between partners may cause appropriation and in some cases exploitation. This negative association of collaboration as collusion with the enemy is then illustrated with specific cases.

The third chapter looks at collaborative writing as a process of shifting identities, particularly where two people are jointly exploring narrative situations of cultural marginalisation. The central argument is that identity is not fixed but rather an evolving process which shifts in times of stress and change. The changing notion of cultural identity is explained with reference to contemporary theorists such as Sneja Gunew, Stuart Hall and Linda Hutcheon. *Shifting* in its collaborative structure exemplifies this concept of uncertainty in situations of dislocation and displacement by exploring physical and emotional shifting through literary form and content. Social transitions of the 1950s and 1960s in Australia are particularly important. Migration, was one of the quintessential experiences of the twentieth century. With its metaphorical associations in literature, migration might depict a shift from an outer to an inner reality, from a physical experience to a psychic one, a journey from childhood to adulthood and from the self to the 'other'. Collaboration on a joint autobiography causes shifts of personal identity within the individual as well as to the 'other' writer. In some collaborative cases, this movement results in a fusing of narrative identity. In *Shifting*, the closure is a blended narration when the two protagonists finally meet and the dual voices blur into one.

The final chapter examines how autobiographies are metaphors of the self and how they may be used to understand cultural identity. Personal narratives help us to understand and construct ourselves. *Shifting* and other autobiographies of childhood and adolescence are forms of personal mythologising: life is a narrative journey filled with signifiers, signposts of change and quests to replace loss. Nevertheless Joy Hooton maintains there are differences between male and female autobiographies — the female is usually more concerned with the content of relationships. I discuss how pertinent this comment is to *Shifting*. Although the novel shares many features of the *bildungsroman*, a novel of self development, and the *kunstlerroman*, a novel of an artist's development, *Shifting* differs in that it does not explore the harmonious cultivation of the whole personality as a unified self, nor does it evoke the world as an harmonious organic whole. Helen's life experiences are not the triumphant linear journey usually associated with the male artist towards self realisation as in the traditional *kunstlerroman* (Zumas 1993). The chapter concludes with an analysis of autobiographical writing and memory as a process of

selecting events and reconstructing experience which creates a mythology of one's self.

In collaborative autobiography, the dual writing becomes an exercise in association, each writer concerned not only with their own story but also with what the other narrative is exploring. Collaborative practice can be both rewarding and frustrating but also illuminating. In many ways the joint writing of *Shifting* has been a journey of discovery, not only of the self as an autobiographical product but also of the self as part of a writing process which shifts through the act of collaboration.

## Chapter One

### Collaborative Writing

Throughout history, there have always been literary collaborations; some proudly acclaimed, others never acknowledged; many individuals in partnerships have been silenced for personal or political reasons and often rendered invisible by the power differential between partners. Traditionally western thought has not embraced collaboration as vital to creative writing. For centuries, philosophers and literary commentators have all probed the individual creative mind: memory, perception, thought processes, and the nature of the written creative experience – understood only in terms of the human psyche in isolation rather than processes of shared social understandings between two or more people in composing a cooperative text (Schrage 1990: 44). This critical emphasis on the individual as single author has been changing for a number of years. It is now generally accepted that no writing occurs in a vacuum. Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' (1977) flagged the notion of writing as discourse and undermined notions of the unified text.

Structuralists (Barthes) and post-structuralists (the later Barthes, Foucault and Derrida) have placed increasing emphasis on discourse rather than the subject (Milner 1991: 72). They maintain differences between discursive elements are important and divert attention away from the uniqueness of individual books to what they have in common: intertextual codes, conventions and rules, which reduce the signifying power of the author. Intertextuality penetrates the individual text with cultural memories, echoes, transformations, and other narratives. Audience and reception communication theories have also subverted the status of the traditional academic 'canon' and the notion of meaning being conveyed by one person (Lodge 1990: 13). Questions about authenticity and reality are also being debated in literary circles. Are novels true to life, or do they merely create a reality effect? Is reality itself only another literary effect? Texts have many meanings which are dependent on interpretation and from what position of power they are written or read. Collaborative creation is of particular relevance to those exploring the notion of group or shared expressions and the decentred self in postmodern discourse. Such approaches militate against the entrenched Romantic notion of the solitary-scholar writer. Although models of collaboration may still

privilege the notion of 'author', collaborative anthologies juxtaposing multiple stories subvert traditional notions of narrative construction: 'Discrete, plural, personal stories and anecdotalism take the place of a grand metanarrative or overarching theory' (Laird 1994: 12). In this post-Freud, post-communist, post-agreed meaning world, the individual's identity as a unified subject is being debated in cultural literature. Postmodernist scholars are increasingly interested in reflexivity and intertextuality, multiple perspectives and the appropriation of other texts. This is not new: many works of the past blur the border lines between genres, novels such as *Tristram Shandy* (1760) and *Such Is Life* (1903), with their disjointed narratives, shifting voices and intrusive narrators are examples. Academic study before post-structuralism, however, has not previously examined these disparate social voices and styles in a serious manner.

Whether acknowledged or not, most published writers do collaborate in one way or another: with an editor, a publisher, or an illustrator. The most common form of literary collaboration is the editorial process, where an editor edits, revises, suggests changes and sometimes co-authors a text. In the last instance, the editor's voice and the storyteller together shape the narrative. Sometimes an amanuensis writes down more than the dictated story, reshaping the narrative in the process (Boyce Davies 1995: 9). There are many examples of this co-authored model, particularly in autobiographical works such as multicultural or women's life stories, which may be narrated orally and then written down by another author or editor.<sup>1</sup> These recent collaborative anthologies of minority groups empower those in society who have too long been silent.<sup>2</sup> The ghostwriter of a celebrity's story is another example of collaboration. These co-writing models involve a great deal of trust and may cause problems of shifting authority. Co-writers may also have more equal involvement where the writing is separated into chapters or tasks depending on interest and expertise. Negotiation is important here, to establish where skills lie. By combining tasks and experience, the drafts are separately written and

---

<sup>1</sup> Henderson, A. (ed.) 1993, *From All Corners: Six Migrant Stories*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney. Henderson edited the text and co-wrote each chapter. She taped the six interviews then transcribed them, interweaving her own observations.

<sup>2</sup> Romero, P. W. (ed.) 1988, *Life Histories of African Women*, Ashfield, New Jersey.



then often edited by the other partner. This revision of each others' work helps unify style and voice in the whole work (Dugan 1995).

In the novel *Shifting*, the creative component was divided in half and written separately. Serge <sup>3</sup> and I did not rewrite or redraft each other's work but the discussion and initial planning of the novel were shared. The individual style and voice of the writers are quite distinct and clearly delineated. My narrative is written in the present tense, with a first person and limited narrator, to capture the naivety of children and the immediacy of their world: 'Under the black deep Mildura night sky I count the star diamonds on hot summer nights looking out of the flywire at the world' (H. Cerne 1996: 35). The use of the first person can give a force, an immediacy, an idiosyncratic and personal energy to a piece of writing (Grenville 1990: 61). Moreover, the use of a first person narration is an effective literary device for the writing of childhood experiences as it preserves not only the child's role as both actor and witness, but that character's voice as well. As Moore suggests, the first person young narrator conveys 'in some cases the language of the evolving consciousness, the makeshift intelligence, the wily rhetorical manipulation and inventions of someone not yet part of the grown up world' (Moore 1997: x). The use of the first person also has limitations as to what the narrator can know, can reveal or, the narrator as child, can understand at that age. <sup>4</sup> Serge's chapters are written in the past tense, with a third person omniscient narrator to capture a feeling of alienation and internal distance. <sup>5</sup> Serge decided to write about his early life in the third person to give the narrative a wider perspective so that he could include the experiences and thoughts of Maria and Pietro, his parents: 'Their reality here had no

---

<sup>3</sup> I refer to my collaborative partner as 'Serge' throughout my commentary, in my last two chapters of *Shifting* and in real life. 'Sergio', however, is the character in Serge's sections of the text. This has helped to delineate between the two for discussion — the constructed literary character and the real person with whom I shared the task.

<sup>4</sup> In *Shifting*, a difficulty for me was maintaining the naive point of view. At times I am perhaps too knowing for my age. Moreover contemporary literary theorists find first person autobiographical works problematic. Gunew argues that they present the spurious authority of experience which reinscribes the unified subject (Gunew 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Elena Jonaitis also chose to write her autobiography *Elena's Journey* (1997) in the third person. She said at the Melbourne Writers' Festival 1997 that she had to distance herself to tell the truth because that past little girl 'I' was now a 'she' and that by telling 'her' life she was speaking of the migration experience of others too.

the familiar facts they knew, because they were absolutes that gave their universe a purpose, otherwise their lives, their personalities would be meaningless to the point of extinction' (S. Cerne 1996: 142).

Other forms of collaboration are the choral or plural modes of collaborative writing featured in recent publications of many marginal life stories collected as oral history.<sup>6</sup> These polyphonic and plural forms, Boyce-Davies (1995) argues, challenge many of the generic expectations of autobiography: they are, as well, subversions of the definition of 'author'... a crossover genre that challenges the oral/written separations and unites these forms to maintain their distinct textualities' (Boyce-Davies 1995: 6-7). In another example of collaborative work, the 'psychic fusion model', the voices blend and the creative process is synergistic and totally shared.

There are several advantages in collaborative writing. Knowledge is shared and written work is halved. Dual communication processes and perspectivity provide a broader input, as well as a search for the identification with others/another and a certain pleasure in the creative act itself. Sharing a frisson or spark of ideas is another benefit. Writing together can be a stimulus to the creative process. As Dugan maintains: 'It sparks off knowledge in the other person that they didn't know they had!' (Dugan 1995)

Serge and I chose collaboration for several reasons. First, we thought thematically there was a strong connection between two children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s who both felt dislocated because of shifting. Moreover, the many similarities, coincidences, and synchronicities of the narrative events of our lives were too uncanny to ignore. Second, as we were both interested in innovative writing techniques, we thought a collaborative work would generate a more experimental structure, with different male/female perspectives. Third, the closure of the meeting voices was a strong way to conclude an adolescent autobiographical novel. Fourth, because we enjoy working together and discussing ideas, writing collaboratively seemed a logical progression. Finally, I thought our joint life studies were a suitable project for an MA thesis. Serge agreed it was a way of writing for a purpose. We both have previously experienced publishing frustrations

---

<sup>6</sup> Patnai, D. (ed.) 1988, *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

with long-term writing projects. A couple of plays have been workshopped but never produced.

Many co-writers maintain that without the other person, they would not have completed the task at hand. Trust is critical in the sharing process. In the writing of *Shifting*, this was very much the case. Writing through discussion, through sharing memory experiences and through reading the other's work, empowered our writing. Rather than seeing each other as competitive rivals, we saw the creation of the dual text as all-important. As Borges states about his collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares<sup>7</sup>: 'We don't feel as if we are two rivals ... There's no case of winning or losing. What we're thinking of is the story itself, the stuff itself' (Borges 1976 : 134).

However, there are also several disadvantages in writing together: there are basic practical problems of finding convenient times to work together, agreeing on the structure and direction of the work, splitting research tasks, using copyright and public domain material, and working out contractual agreements and dividing shared royalties (Dugan 1995). Cultural differences, of ethnicity, class and gender can be a difficulty too. For example, in Serge's chapters he wrote about Italian folk practice and used idiomatic language such as 'catching sparrows with salt on their tails', or '*malocchio*', 'the evil eye', which I found hard to understand. Aspects of stories such as humour do not always translate. The use of many Italian phrases caused problems with the spell check! There were also writing differences in styles, speed, and shaping of the text; and contrasting emphases in content and form, facts and imaginary reinterpretation. Conflicts over character, stylistic concerns, the amount of dialogue or researched description and the role of the reader were also issues.

Creating a shared text can also be constricting. In *Shifting*, the narrative limited what the 'other' was exploring. Silences appeared. Serge decided to focus on the solitary boy. I chose not to discuss family problems. Some stories were censored. (There are secrets in any relationship.) I chose not to mention the private memory of my first serious heterosexual relationship. Many narratives were not told; some events were contrasted in the text, other incidents mirrored

---

<sup>7</sup> Borges and Casares in their collaboration created a third person called H. Bustos Domecq, named after their combined great grandfathers' names. Together they wrote detective stories, *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, (1942).

experiences. Each writer could not diverge from the pressure of closure, the narrative drive was constrained by the collaborative structure where the two characters finally had to meet. Other co-writers have experienced this tension when writing a conclusion. Piers Anthony has written 17 collaborative science fiction novels and he talks about these interesting differences with endings: 'I have to fight my inborn pessimism or clear view of reality not to conclude with a tragedy' (Anthony 1992: 264).

To work with another may also involve compromise. Serge and I have different work practices. Researched information and content is important to both of us, but Serge, a more meticulous writer than I, is more concerned about the aesthetic form of a piece of writing. Many lines of his are worked on until they become quite poetic and lyrical: 'Teeming runnels of rummaging rats scurried over the rubbish ... A vast sky sang with the song of invisible birds' (S. Cerne 1996: 74-75). A paragraph may be rewritten many times before he moves on. I tend to be a faster more prolific writer. I write a whole chapter in one sitting and then begin the laborious process of editing and redrafting. Usually I do several rewrites, but the basic foundation and the structure of the piece is there from the start. I may rearrange it, layer it with resonant motifs but usually the basis of the first draft remains. The biggest problem for me in collaborating was that Serge was never satisfied with the work. When I moved on, he continued to tinker and change chapters. When I reread his sections, they had been altered again! Sometimes we were working on different disks or drafts which was confusing. For Serge, art is a dynamic process with no closure. It is never complete. Halving the work did not always make the collaborative task easier; in fact, in many cases it became more complicated, as issues of control and conflicting priorities arose. This issue of power in the collaborative text is significant for theorists who analyse how the collaborative process works.

Recent research into collaborative writing distinguishes between two general types: the hierarchical and the dialogic. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford are pioneers in this field of research. In *Single Texts/Plural Authors* (1990), Ede and Lunsford use linguistic methods for the analysis of conversational discourse and give examples such as turn-taking, cooperation, and sharing to define models of collaborative writing: 'The process of articulating and working together to achieve goals is as important as the goals themselves ... Yes, it can be a site of

struggle, a site we also see as one of opportunity' (Ede and Lunsford 1990: 234-236). The hierarchical mode of collaborative working is structured, goal-orientated and carried out by people in clearly defined roles which Brady defines as essentially 'masculine' (Brady 1992: 303). Within this competitive mode, the realities of multiple voices and shifting authority are seen as differences to be overcome or resolved. In Ede and Lunsford's dialogic model, the narrative style approximates the 'feminine' style of discourse where roles are flexibly structured and fluid and the writers do not compete for control but maintain individual authority and flexibility: communication is noncompetitive and cooperative.

The notion of 'dialogic' discourse derives from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Bakhtin argued that disparate voices and diverse genres compete with each other in the novel. 'Dialogism' is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia: everything is understood as part of a greater whole; there is a constant interaction between voices, accents and meanings, each conditioning the other. This ensures that a text is not monologic. Bakhtin maintained that language is not a two-sided sign but a two-sided social act: every word we use is directed toward the 'other'. He stressed the novel's polyphonic nature and the incorporation of diverse genres written in different voices, some academic and others in the vernacular of the people (*skaz*). For the novelist, other people's words are important, and are incorporated within the author's own language. Bakhtin's theories of literary meaning were rooted in this importance of the social nature of language. Heteroglossia constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author (Bakhtin 1980:324).

The birth of the novel challenged monologic forms such as the canonic genres of tragedy, epic, and lyric which all suppressed the inherently dialogic quality of language in the interests of expressing a unified world view. According to Lodge, the novel is a hybrid form which does:

justice to the inherent dialogism of language and culture by means of its discursive polyphony, its subtle and complex interweaving of various types of speech – direct, indirect and doubly oriented (e.g. parody) – and its carnivalesque irreverence

towards all kinds of authoritarian, repressive, monologic, ideologies (Lodge 1990: 21).

Dialogue also has particular meanings for collaborative writing studies. Ede and Lunsford (1990) also assert that polyphonic discourse is advantageous to co-writing. In their study, the term 'dialogic' refers to two or more writers constructing a text together. Their study focuses on collaborative writing in formal situations such as business organisations, institutes and schools; their work does not examine in detail the process of creative writing. This contrasts with Bakhtin's use of the term 'dialogic' which has philosophical application as social discourse, orality and parole,<sup>8</sup> and literary application in creative writing and the evolution of the novel. Unlike Bakhtin, Ede and Lunsford also privilege the role of the author. They argue that writing is unified and original, the property of the 'authors', rather than the heteroglossic and eclectic property of social discourses and genres.

In his study of male collaboration, Wayne Koestenbaum (1989) observes that the decision to work together on a text determines the work's contents and how it may be read. His study emphasises literary dialogue as a social act and relationship: 'Books with two authors are specimens of a relation and show writing to be a quality of motion and exchange, not a fixed thing.' (Koestenbaum 1989: 76) When two writers' names appear on a book, they are signalling the social aspect for the reader who then reads the book differently because he or she is aware of the dual creative process involved: 'The double signature confers an enormous interpretative freedom for the reader as it permits he or she to see the act of collaboration shadowing every word written in the text' (Koestenbaum : 78).

The chosen reader is often the 'other' writer. Many partnerships stress this importance of a shared appreciative audience as being an essential impetus to the other's work. Serge and I both depended on feedback from each other : we were our own captive critical audience. In Australia, the partnership between Marjorie Barnard (1897-1987) and Flora Eldershaw (1897-1976) was one of the most important productive Australian literary collaborations of the twentieth century and a prime example of the interested 'other'. Over several decades, as M. Barnard

---

<sup>8</sup> Parole is distinguished from language (langue) in linguistic theory - parole is speaking-speech, language-behaviour, or on occasions phrases such as the sum of all actual possible utterances.

Eldershaw, they wrote historical novels together and rewrote each other's work. Both insisted that in addition to the conditions of collaboration, they also needed each other as an audience to develop as writers. According to Dever, both 'embodied for the other ... the ideal reader, a function that allowed them in turn to play crucial roles in making writers of one another' (Dever 1994: 72). M. Barnard Eldershaw, their fused pseudonym, could be seen as a third narrator and a constructed collaborative voice, which became a new entity.

Conversation is also an important common feature in effective collaboration, before, during and after the writing process. Discussion was a valuable process in writing *Shifting*. Many co-writers (Doane and Hodges 1994, Leonardi and Pope 1994) speak of the need to model both process and product, and the importance of talking and contextualising their collaborative methodology. Elbrecht and Fakundiny also argue that : 'The goal of all these shifts and transfers going back to *conversari* had been to foreground verbal behaviour - talk - as a synecdoche for living. Like conversation, collaboration is both eventual and contextual, delimiting both time and space' (Elbrecht and Fakundiny 1994: 249).

Talk appears to act as a mediator for cognition. Vygotsky <sup>9</sup> (1986) stresses the importance of the interfunctionality of language: 'if thought is internalised public and social talk ... then writing of all kinds is internalised social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalised conversation, then writing is internalised conversation re-externalised' (Plowman 1993: 151). Co-authored writing is similarly dynamic: there is a transition from talk, to talk internalised as thought, which is then re-externalised as a co-written text. Discussion and writing shape meaning and provide a link between social and cognitive processes. Spoken dialogue not only conveys meaning, it also generates it. Recent studies such as Plowman (1993) and Ede and Lunsford (1990 ) show that talk performs a range of functions in the co-authoring of a text, much more than proofreading/ editing asides and brief marginal notes. Speaking together also helps the global revisions of the whole text. These studies indicate that the time to talk through ideas is more beneficial to the creative process than written comments. Discussing ideas is also of particular importance to those teachers or editors

---

<sup>9</sup> Vygotsky's case studies show the process of writing as a cyclical sequence: participants present thoughts to the group, modify them in the public arena, capture them in text and then reinternalise them.

working with writers. Conversation enabled Serge and I to prompt each other, articulate themes, recapitulate points, argue issues, generate ideas and seek consensus. Talk is interactive, spontaneous and untidy. Nevertheless, it enables the generation and reformation of ideas through turn-taking, overlapping of ideas, contextualising and clarifying understanding.

Using a computer is also a factor in effective collaboration. Many studies (Davies 1989, Crook 1994) have highlighted the advantages for organising joint writing activities with word processors over more traditional means. Although Serge and I never jointly composed the text together on the computer at the same time, this technology saved time and promoted discussion. It allowed for greater interaction as the writing product was equally visible; any editing that emerged from discussion could be executed easily. It also reduced problems of redrafting, cutting, pasting and locating sections of text. Computers aid social engagement and help to develop a shared understanding. This is an important aspect of collaborative writing practice. Crook, in his study on how computers aid collaborative writing, refers to this shared understanding as a 'platform': 'a shared position from which partners investigate further... a possibility of creating a mutuality of reference and attention that can govern the next response' (Crook 1994: 163).

These pedagogical advantages of collaborative learning and writing approaches in the classroom are stressed by many theorists - Ede and Lunsford (1990), Plowman (1993) and (Crook 1984). The importance of talk, the negotiation of authority and the responsibility to encourage group cohesion, creative conflict and the protection of minority views are seen as essential to learning. If, as Plowman (1993) maintains, aspects of knowledge are constructed among members of a community, then the collaborative learning practice is important in education. Ede and Lunsford (1990) argue that we must see shared writing tasks as a dynamic social process that permits differences to emerge and real learning experiences to occur. They argue educators must 'distinguish between consensus as an acculturative practice that reproduces business as usual and consensus as an oppositional one that challenges the prevailing conditions of production by providing a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which difference may emerge' (Ede and Lunsford 1990: 118).



Talk may not be always agreed polite conversation either.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the creative ideas spring from the well of misunderstandings, from the right words taken from the wrong context or from the breaking of social conventions in conversation such as not interrupting, not digressing, or screaming. Some writers talk about the breaking of these conventions of politeness which cause disagreements as essential to the process for good collaboration. Honesty and candour should be at the heart of effective collaborative work to gain clarity. Sometimes this negotiation is more akin to 'intercourse' with all its associated meanings (Leonardi & Pope 1995: 267). Negotiations for a clear understanding involve, Schrage says, 'a dialectical process of depersonalised argumentation ... where there is a delicious tension between people passionately proclaiming their dispassionate analyses' (Schrage 1990: 42).

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges (1994) point out reasons for the proliferation of feminist collaborative literature. In contrast to men, women are socialised to cooperate and work together collectively, often non-competitively. Some women choose collaboration as an important subversive way of questioning patriarchal norms of authorship which privilege the autonomous author. The question remains whether such writing is a 'regressive feminine selflessness or a progressive feminist selflessness?' (Doane and Hodges 1994: 51 )

As co-authors of *Shifting*, Serge and I believe that rather than limiting individual voices, collaboration enables dual ways of representing and perceiving the 'truths' that transcend individual experience. Our novel was written not only to explore the possibilities for displacement by the juxtaposition of the male and female narratives, but also to examine notions of memory and relative truth in autobiography. It poses a relevant question for contemporary literature and history: does collaboration, as an experimental and narrative literary device in an autobiographical work, create greater resonant meaning than in a conventional single-voiced narration? This thesis supports the notion that the multiple truths/fictions of lived and remembered experience, especially when two people have

---

<sup>10</sup>Michael Gurr, the playwright, supports this description of collaborative experiences: 'When you work with people repeatedly you lose the burden of politeness ... collaboration gets rid of that ' (Gurr 1997).

lived through the same period and the same places, can be more powerfully conveyed through a collaborative text.

In *Shifting* the final chapter interweaves both voices into a collaborative closure that is both fragmented and unified. Serge and I switch narrative voice. Serge now writes in the first person and I write in the third person. These stylistic decisions reflect the nature of remembering or constructing of actual experiences. Some individuals recall their past with an involved vivid voice; others repress most of their early memories and speak of childhood in a distant way as though it happened to someone else as is the case with Serge. Also, the shift in narrative voice and tense at the end of *Shifting* explore the changing relationship and the nature of meeting the significant 'other' in heterosexual relationships. The male now empowered speaks in the first person; the female speaks in the third person now distant from herself as 'she'. When she does speak in the first person, it is now 'we' in the plural form. This dynamic is further explored in chapter three.<sup>11</sup>

Sexuality may be a primary and political component of much collaborative work. The erotics of authorial collaboration appear below the surface in many discussions about co-writing. The *frisson* shared in creating seems charged with sexual undertones. When co-writers are emotionally involved or lovers, the nature of the relationship, the social act of creating together is often under scrutiny. Literary critics often debate the positive or negative co-influences of writers who work, live and write together. Heterosexual collaborations have the further complication of gender roles and power relations. Many authors simply refuse to work with anyone with whom they are sexually involved. 'That's best left for the bedroom. No way. Keep it apart!', argues Dugan (1995).

The notion of sensual duality in literary collaboration is taken up by Wayne Koestenbaum (1989) who analyses writers at the turn of the century such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, Eliot and Pound. Koestenbaum argues that these writers collaborated in order to separate homo-eroticism from the sanctioned male bonding that upheld patriarchy at this time. He uses the metaphor 'love child' to describe the texts which resulted from their collaborations. Many literary couples' sexual relationship forms the basis of their co-writing

---

<sup>11</sup>This chapter 'Shifting Cultural Identity' explores through examples from the novel shifts in narrative voice and cultural identity, examining aspects of ethnicity, gender and class.

experience. Gillian Hanscombe's and Suniti Namjoshi's *Flesh and Paper* (1994) explores their lesbian erotic bonds in explicit detail and how their dual text subverts the difference between 'subject' and 'object' and the notion of individual authorship. Similarly in *Jump Cuts* (Soldatow and Tsiolkas 1996), the two narrative voices merge into a single voice and blur within a shifting narration.

For various reasons, people decide to collaborate to produce literary works. They may need insights, comments, and questions from others; they implicitly accept the fact that other perspectives can add value to their own. For *Shifting*, Serge and I felt reconstructing the life of a boy and a girl in transition in a period of social change was the best method to explore growing up in working-class Australia. The novel moves between the hierarchical and the dialogic model of collaboration, involving shifting roles for each writer. Power and authority do not disappear, but rather are shared and sometimes contested. Like most co-authors discussed in this chapter, we see collaboration as constructing something of worth. As Schrage notes, 'Collaboration describes a process of value creation that our traditional structures of communication and teamwork can't achieve' (Schrage 1990: 39). As a man and a woman in a long-term relationship, we had difficulties to resolve; we struggled over the content and form, the final product and the more practical features of the writing process itself.

## Chapter Two

### Heterosexual Collaborative Writing Partnerships

Although feminist collaborations have become increasingly more common and theorised in recent years, heterosexual collaborative writing appears under researched. Undoubtedly differences arising from gender, sexuality, age, race and class can affect such partnerships. The constraints of familial, social and matrimonial arrangements can place further limitations on shared creativity. Nevertheless, despite such obstacles, these literary collaborations can reveal many endeavours which are successful. Men and women can and do work well together but the interpretations by theorists and the co-writers themselves of the collaborative process may vary. Myths, images and stereotypes about heterosexuality continue to exert a strong influence over creative expectations, especially when they emphasise the male as originator or controller of ideological concepts:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer not maker of meaning (Mulvey 1975: 433).

For male artists women have been seen as figures of inspiration or as 'the muse' or even as silent bearers of meaning, but seldom as the creators of meaning. Female metaphors of biological reproduction and emotional nurturing appear widely in the work of male and female writers in all cultures. Socially constructed gender roles influence the equality of shared heterosexual expression. Within patriarchy, there are limitations on shared writing experiences and continued assumptions by both readers and writers of the male as the dominant partner and the female as the subordinate one.

Men and women sometimes have different accounts of the shared writing process. Playwrights Andrew Bovell and Hannie Rayson, for example, have different interpretations of aims and choices in writing *Scenes from a Separation*, (1995) a well received play about marital breakdown. Bovell stressed the individual stylistic differences. He did not want homogeneity and felt: 'it was important to come up with a concept that allowed us to work independently' (Bovell 1996: 7).

Rayson disagreed: she wanted the play to be more homogenous. She believed they had achieved this through the two main characters, Mathew and Nina, who, although written from different male and female perspectives, did finally develop as if one playwright had written them (Bovell and Rayson 1995).

Many heterosexual couples divide their writing tasks according to individual abilities which they maintain are gender differences. William and Marilyn Hoffer are a husband and wife who have written 17 best-selling books together. She writes the first draft and he rearranges the material and writes the second draft. They each criticise the other's copy for unity and consistency. William Hoffer organises and handles the technical information while Marilyn Hoffer writes about people and their emotions. He says: 'To be chauvinistic about it, she's got the woman's touch' (Page 1988: 2). It is simplistic and a generalisation to conclude that the Hoffer model is the norm of heterosexual writing partnerships. More complex individual factors are involved. But collaborative relationships like the Hoffers may reflect what many feminists (Doane & Hodges 1994: 53) refer to as one aspect of women's socialised gendered roles, namely their willingness to submerge their identity in cooperative relationships. For this reason, women may appear better at collaborating than men. They seem more prepared to compromise or to blend with another. This may stem from the psychic consequences of a phallogentric society where male individuation is perpetuated.

According to Joy Hooton (1992) female cooperation has its origins in childhood. The girl identifies with the mother as primary care-giver and has no need to detach herself from the world to find individual selfhood: 'Thus her experience of self is characterised by more flexible and permeable ego boundaries' than the male (Hooton 1992: 30).

Initially, collaboration was my idea. Serge, at first, was sceptical, but he became more interested in our story, even if he still remained more committed to his own. Despite my strong feminist leanings, there was an implicit belief on my part that a male perspective juxtaposed with my experiences would validate the act of writing an autobiography. This presence of a significant 'other' – a tendency still pervasive in women's life stories – will be discussed further in the chapter on collaboration and autobiography.

Two significant aspects of heterosexual writing partnerships for committed couples within patriarchy are the socio-economic

circumstances and domestic responsibilities which may affect the relationship and determine the nature of collaborative practice. It would have been impossible to write *Shifting* several years ago. With Serge as breadwinner and myself as the primary carer of small children, a part-time teacher and student, conflicting pressures, and time commitments made it far too difficult. Once the children became independent, it was possible to collaborate. Nevertheless having one computer meant only one of us could work at a time. If we were both at home, it was usually Serge who had first priority. This exemplifies a common experience of women who write and have families: they work when the children are asleep or at school or when the husband is not at home.

Other famous married writing partnerships in Australian fiction further illustrate the pressures of domestic reality. Couples such as Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland or Charmian Clift and George Johnston show how family commitments place enormous social, economic and creative demands on collaborative relationships.

Ruth Park (1919- ) and D'Arcy Niland (1917-1967) shared a twenty-five year productive marital relationship of writing creation. Together, they wrote an autobiography *The Drums Go Bang* (1956) and a television play *No Decision* (1961). Park's autobiography *Fishing in the Styx* (1994) describes this process:

If either one of us disliked a piece written by the other, the reasons had to be stated and argued out. In this way we learned from each other ... gradually I acquired knowledge about the writing of short stories ... and he so adamant that he would never get the hang of writing factual material profited by my years in journalism. He suggested the replacement of inexact words with hard hitting ones or that I should shorten sentences, sharpen themes (Park 1994 : 119).

Park often refers to 'we' in the text which refers to the plural process of writing throughout their happy twenty-five years together: 'We were dual; we set off sparks in each other. Providence had also spared us jealousy, that frequent devil that haunts creative partnerships and which destroys so many writers, even writers we knew well, such as Charmian Clift and George Johnston' (Park 1994: 120). After a day's work Niland and Park would pin up pieces of prose and each was free to borrow from the other to complete their set task. It was a long fruitful collaboration and loving partnership. 'We were in a literary

sense, obsessively industrious, partly because we had to work like demons in order to make the most basic of incomes, and mostly because writing was life itself' ( Park 1994 : 39). Nevertheless, Park writes of frustration, boredom and lack of writing time when the children were young. Longing for her own time and writing space, it was Niland who got the first desk and room in which to work while she used 'the kitchen table, the ironing board, the bed or my knees' (Park 1994: 122).

Charmian Clift (1923-1969) and George Johnston (1912-1970) wrote three novels together: *High Valley* ( 1948), *The Big Chariot* (1953), and *The Sponge Divers* (1956). But there were dual borrowings throughout their time together. Sections of Clift's Greek journals appeared unacknowledged years later in Johnston's *Clean Straw For Nothing* (1969). Describing the collaborative process, Clift and Johnston both noted that they first did a careful synopsis, wrote a chapter each and then exchanged ideas and rewrote each other's work if necessary. Their working methods were opposite. Johnston's journalistic training made him faster and more prolific; whereas Clift was slow, painstaking and very private (Wheatley 1990: 271). Clift's sister described their collaborating thus: 'They'd put their heads together and say now what are we going to keep and what are we going to cut? Clift would go below the surface.' Johnston later described their collaboration on *High Valley* as follows: 'It was a fair fifty-fifty. I contributed most of the descriptive material as a journalist, she supplied the emotional structure and themes.' *High Valley* won the Sydney Morning Herald Award, and they were celebrated throughout the media as a successful creative partnership:

The fact that they wrote as a team caught people's imaginations ... Somehow the fact of marriage partners succeeding in a single artistic venture raised feelings about the perfect relationship, combining all those usually incompatible professional, imaginative and domestic elements into a harmony that cut across socially determined roles ... They fed ideas to each other, read and criticised each other's work and loyally sustained each other's commitments to the task in hand ( Kinnane 1986: 100).

Although this idyllic relationship appeared to work well, it soured later because of illness, professional rivalry and sexual jealousy. The

ebullient Clift wrote several novels on her own,<sup>1</sup> but because of motherhood and increasing domestic demands, she concentrated on articles and editorial columns in later years to meet expenses. Increasingly depressed in her private and professional life, Clift committed suicide in 1969.

The borrowing of another's work or ideas often raises questions of ownership. Is it plagiarism, or exploitation? Is it appropriation of the female by the male? Professional writers have to make ends meet. For women writers, particularly before and immediately after World War Two, heterosexual relationships often meant teamwork, compromise, and helping the other partner at the expense of individual fame. Their collaborative exchanges sometimes were pragmatic choices. Paying the bills often became more a practical reality than preserving a creative individual authenticity. Chadwick and Courtivron, in their study of creative partnerships, have reiterated the need to acknowledge the depth of the emotional relationship as well as the importance of the domestic socio-economic situation:

Perhaps because as feminist scholars we have until recently focused on the social constraints we have not fully understood the richness of the private interactions that operate *within* relationships. [We must] pay equal attention to the theory underlying the social concepts of masculinity and femininity and to the real social and material conditions which enable or inhibit the creative life' (Chadwick & Courtivron 1993: 9).

Many feminist academics (Leonardi and Pope 1994), however, are dismissive of these exploitative heterosexual collaborations and fail to empathise with the depth of these emotional commitments, the problems of paying bills, feeding and caring for children. Often collaborative projects have to be shelved because of domestic pressures. Radical feminists further argue a man and a woman, especially a husband and wife, are bound by the very nature of patriarchal heterosexuality: he is the dominant active partner, the doer, and she is the passive receiver.<sup>2</sup> These links between productivity and creativity are also reproduced at a deeper level in culture. Notwithstanding

---

<sup>1</sup> Clift wrote *Peel Me a Lotus* (1959), *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* (1960), *Honour's Mimic* (1964) and *Mermaid Singing* (1956).

<sup>2</sup> In *Gyn/Ecology* (1979), Mary Daly writes about role defined masculinity and how patriarchal socialisation has numbed women's brains and blocked their Be-ing (Daly 1979: 379)



recent generational changes, it is usually the woman who puts her career on hold or continues as the supportive partner in the man's writing career. This is particularly true if she lives in a close emotional relationship with a man, and children are involved. She may no longer have time to write anything let alone collaborate on a literary work.

In some cases, the female partner may take on the role of the male's researcher or the hack writer of the cooperative team. Vance Palmer (1885-1959) and Nettie Palmer (1885-1964) exemplified this arrangement. The brilliant Nettie wrote short pieces - articles, criticism, reviews and editorials - to keep them afloat during difficult economic times rather than writing long researched creative work which she valued more highly. Fostering the work of other writers and sublimating her obvious talents to raise her family, Nettie saw Vance as the 'real' writer in the partnership. Modjeska concludes:

Vance Palmer has yet to be assessed in relation to her influence on him, an indication of the strength of "conventional" wisdom about masculine and feminine intellectuality. Nettie Palmer publicly cast herself in a supportive role, both to Vance and to other writers and gave herself very little credence as an intellectual (Modjeska 1981: 203).

In most co-writing households this hierarchical order continues.

Whether equal writing partnerships or not, the fact remains that with or without the consent of their female partners, males have claimed ownership of texts written by those partners with whom they have shared domestic relationships.<sup>3</sup> The contributing voices of female creation are often ignored by the male writers in the heterosexual partnerships. Exploitation can occur in domestic hierarchical structures or collaborative writing partnerships where one partner is more dominant. Indeed many radical feminists see writing a novel jointly with one's male partner as collusion with the enemy.<sup>4</sup> The very term

---

<sup>3</sup> Johnston and Clift, Willy and Colette are discussed, for example, on p. 21 and 24 of this commentary.

<sup>4</sup> All radical feminists believe in some form of separatism to varying degrees. Men - not merely patriarchy - are identified as the enemy because all men benefit from women's oppression. The famous Leeds Revolutionary Feminists (1981) maintained that heterosexuality was the fundamental means of male domination and declared that women, even heterosexual feminists, were collaborators by giving energy and support to the enemy-men. Today, more extreme feminists such as Monique Wittig and Andrea Dworkin call for all women to become political lesbians (Bell & Klein 1996).

'collaboration' has negative connotations associated with a 'selling out' of authenticity or even 'national betrayal'. Silent literary collusions with authoritarian or totalitarian institutions in history such as occupied France or Soviet Russia have tarnished the reputation of many writers and artists. Colette, the French writer, (1873-1954) is such a case. She was twice the pawn of the patriarchal establishment. First she collaborated with her husband Willy and then later during the Nazi occupation of Paris wrote articles for propagandist anti-Semitic fascist magazines such as *Comoedia* (1942) and *Le Petit Parisien*. The reasons for Colette's collaboration with the French male literary establishment, who were by and large Nazi 'collaborators', were complex. Brunazzi (1994) maintains that Colette's publications in occupied Paris can be directly related to her forced collaborative writing as a young wife with Willy who for many years claimed authorship of her brilliant stories. Brunazzi concludes: 'Willy taught Colette ... the arts of survival in the face of loneliness, depression and violence, including the art of mute collaboration with an enemy' (Brunazzi 1994: 288).

Separation can also be another problem in intimate partnerships. If the man and woman are known as a successful writing team, can they survive alone professionally? What happens to the career of the individual writer then? A fascinating example last century was Charles and Elaine Eastman. He was a descendant of Sioux Indians, educated to be a doctor; she was a dedicated author, who once proclaimed, 'I'd rather write than eat.' Elaine Eastman co-wrote and edited all their best selling books, dedicating herself to Charles's writing and his people. Their books together became famous best sellers. When the relationship ended, as the ex-wife of a celebrity, Elaine was never able to gain recognition as an individual writer. Charles too stopped writing. For both, the legacy of their collaboration was perpetual silence (Clark 1994: 278).

Very few heterosexual couples are able to transcend these limitations but some have tried. In *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnerships* (1993), Chadwick and Courtrivon have assembled thirteen essays which examine famous artistic collaborations. Although most artists and writers do not escape social stereotypes about masculinity and femininity and their assumed roles within partnerships, many couples have negotiated new relationships different to conventional stereotypes. Some couples pay a high price

for these alternative creative and affective arrangements which may place an enormous burden on their relationship. (Chadwick & Courtivron 1993: 9-11). Consider, for example, the sexually charged Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, the bisexual Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, Vita Sackville-West and the Bloomsbury set, or the unmarried partnership of Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman or the more conventionally married Simone and Andre Schwarz-Bart. These relationships illustrate how heterosexual creative partnerships can work in a diversity of ways. There are no set patterns. To separate their co-influences on each other is difficult. The intimate intellectual and personal sharing of ideas make the very nature of the artistic relationship a dual creative act. Notions of authorship and ownership are complicated by the writing process itself.

One of the most famous literary partnerships this century, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), was an example of this. Their mutual intellectual indebtedness to each other and their shared ideas have been well documented but critics usually focus on Sartre, the male writer, as the catalyst for their creative relationship. Beauvoir too in her autobiographies has stressed his influence on her intellectual development. Collaborative researchers, Fullbrook and Fullbrook (1993: 117), however, argue quite the reverse. New evidence suggests Beauvoir's *She Came To Stay* (1943) flagged much of Sartre's so-called seminal existential ideas in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Despite the shared nature of conceptual development and intellectual exchanges in collaborative partnerships, the general assumption remains that the 'male' is the originator. With partnerships such as Sartre and de Beauvoir, however, it is difficult to separate their equal contribution to the creative relationship.

Collaboration is easier if the heterosexual partners share the same interests or educational background. Both Sartre and Beauvoir were from middle-class families, studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and shared atheistic Marxist beliefs. Serge and I also share similar interests, and educational background. Both History/English majors from Melbourne University, our shared reading and discussion of modernists such as Joyce, Woolf, Beckett, Kafka and Borges and magic realists such as Marquez have influenced our writing. Serge pays homage to Joyce when he quotes from him at the end of chapter 22 'Seeing Things' and has an uncle meeting a Giacomo Joyce in Trieste (S. Cerne: 139). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with its

youthful protagonist's changing perspective and growing intellectual maturity is evident in both narratives in *Shifting*. The adolescent girl Helen becomes more interested in introspection and ideas and the later chapters reflects this through more experimentation and sophistication. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Sergio turns away from the extroverted pranks of youth and becomes more interested in intellectual pursuits.

I also use modernist literary allusions from the works of Eugene O'Neill and Pirandello. This is the scene where the teenage girl Helen (myself) has to act the mad character Annie Keeney from O'Neill's short play *Ile*. Later I start to behave like this character repeating the exact lines from the play to my high school date. (H. Cerne: 154) 'Take me home! It's killing me this life ... I'm going mad. I can feel the threat in the air. I can hear the silence. I can't bear it. I'll go mad' (O'Neill 1960 : 182). I have become the insane character. Also, I am in search of a dramatic part in the same way as the characters in Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search of An Author*. In the play a family wanders on stage, and interrupts the actors and director, demanding the centre of the dramatic action. In so doing they subvert the notion of what theatre is. The theme is that everyone is an actor on and off the stage who changes roles to suit the occasion. The 'Father' says: 'Each one of us believes himself to be a single person. But it's not true. Each one of us is many persons ... according to all the possibilities of being that there are within us' (Pirandello 1978: 25). This notion of changing identities is also an important motif in *Shifting*.

Although begun as an equal process, the writing of *Shifting* over a two-year period involved many adjustments and renegotiations. Moreover because half of the novel forms my thesis, I tried to have the final say which was not always appreciated by Serge who is an idiosyncratic and individual artist. Despite gender and cultural differences, however, our common literary preoccupations and writing interests made collaboration easier.

Collaborative writing relationships often do not last. They occupy a specific time and fulfil a specific purpose. The length and nature of the relationship may also impact on the process. Many couples, whether heterosexual or homosexual, collaborate in the heat of their emotional relationship (Clift and Johnston, Tsiolkas and Soldatow 1996). This is in contrast to the writing of *Shifting* where Serge and I decided to write a novel together after a long marriage. The real issue

in effective collaborative writing arrangements may be not whether the couple are emotionally involved but whether they share common interests and an ongoing engagement with the project. Another important aspect appears to be mutual respect for the project as well as each other, the belief that both are adding something of value and that together they are constructing something of worth. However, where there are socio-economic pressures and domestic inequalities, especially related to children or gender role assumptions by either partner, the woman in the heterosexual partnership usually is the one restricted in fully contributing to the joint venture. Despite respect and emotional sharing, gender hierarchy persists.

The academy has shown a reluctance to study this complex and problematic terrain of spouses and intimate partners, particularly where the professional and private converge. Heterosexual collaborations are fraught with difficulties but this does not mean they cannot work. Inequity can be confronted and negotiated. Feminist theory is useful here for male and female co-writers: it is rigorously critical of exploitation and appropriation but it also provides a positive way of analysing differences within writing practice. Feminism provides a tool for couples to self consciously examine the hierarchy that exists in their relationship to one another in research and writing while encouraging each member to pursue her or his own voice (Lapovsky Kennedy 1995: 28 ).

Heterosexual collaboration should create a framework that supports each individual as an equal autonomous thinker (Ede and Lunsford 1990). In some partnerships, writers choose to fuse their narratives into one voice but dialogue is another option where two people come from different cultures as in *Shifting* - Italian/Australian, or masculine/feminine. These identity and cultural differences can be a fertile source of narrative exchange.

## Chapter Three

### Collaborative Writing: Shifting Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is a complex concept, more problematic than the simple association with an individual's country of origin. Increasingly, in the late twentieth century, cultural identity refers to a multiplicity of lived experiences, or a process of identity formation whereby one changes or becomes someone else. In intellectual discussion, the nature of both culture and identity are being vigorously debated within the context of the fragmentation of the modern individual as a unified subject. Shifts in the concept of identity and the subject have occurred because cultural identity has become wider than national and ethnic differences to encompass changing distinctions, based on religion, gender, and class. Such shifts in cultural identity are even more apparent in a collaborative writing project where male and female co-writers narrate their experiences of growing up in the same place at the same time.

Many contemporary theorists, among them, Sneja Gunew, Stuart Hall and Linda Hutcheon, support the notion that modern identities are breaking up and structural changes are transforming the once stabilised social western world.

[These changes are] fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals. These transformations are also shifting our personal identities, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a sense of stable self is ... the dislocation or decentering of the subject ... As the cultural critic Kobena Mercer observes, 'identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (Hall, Mc Gren and Held 1992: 275).

This chapter explores the concept of shifting identities in situations of change, uncertainty, and marginality by examining the collaborative novel *Shifting*. The novel articulates this new postmodern sensibility in several ways. First, the novel is about physically shifting, moving from place to place. Both protagonists are displaced physically throughout the text. In every chapter, the main characters have to fit into new locations as outsiders. Second, the novel is a study of shifting values, attitudes and perspectives, which are

part of the process of moving and also of the experience of growing into adulthood. In each chapter the main protagonist is outside the 'norm' of the surrounding social context: in the early chapters because of moving from place to place, and in later chapters because of gender and class differences. As well, individual physical, spiritual or psychological characteristics play a part in the formation of each character's sense of identity. Third, the novel shifts in literary style and voice; it is a collaborative work with a fragmented structure and has a broken narrative capturing the transitional nature of human lives. This use of a dual narrative is a conscious literary choice. It illustrates the central hypothesis of this chapter that one's identity is not fixed but rather a process which shifts in times of stress and change and that this involves positioning the self in relation to configurations of power. This repositioning also reflects the nature of the discourse of 'otherness' explored throughout *Shifting*, the voices on the periphery of the mainstreams of power: the migrant, the female, the new kid on the block, the child not yet adult and the girl on the verge of womanhood. The outsider has to readjust his/her position to fit into the mainstream. Stuart Hall maintains that identity and positioning are interrelated: 'identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past' (Hall 1989 :70). Sneja Gunew supports this notion:

This does not mean that because there can be no permanent positioning there can be no meaning but rather that because positioning is always temporary, meanings are always provisional. The importance lies in always recognising the role of history and the prevailing circumstances of power (Gunew 1994: 45).

Transitions in cultural identity occur throughout *Shifting*. Themes of ethnicity, gender, class, religion, popular culture and changing socio-historical influences frame the narrative. There is the shift in narration from the Italian migrant experience to the native-born Australian, from the male to the female perspective; and shifts in the way working class identity is described. The maturing process from children to young adults is further conveyed by both form and content. The contrast in literary styles and points of view also highlights differences in personal identification with the surrounding social and cultural environment (S. Cerne 96: 164). Furthermore, the era described in *Shifting* encapsulates the transformation of Australia's own sense of

national identity during the 1950s and 1960s, with the shift from British to American influences, and the rise and impact of teenage culture globally. This period also witnesses the development of global mass communication technology, post-war economic growth and consumerist materialism, by the ubiquitous television in every home (Dingle 1984: 225). Descriptions of dress, hobbies, games, childhood and teenage pursuits encapsulate these changes throughout the novel (H. Cerne 96: 133).

The novel asks a central question: is identity fixed, or are we always becoming someone or something else, especially in a changing cultural environment? Dislocation or displacement from familiar surroundings threatens a sense of self. The concept of cultural identity is often connected with ethnicity and domestic practices, and its associated elements: manners, food, dress, rituals, and norms of societal behaviour and beliefs. Cultural identity brings together many issues, some very particular and personal to the individual, others of larger and evolving social significance. Stuart Hall's assertion that 'Identity is formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture' is explored in our novel (Hall 1987: 44). This unstable point where the individual's personal experiences encounter the surrounding and evolving social context is the central theme of *Shifting*. The unspeakable stories may mean many things: the inability to articulate feelings, the repression of certain memories, the silences imposed by power elites or the refusal to speak the truth for whatever reason. In my chapters there are silences - domestic traumas are glossed over, painful memories downplayed. In Serge's early chapters, the inability to express oneself is a powerful motif.

Migration can cause the loss of identity and is the quintessential experience of displacement. For the individual, migration primarily signifies loss : a loss of place, a loss of language and a loss of social contacts. By migrating, one is removed from a cultural landscape, often from a communicative language and from a supportive social structure. Moreover, reversals in role and status are also experiences of the immigrant. In several episodes in *Shifting*, Sergio, as a child, has to act the adult and translate for his parents who become childlike in their inability to communicate (S. Cerne 96: 142). The loss of place, of status, of family respect, and of physical environment is a crucial change in one's life. But no change may mean one does not reflect on the impact



of this transition. As Carter argues: 'The meaning and significance we attribute to our lives are closely bound up with this sense of place. Places ... give us a sense of orientation. Conversely, a totally homogenous environment is disorienting, it has no human meaning' (Carter 1992: 9).

The novel *Shifting* explores the displacement experience by focusing on the sense of disorientation caused when one moves from a familiar environment to an unknown space. To be on the borders or the margins, inside yet outside, is to have a different perspective, one that Virginia Woolf once called 'alien and critical', to have an always altering focus which has no centering force (Woolf 1929: 93). Difference in all its multiple forms is observed from this new perspective giving an awareness of the contrasts between situations. In my chapters, the female experiences highlight the loss of a known physical and social landscape, especially when moving to a new school from the country to the city. To know no-one and recognise no familiar place is a totally disorienting experience:

I'm lost. Feel sick. Don't know my way out of this big building. Under some stairs, in a cramped room like a broom cupboard, there's a stern old grey-haired lady with a scaly neck like a lizard teaching English to dark haired kids. She's shouting. Watching their frightened bewildered faces suddenly makes me less tense. At least, I know what she's saying (H. Cerne 1996: 82).

This extract dovetails with Serge's chapter at the same school, 'Kingsville Primary 1956'; it creates a stronger sense of alienation and illustrates the second point of the migrant experience. Immigrants not only lose a country, they often lose their language, and consequently their way of communicating with others. How to give voice to one's inner most needs and feelings becomes paramount in an alien environment, when one is silenced by circumstance. Being a new migrant boy at school with no English becomes a painful critical recollection:

So many things were done and he did them because all the other kids did the same but he didn't know why. After a bell he was outside. There were masses of jaunty youngsters penned in the yard twittering, twinkling skipping and romping. He was amazed to see so many together in one place. Some asked him to talk, then to say his name and then they laughed. Knowing no

better he laughed at himself too. A school yard jester ( S.Cerne 1996: 92).

Social disruption is also a significant experience of migration or shifting. The migrant is cast adrift without friends or family support or community networks which had previously provided a sense of security. At first, there is the loneliness and then sometimes the need to regroup into migrant ghettos or the workplace. Serge's family make their first friends through the Davies Coop factory which was a common experience for migrants: transplanted into menial occupations as factory workers, labourers and domestic workers. The first wave of post-war migrants clung to these cultural details as the only stable units which permitted them to retain some dignity (Gunew 1987: 3).

Many displacement texts such as Judah Waten's *Alien Son* (1952), Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* (1984), Maria Lewitt's *Just Call Me Bob*, (1960) and *No Snow in December* (1985) explore this unstable point where the personally subjective disempowered experience confronts the new alienating cultural landscape. But to be someone caught in between two cultures can give fresh insights and interpretive license as Kefala explores in her novel *The Island* :

in order to understand history one needed a type of vision that only people placed at the crossroads could provide ... That is people that lived between cultures, who were forced to live double lives belonging to no group and these he called 'the people in between'. This type of vision he maintained was necessary to the alchemy of cultural understanding (Kefala 1984:10).

The twentieth century, the era of the diaspora, has been a century of global movement and unprecedented change. The migrant is perhaps the central or defining figure of the twentieth century. Kundera's Prague, Joyce's Dublin, and Grass's Danzig; exiles, refugees, and migrants have carried many cities in their bedrolls in this century of wandering (Rushdie 1985: x).

Furthermore what effect does such large scale migration have on a host society? This aspect is overlooked in most literary and historical works dealing with ethnicity which concentrate usually on the integration difficulties or assimilation problems of the outsider migrant rather than the internal shifts required in members of mainstream or host cultures (Shearer 1995). Both aspects are important

in understanding the changes in our society since 1945. *Shifting* is a collaborative text which looks at both sides: the experience of being a stranger, the new arrival to Australia, and the experience of a young Anglo/Australian and how she reacts to the influx of migrants.

Aussie blokes at Sam's Coffee Pot at the junction of Geelong and Somerville Roads swear at the 'dagoes' congregating on street corners, turning our milk bars into cappuccino joints. At ten, I am scared of these grown-up New Australians, with their loud noises and rude gestures to pretty women like my mum ... their different food and ways ... But on the Guiding Star bus, a young dark man with a sombre face biting his nails suddenly starts shouting uncontrollably ... at the passengers and the driver and then bursts out crying, fleeing from the vehicle at the next stop. Everybody looks bemused and someone even laughs. I suddenly feel sad. He looked so lonely (H.Cerne 1996: 120).

In many ways migration is a feature of the modern human condition. It has been said that 'a sign of our contemporary condition is our sense that the world no longer affords us a home, that by our own actions we have rendered ourselves exiles on our own planet' (Carter 1992: 11). Migration is one of the richest metaphors of our age. The very word 'metaphor,' which in Greek means 'bearing across,' describes a sort of migration, the shifting of ideas into images. Migrating has many shades of meaning. Migrants, 'borne across humans', are metaphorical beings in their very essence and in many ways we are all migrants, moving and crossing frontiers. The word 'migration' also denotes a certain impermanence. It is a shift from the known to the unknown, and is often as much a psychic journey as a physical one. The journey from childhood to adulthood is also an important life shaping experience. The way we construct self narratives often shapes the identity we present to the world. This dynamic is clearly delineated throughout *Shifting*. To be dispersed and fragmented may be paradoxically part of the representative modern experience.<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall argues : 'The question who am I or what is the real me can only be answered by a whole set of other narratives, other stories, other fictions we tell ourselves and others' (Hall 1987: 45).

---

<sup>1</sup> Hall talks about the young black people of London who are marginalised and disenfranchised, and yet look as if they own the place; look centred. He calls it 'coming home with a vengeance' or 'welcome to migranhood' (Hall 1987: 44).

As Bakhtin has argued, language gives us many social voices and these voices construct both selves and characters as selves. The explicit and implicit interplay of social voices reveals the way a specific historical and cultural context fashions the self. The cultural context also fashions the self according to gender differences, another dynamic which is explored in *Shifting*. The joint writing process enables both a real shifting in cultural identity and changes in narrative perspective. Throughout our novel, I speak in the first person and present tense. 'I walk along Geelong Road to the blue light up ahead' (H. Cerne: 166). Serge's voice is in the third person and past tense. 'At the end of a corridor he was left outside a black door feeling an awful uncertainty' (S. Cerne: 155). In the final chapter I move into the Italian household, the world of cultural difference where I am distanced from myself as the female in the relationship and now speak in the third person. I have become the 'other': 'Helen excused herself and followed the sound of the piano' (H.Cerne: 189). Serge after entering the Australian household secure in the new relationship feels a sense of belonging, even empowerment and speaks in the first person. He is now the immediate focus, the male gaze 'I'. He begins to feel at home after years of marginalisation:

I watch Helen opening my large sketch book of familiar places drawn in pencil; the factories along Francis Street, the boats at Williamstown, the back lane of Cain's bakery ... We laugh. Past myths become more real in remembering. Somehow I'm not outside of it all anymore' (S. Cerne: 190 ).

There are other similar experimental collaborations exploring shifts in cultural identity through changing narrative perspective. One is the novel *Love Medicine* based on the telling of myths and stories of the Chippewa culture: 'To emphasise the importance of family and community, all but three chapters ... are told in the first person. Whenever the third person is used it refers to a character who is no longer part of the community, a character alienated from family and tribal connections' ( Brady 1992: 308).

People on the periphery of a social and cultural crisis often are forced to become powerful in this marginal realm.<sup>2</sup> The centre is decentred but only as a safety valve for a short time. In the early

---

<sup>2</sup> The most extreme example is Bakhtin's carnival world or 'the carnivalesque' discussed in his *Rabelais and His World* (1968)

chapters of *Shifting*, the character Sergio is mainly a silent alienated distant observer of the social world; by the end his voice is stronger, competing with mine on an equal footing. But this is a society where hierarchies exist. The voices of migrants, children, adolescents, girls, and lovers, are not always taken seriously. Nevertheless although my voice is not disempowered in the text, there are changes in the use of language. The voice becomes more sophisticated, more reflexive and more self-consciously structured to convey the growing maturity of the young woman. The text's irony lies in its contradictory depiction of female love as loss of identity and power, and Helen's growing ability to articulate this experience (H. Cerne: 182).

Language constructs inner selves. Rather than representing the self as a unified identity, at the conclusion of *Shifting*, the female 'I' voice disappears but is only provisionally displaced; the 'I' narrator has gone underground, discovering other possible selves, other identities. Language like class is never static. History keeps consciousness in flux: identity and gender then are polyvocal, often contradictory, always multiple (Bauer 1988: 676). Throughout *Shifting* the numerous voices of the girl and then the young woman with latent feminist concerns compete within the structures of patriarchal discourse which underpin the narrative drive – not to dominate, nor be silenced but to be heard.<sup>2</sup> Different identities become significant at different times. For example being a country kid or an Australian or a member of the urban working class or a jazzer are part of her evolving cultural identities. At puberty, however, the search for a gender identity becomes paramount, being a heterosexual female everything:

The real endeavour of every girl is to catch older boyfriends or even better, real men with cars ... Someone with a hot rod and money who will take you to the drive-in for a petting session you can brag about in school. No-one talks about careers or ambitions just about weekends (H. Cerne 1996: 145 ).

The collaborative process reveals the awakening of aspects of identity shifts which would otherwise remain invisible or unspoken. In the shared discussions, the individual writing and separate

---

<sup>3</sup> In phallogocentric theory (a term developed by Jacques Derrida) and influential on feminist thinking, language is the realm of the fathers and the phallus is 'the privileged signifier,' the symbol of male power/male presence. Since the female lacks a penis, this denotes absence of power, authority and speech (Tuttle 1986: 247).

redrafting stages, observations are realised and evocations combined which may convey other meanings to the reader. For Serge, the question, 'Who am I?', has many facets but most are embedded in his ethnicity and socio-cultural disorientation. In contrast to Helen's version of high school, the emphasis falls not only on gender identity but acceptance as a true blue Aussie:

At fifteen Sergio could not articulate the contradictions, the dilemmas he felt. How to define identity? Did it come from the ruins and distortions of one's heritage, one's history ... He stared at the blank page. What it means to be an Australian. Being, being ... becoming. He began trying to find some coherent idea that might fill the page but he did it slowly with difficulty  
(S.Cerne 1996: 143).

Thus the truths of the narrative lie somewhere in the interstices between the two perspectives. This intertextuality, based on complementary juxtapositions, sometimes overlapping resonances and frictions between cultural, male /female, and Italian/Australian viewpoints, sparks contrasts and different insights. Both sides of the story are only a part of a larger more complex reality. As Boyce Davies suggests:

Affiliations or disjunctions of gender, class, nationality, language and shared politics seem to be the primary facilitators of, or interferences in the collaborative life story telling process. The extent to which the co-author/editor share common identity locations ... determines the extent of full articulations of an autobiographical "we" rather than the "I." There are some collections in which identities converge or in which certain identifications are absent (Boyce Davies 1995: 12).

For some co-writers fusing identities is the goal of collaboration. To lose oneself in the other is the aim of the joint project. Not so for Serge and myself, who as two individuals have aimed to keep the two narratives contrasting and complementary. In the psychic-fusion collaborative model, a third combined voice takes on a persona of its own, with characteristics often unlike those of the two individual authors. This new self or entity that is neither of them attains a certain triangularity: the two and the 'other.' Rather than seeing collaboration as a loss of individuality, some writers speak of collaboration as giving a new freedom to become someone else, a separate entity quite apart

from the two narrators.<sup>4</sup> But this creation of another third person 'author' who takes on a life of their own can backfire on its co-creators. Harold Stewart (1916-1995) and James McAuley (1917-1976), perpetrated the infamous Ern Malley hoax in the mid-1940s in Australia. At first written as a stunt to expose the aesthetic bankruptcy of modern poetry, the Ern Malley poems are now included in contemporary anthologies as examples of self-parody, their brilliance much admired in these postmodernist times (Tranter & Mead 1991: 86-100). Ern Malley today is arguably better known and more highly regarded by critics than his traditionalist collaborative creators Stewart and McAuley (1917-1976). An interview with Stewart, shortly before he died in Japan, revealed the power of this collaboration. In hindsight he believed two identities were lost in the new creation: 'You know ... perhaps neither McAuley nor I ever existed except in the imagination of Ern Malley' (Heyward 1995: 69).

Although the two narratives of *Shifting* remain very separate and delineated throughout, in the final paragraphs of the novel the voices come together. The choice of the first person plural, 'we', implies a coming together into one merged identity. But the use of 'they' also is a distancing technique, the two characters are captured in a freeze frame or tableau with a more distant narrative voice describing them. The final words in Italian and English decrease from four word sentences to three, to two, until there is only one word: '*insieme*-together.' This is the last word of the text. It is surrounded by a meaningful white space, alone on the page. For some readers it may signify an optimistic closure where the couple have found each other and are facing the future together. For others, such as feminists, it may signify stasis, a blurring of individuality, or a loss of the self in the new relationship: personal identity stands still. The hyphen between *insieme*-together denotes the marital bonds. When a woman marries and has children she usually becomes more committed to the family than to herself. The 'I' becomes either 'she' or 'we'. But it may be argued that this shift from individuality to the 'other' happens to both sexes when they make a

---

<sup>4</sup> An example of this fused complex dual narration is by Joyce Elbracht and Lydia Fakundiny who rely on their fictional author, Jael.B.Juba, to account for their collaborative life: 'And yet I, Jael B Juba, am the collective being of their collaboration, that glances off from them and cools. Their jell. And their jail ... their shelter from their ordinary life-routines, wherein they confine their freedom'(Elbrecht and Fakundiny 1994: 252).

commitment. And this may be the ultimate alienation of the text, the couple are together as outsiders - 'the other' to the rest of the world. Plurality, the shift to a dual way of being and seeing the world, is a new territory to be negotiated with new pass words. Together, they are the sole gate keepers to their own private landscape. Oblivious to the world, they speak their own language.

Lovers are usually alienated from other people by sexual, psychological and emotional dislocation. They colonise each other in a kind of psychic invasion. Their peripheral individual cultural identity may be centred together but they remain marginalised outside the norm, decentred from others. Like displacement experiences, this is also a positioning of power. Identity undergoes questioning in moments of crisis. The experience of falling in love is a critical moment. But this state of being in love is provisional. Meanings will alter. Changes take place. In such relationships there will be other crises and other repositionings. The novel ends with the meeting of two different personalities and answers the question posed in the prologue: how did these two disparate people come together (H Cerne: 6)? The ending is also a beginning of new sets of renegotiations and movements in personal identity and space. This exploration of the evolving self has been a significant notion underpinning this chapter and was an important theme in the writing of *Shifting*. In autobiography, the reconstruction of self in its many vicissitudes, is the major focus of the last chapter of this commentary on collaboration.



## Chapter Four

### Collaborative Autobiography

Autobiographical narratives are important in understanding aspects of cultural identity. Through autobiography, we locate ourselves in the symbolic world of culture. Through it we identify with a family, a community, and indirectly with the broader culture (Bruner 1980: 8). Autobiography is one literary form which is distinctive among other narrative forms in that it has a dual aspect - the subject of the present writes from a certain position in time about his/her twin self, and this subject of the past is then written about. This retrospection emphasises a sense of doubleness, about one's present self, about the past events and sensations, and about the reasons for these memories becoming powerful in the present. As Roland Barthes so succinctly expressed in describing first person autobiographical narrators, 'who speaks in the narrative is not who writes (in real life) and who writes, is not who is' (Barthes 1975: 237). Romantic notions of the autobiographical self are further complicated when confronted by another culture with new forms of discourse. Migrant autobiographies provide a rich insight into identity crisis, where entry into a new language requires the construction of a new or hybrid self. These individual pieces are full of digressions, witty or sober, commentary, interpretations and leaps back and forward in time (*Deakin Study Guide* 1993: 111). This chapter discusses theories of autobiography particularly in relation to *Shifting* and its central concerns: the embodying of displacement of two young people growing up amid the social changes in post-World War Two Australia.

Autobiographies construct identities. They are metaphors of the self. Everyone changes roles everyday and constructs reality by the stories they tell about themselves. The fictive nature of selfhood in other words is held to be a biographical fact (Pascal 1960: 181). Individuals constantly alter their known territories, seeking both internal and external transformations. The study of narrative psychology, increasingly included in literary studies and sociology courses, emphasises this search for identity within individuals. According to Kevin Murray (1989 : 177-178), finding a place for oneself in the world involves two projects : finding a social identity, a place in the social order, as well as maintaining some sort of personal identity, a biographical uniqueness. Murray believes individuals do this by

constructing life narratives about themselves. When we understand someone, we understand subjectivity as a narrative. As Murray suggests: 'Self is a telling' (Murray 1989: 181).

Perhaps, the common universal experience shared by adults is growing up, the move from childhood to adulthood, from girls to women, boys to men. We migrate from childhood, adults in exile we cannot go back. *Shifting* deals with this territory of the past; the narrative travels that foreign country called youth.

Autobiographies of childhood are narratives of beginnings. They may begin at an individual's birth or they may begin with the past of an individual's family, establishing the context of their origins. In *Shifting*, the decision was made to start the story before the two protagonists were born. By framing the beginning in this way, Serge placed the autobiographical narrative in a historical context, contrasting war-torn Europe with the relative peace and stability of Australia. Another common literary structure in autobiography is the choice of ending. Through a series of life-shaping experiences, either education, parental conflicts, sibling rivalry, domestic trials or displacement, the child finally becomes an adult and the text concludes. The end of *Shifting* is the eventual meeting of the two characters on the verge of adulthood and responsibility. Although based on historical details, the adult's remembered accounts of childhood events are also a process of myth making. Writing an autobiography is, in some ways, a process of creating a mythology of one's self. According to McCooey:

Autobiographies of childhood begin beyond history, since childhood is beyond time. They end with the individual being impelled into the adult world of time, a world necessarily connected with death. Reliving childhood, even in mythical terms, is a mimicking of the entry into the historical world  
(McCooey 1996: 49).

Autobiographies of childhood can be mythological in a number of ways. Many texts feature quests for discovery: finding something profound, to replace an early experience of loss.<sup>1</sup> In *Shifting* Serge has lost a language, a culture, a home, he seeks security, permanence and

---

<sup>1</sup> Hal Porter, in *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony* (1963) leaves his first home never to return. His mother's death is also a strong theme. In Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain* (1989), there is the early loss of Eden with the long term drought.

acceptance (S. Cerne 1996: 143). Similarly Helen, in later sections of the novel, is looking for a happier time spent under the stars in Mildura or Korumburra or Kingsville; where she felt complete and at home (H. Cerne: 70). This sense of a lost paradise or a Garden of Eden figures in many autobiographies: the backyard, the garden overflowing with fruit trees, the makeshift cubby or the secret hideaway are recurring metaphors of childhood<sup>2</sup> It is not only the freedom of an Aussie backyard that resonates in such texts but also the sense of security and protection evoked by a safe enclosure where the child can play at will. In autobiographies of childhood, first homes become important places to remember or invent. Here time does not exist. Sex and death take place outside. In the garden of childhood things are stable. Beyond, the world is complex, multiple, alien. The myth of Eden is the story of the loss of innocence in an unchanging, united world, for the gaining of experience in a changing, disunified one (McCooley: 57). For Helen the word, 'Misselthwaite', represents this loss: 'I belong here in Korumburra in my own secret garden. I look up at the sky but it's dark and grey. Oh, Misselthwaite, why can't you be real? Everything changes. Nothing ever lasts. Not even when you want it to' (H. Cerne: 70).

The later chapters of our novel foreground the desire to go back home, wherever it is. For Serge, the sense of loss is even more mythological, bound up with a time and place which he never actually experienced: the remembered nostalgia of pre-war Italy before his birth when Yugoslav Rijeka was still Italian Fiume.<sup>3</sup> His parents' stories echo his longing for a better time in another world (S. Cerne: 136).

Carol Steedman's autobiographical study *Landscape for a Good Woman* addresses a similar gender/class dichotomy like *Shifting* and explores in detail ideas of loss. The novel describes the South London urban territory of a working class girl maturing in an impoverished situation with an absent ineffectual father. A mother and her two daughters try to find some sense of belonging or place in a world where they are marginalised by their poverty and gender. Steedman says that

---

<sup>2</sup> In David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street*, the garden is Edenic. In Bernard Smith's *The Boy Aedotus: Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard*, the most important aspect of his house is the garden. In Dorothy Hewett's *Wild Card* (1990), each part of her narrative is interlaced with a house.

<sup>3</sup> In *A Shoe In My Cheese*, Rino Baggio, although he was born in Australia, speaks of home always as Cittadella, Italy, because of his parents' stories (Baggio 1989: 2).

'the stories we make our own are formed on the borderland marginal places that bear witness to the irreducible nature of our lost childhoods' (Steedman 1986: 144). Childhood is a special site of community that expands across all social divisions; it is a place where all adults have been but have had to leave:

Childhood is where we are socialised ... learn to read and write and thus begin to make verbal sense of ourselves and the world around us. It is moreover the place where we were once supposedly innocent before the corruptions of life set in. (Bristow 1990: 122)

Writing of childhood, or the loss of it, is writing of a journey through early life. This idea incorporates another mythological aspect of autobiography to explore: the figure of life as a journey, as an archetype. Trying to remember significant moments or special events that made a difference in the shaping of one's self /selves becomes all important. They become signposts of stages on this journey. Symbols of change, such as keepsakes or talismans, and the representation of lost objects or special treasures, are common literary motifs in autobiographical narratives.<sup>4</sup> For Helen, keeping letters, diaries, little mementoes, and wise sayings represent a connection with the past. For Serge the oral stories of Fiume take on special significance (S. Cerne: 144). Later in *Shifting*, the painting becomes an emblematic motif in Helen's and Serge's adolescent quest. The portrait of the lonely girl and her expression of seeking locate both protagonists' quest to find a place to belong. In the final chapter the painting brings the two characters together. The portrait's symbolic unification signifies the end of a journey (H. Cerne: 189).

Creating a sense of place for the reader is a challenge when the place of the narrative is always changing. Movement from one environment to another is a fundamental historical concept. Change of place is as important an archetype to history as the change of the generations. For the individual, movement provides a sense of difference between the past and the present. This difference is more than merely temporal (McCooley 1996: 109). In Serge's chapters, the emptiness and loneliness of the stark, hot, thirsty landscape of

---

<sup>4</sup> In Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*, the looking glass in the hall at Talland House and the leafless skeleton tree signify the loss of innocence and loved ones (Woolf 1981: 78).

migration camps or the flat barren terrain of the western suburbs of Melbourne contrast with the busy, densely populated towns of pre-war Mediterranean Europe. In my sections, rural Mildura juxtaposed with suburban Dandenong, 'pretty' Korumburra set against the urban ugliness of West Footscray, represent my changing environment. Sometimes descriptive repetitions, metaphors such as 'scotch thistles', 'the murky creek', or 'the ubiquitous single-fronted weatherboards of the west of Melbourne', reinforce the alienation felt by both protagonists.

Displacement autobiographies are important social records particularly of this century. Physical and social upheaval forces the shifting protagonist or migrant into a search for meaning in his or her life. In *Shifting* the children find it crucial to fit into the alien changing landscape and the new community. They must reject the past, their origins and their parents, a common experience of the migrant child. Shame mixed with disowning are common experiences. As the children assimilate to the new existence, they leave behind the values of the old place (S. Cerne: 142).

Loneliness and isolation are also features of a child's reaction to movement. In many autobiographies children find relief from isolation through books and reading.<sup>5</sup> They live in imaginary other worlds. The English influences of Enid Blyton's escapist fiction and later the classic *The Secret Garden* (1909 ) are important for Helen when she is a little girl (H. Cerne: 36). Television is influential but it does not replace the importance of literature. This contrasts with Serge's experiences: he doesn't start school until nearly eight and unable to read in his native tongue, is not only classed as dumb but thinks he is. Television becomes all important for him for escaping. He does not discover the joy of literature until his mid-teens when, with new glasses, he reads *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, (1915), *Prester John* (1910) and Shakespeare's plays. Suddenly he finds a new identity.

Growing up in Australia in the 1950s, meant witnessing many societal changes. A climate of political conservatism pervaded the

---

<sup>5</sup> In Jill Ker Conway's autobiography *The Road From Coorain*, she reads as a child because she is isolated on the outback property (Conway 1989: 41). In Rose Liverani's *The Winter Sparrows*, she reads all the time to find characters of vitality and passion because of the loneliness and the isolation which follows migration (Liverani 1975: 34).

political landscape, but for young people it was an era of personal transition and confrontation, an era which needs further examination and documentation in Australian literature. The twenty years after the Second World War were a time of great social transition premised on the mushrooming influence of the mass media and the advent of teenage culture, low unemployment, rising incomes and higher educational participation. The influx of migrants, the arrival of television and rock n' roll, and the start of urban gangs of bodgies and widgies, jazzers and rockers, made the post-World War Two generation very different to the one before (Gerster and Bassett 1991). Clothes and tastes began to change. Townsend documents this transition: 'From Peter Pan collars, puffed sleeves, viyella dresses, jodhpurs, drab trousers, to sexy stretch pants, fluorescent socks and lurex jackets. I was dressed in grey for the first fifteen years of my life' (Townsend 1988: 78).

In contrast to their parents, most young Australians' political and cultural allegiance moved from Britain to the USA, the land where you could get everything fast: dream homes and swank cars, instant movie fame and hit records, takeaway food and TV dinners: it was a consumer paradise (Gerster and Bassett 1991: 33). Whether a girl or boy, a migrant or Australian-born, the influence was all-pervasive. In *Shifting*, I recall:

On top of the flat concrete roof of the jail we sunbake comparing  
our bodies to the models in the American magazine *Seventeen* ...  
With the transistor blaring we do the 'Jailhouse Rock', shaking  
our bodies like Elvis, Fabian or our heart throb Ricky Nelson from  
the TV show' (H. Cerne 1996: 133).

Similarly Sergio, although living in an Italian migrant home where English is not spoken, identifies with the masculine TV cowboy heroes of *Cheyenne* or *Maverick*, or the cool detectives of *77 Sunset Strip* and *Peter Gunn*.

Patricia Meyer Spacks maintains that each century reflects different autobiographical concerns. In 'Stages of Self' she argues twentieth-century autobiographies are centred on adolescence because this is the time of anti-social behaviour of defiance and difference (Spacks 1977: 12). She maintains that the individualism and self-obsession of twentieth century teenagers is in accord with many of the century's wider cultural interests. McCooey, however, believes that childhood is still significant in individuals' attempts to make sense of

life and continues to be an autobiographical preoccupation in Australian literature (McCooley 1996: 50).

Although moving from childhood to adolescence may be a universal experience, it is never the same remembered experience. Memory, whether seen as unreliable, selective or relative, is still an important tool for historians and novelists. As Stanley suggests:

The use of 'I' explicitly recognises that such knowledge is contextual, situational and specific, and that it will differ systematically according to the social location (as a gendered, raced, classed, sexualised person) of the particular knowledge-producer (Stanley 1993: 49).

As a collaborative autobiographical narrative, *Shifting* shows that as well as ethnicity, there are other psychological, gender and class differences in growing up. Australian working class childhood autobiographies dealing with these differences are rare, especially ones which are about the western suburbs of Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s. There have been several works by men such as William Dick's *A Bunch of Ratbags* (1965) and Barry Dickins's *The Crookes of Epping* (1984) but few by women for the same period. Kerry Cue's *Crooks, Chooks and Bloody Ratbags* (1983), although not an urban narrative and based on her family experiences in Kyneton, describes her working class life, growing up as the daughter of the local policeman. It is similar to my own story but it is much more humorous. There is, however, not a collaborative text by male and female partners which document this period, let alone a collaborative autobiographical novel.

The huge waves of migration affected Australian society greatly. Government policy pushed rapid assimilation, but there were resentments and some hostility to 'new Australians' taking factory jobs and land. *Shifting* represents these changes: 'those dagoes from the camp at the aerodrome. Make good pickers. Long as they keep to themselves, I reckon ... Some of them are moving into town. Bought Morgan's green grocery. Now that's not right, is it? Them taking over our businesses' (H. Cerne: 39).

The suburb of Footscray with its community spirit and working class ethos was greatly affected by the postwar influx of migrants. The young generation growing up in the 1960s epitomised the acceptance of this social transition. New schools like Footscray High School were a microcosm of the changing society. As Lack sums up: 'These schools

catching and expressing the buoyant optimism of the 1950s were eroding ethnic animosities and social negativism'(Lack 1991: 365). Both authors in *Shifting* explore this erosion of ethnic tensions and general acceptance particularly by the young:

By 1960, at Footscray High...there were Latvians, Estonians, White Russians, Italians, Germans, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, Dutch, Poles English, Irish and of course the predominant Australian born. But in some ways all the boys were one; in the classroom, in the yard, in the dunny, all speaking the same language, the hard-edged masculine working class slang of the western suburbs. Only in their surnames, in their families and inside their homes were they different (S. Cerne 1996: 155).

Since the 1970s, autobiographies, particularly those written from a disempowered or marginal perspective, have adopted popular forms of narrative expression. Oral histories have been an important primary source for historians; their first-person voice offers the authenticity of an eye-witness account. Multicultural studies have found this genre important because the story of a distinctive culture written in an individual voice offers privileged access to the experience that no other writing can offer (Olney 1980: 13). Sneja Gunew argues that the so-called 'authority' of experience in autobiography reduces ethnic minority writing to sociology, reinscribing the unified subject to unsophisticated versions of reality and serving the majority culture's agenda of assimilation (Gunew 1994 : 53). She prefers the experimental fragmentary texts of Rosa Cappiello, Anna Couani, Ania Walwicz and Antigone Kefala, which are more open to post-structuralist readings and allow for difference: 'All four writers are transgressive in ways that interweave the voices of women and of migrants: testing the limits of languages, the limits of gender' (Gunew 1985: 167).

There are several approaches to writing autobiographies which inform the writing of *Shifting*. Although as co-authors, Serge and I wanted to convey to the reader the 'truths' of our social and historical experiences, we also acknowledged that in telling stories, we were shaping the past, according to the demands of a creative literary process. As writers, we were conscious of how fictive literary devices such as character, dialogue, an interesting plot, are needed to construct a readable story. Moreover, any written account of the self is a constructed artefact - a human product. Autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving process of self discovery and self creation (Eakin



1985: 3). In Serge's case writing an autobiography in the third person was challenging because it blurred the boundaries between genres; his narrative shifted from autobiography to biography and fiction. The use of the third person also set up all sorts of tensions for both himself and the reader. Lejeune pinpoints the difficulty when he asks: 'Can one really speak about oneself as if one were another, stand at the window and watch oneself walking past?' (Lejeune 1977: 40) This inherent duality of the narrative voice corresponds to the gaps in perspective between the narrator, the implied narrator and the protagonist of the novel. As Lejeune concludes: 'In fact one is never truly another or truly the same. The third person figures provide a range of solutions in which distancing is more prominent, though always used to express an articulated connection, a (tension) between identity and difference' (Lejeune 1977: 32).

Autobiographical studies have a number of concerns: first, the self's truth and its difference, from the truth of fiction; the meaning and the design of his/her facts of history; second, the genre and the rhetorical features which demonstrate the author's sense of writing within a literary tradition; third, the linguistic workings of the text which reveals the co-presence of a narrated past and a narrative present; fourth, the style; fifth, the idea of a personal myth and its integrating effect on the psyche; and finally the post-structuralist concern for the displaced self of the author (Hart 1970: 485-511).

Joy Hooton adds a further point of major concern in my writing : studies of selfhood must also be concerned with the ideologies of gender. The feminist movement has created an interest in such works. Hooton indicates that theoretical study of autobiography as a genre is rapidly growing in popularity largely because of its coincidence with postmodern literary concerns. The movement away from representational discourse toward self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures and the critical theories that have been devised to explain this movement conspire to make autobiography at the cutting edge of literary studies (Hooton 1992: 25).

Hooton laments the extraordinary dearth of studies of female autobiography until the mid-1980s. Since that time, gender issues, cultural politics and feminist study of autobiographies have become a major focus in the genre. Some studies debate the complex nature of feminist autobiography and whether this genre is synonymous with postmodern concerns.

One – recognition of difference between women – moves feminism in the direction of fragmentation, of voice, a decentring of theoretical authority, a positive polyphony of voices speaking to the local specificity of women's oppressions and condition. The other – the rejection of any material grounds for women's difference from men moves feminism in the direction of theoretical certainty and centrality, a single voice arguing for the virtues of ungendered textuality (Stanley 1992: 242).

Many autobiographies by women are written because of the presence of the significant 'other', the male in their lives. The woman's own story alone is not seen as sufficiently important to stand by itself. Indeed one of the unstated reasons for me collaborating with Serge was I thought my story was not interesting enough by itself. Would I have remained silent without a writing partner? As half of a writing team, it is acceptable to 'own' my story. Nevertheless, this sense of alterity, the relationship of one's self to the 'other' is a common feature in women's search for identity in personal autobiographies. According to Mason:

One element, however, that seems more or less constant in women's life writing ... is the sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity ... the pattern most frequently adopted (and adapted) by later women, has unquestionably been ... the pairing of one's life image with another equal image (Mason 1980: 231 ).

Whether a positive or a negative stimulus for women's life writing, this characteristic trait of defining self as a self in relation, is a major historical difference between men and women's autobiographical texts. There can be little doubt that the writing of one's life story is an important 'owning' experience for women, a self realising form of expression, where one's voice and view are finally shared. Hooton concludes that the unspeakable stories are at last heard: 'Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech' (Hooton 1992: 39).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan's paper on the 'mirror' stage as formative of the function of the 'I' showed the mediating role of the image of the body in the constitution of the subject. For Lacan 'the child originally inhabits a pre-Oedipal imaginary world characterised by speechless identity between child, mother and the world. Entry into the symbolic world of language and the acquisition of subjectivity are achieved at a loss of identity with

Autobiographical inquiry theorises collaborative writing and locates the struggles that emerge from inside and outside co-authorships; it poses the question of whether a collaborative autobiography, between a man and a woman, is an impossibility, even an oxymoron? It could be argued that men and women remember and represent the past differently (Hooton 1992: 34). Gender differences may also cause a problem of interpretive control and narrative unity in a collaborative text. Several feminist studies question whether a truly collaborative project between a male and female is possible (Boyce Davies 1995: 12).

Phillipe Lejeune maintains that a collaborative autobiography' is an impossibility, a 'mongrel' text, as one cannot write an autobiography without constructing and communicating a point of view towards oneself. A shared autobiography, Lejeune argues: 'presupposes a shared point of view, an underlying complicity or collective narcissism ... The presence of completely antagonistic points of view excludes *a priori*, the possibility of a shared plan for writing overlapping autobiographies' (Lejeune 1977: 42). In contrast to this view *Shifting* demonstrates that collaborative autobiography is not only possible but offers new and fresh ways of writing about the self. There are few examples of autobiographical collaborations and they are usually written by people who share close relationships. Lejeune says such examples are rare and always occur in symbiotic relationships between siblings, married couples or friends like the Goncourt brothers, who wrote a diary together or the fictive witness example of Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, who imagined how a close friend might write her (Gertrude's) life story and the story of their lives (Lejeune 1977: 42).

*Shifting* may be viewed as a hybrid or 'mongrel' text, it is about two lives. Autobiography can be heterogeneous, polyphonic, or dialogic, and occupy multiple speaking positions. The differences in the text may make it a richer narrative experience. Although autobiographical writing, can be solipsistic and self indulgent, it can also be quite the opposite. In my case I felt my mediocre life story alone would not be interesting enough for others to read. It depends on how one values autobiographical texts. I see writing about the self as a way of

---

the mother ... in the masculine symbolic world of language (Milner 1991: 95).

understanding and reflecting on one's life experiences in relation to others and the changing social environment. For me, in particular, it demonstrates the interconnectedness of people's lives and relationships. In *Shifting* the two individual narratives help us understand who we are and how we have become that way, both personally and in the context of our society. If one defines autobiography as a type of history writing, then in terms of its meaning, it also has a value and a purpose as a literary form. McCooey argues:

Consideration of morality and history shows that, paradoxically , autobiography is anti-individualistic. Autobiography acts as a large, extended conversation in a community too large to commune with itself ... Autobiographies, then are social documents (McCooey 1996: 25).

The novel *Shifting* is a joint autobiography in which the individual reader will have to find their own coherence of the text. Barthes's notions of the readerly and writerly text are relevant here. Readerly texts are traditional literary works that rely upon conventions which are shared by writer and reader. They are fixed and closed in meaning. In contrast, the writerly text forces the reader to engage with the process of writing itself in the perpetually present. The goal of a literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text (Barthes 1990: 4). *Shifting* is writerly rather than readerly; it forces the reader to work or produce meanings which are inevitably other than the correct text and it contains its own resistance to unified readings.

James Olney discusses the way in which authors construct autobiographical meaning by selecting events and happenings from the past into a realm of order which is based on personal significance rather than a chronology of experiences (Olney 1980: 247). This ordering is further complicated, when two people, a man and a woman, write about the same period and the same places and experiences. Selective memory may be influenced by various factors: personal events, psychological characteristics, traumatic experiences and environmental changes. One of the primary functions of narrative is to relate theory to experience. Narrative constructs meaning or places a series of events into some order. Moral statements found in fables about identity and metaphors which deal with the similarities and differences between one's own situation and with what one knows of others may all guide

the way a narrative develops. In the writing of *Shifting*, the parallel choices, the echoes of similar experiences and the different gender responses provide resonant meaning and illustrate how collaborative writing can enrich the creative process. For example, in my only chapter exploring spirituality, one girlish encounter depicts the holistic mystery of the Catholic Church. In Serge's corresponding religious chapter, one incident with a singing teacher symbolises the sexual repression of the writer's whole Catholic education over several years.

Visual images and pictures, particularly religious iconography, are strong in youthful memories. Autobiographies of childhood often employ spiritual imagery. In *Shifting*, the images of Christ suffering on the cross, St Sebastian shot through with arrows, the Madonna of the Perpetual Succour, and the nun wielding vengeance with a strap of purification create a tapestry of Catholic images. According to Mandel, 'good' autobiographers are able to create pictures which the reader then puts into context and gives meaning: '[Autobiographers] trust themselves to let the truth of their experience illuminate the deeper relevance of these pictures in the context of their total existence. It is the *context* disclosed through writing that is the autobiography' (Mandel 1980: 52).

The creative collaborative experience offers a way of layering the text to make its associative images more powerful. Moreover, if there is a common thematic narrative, such as dislocation, as in the case of *Shifting*, this can give an autobiographical novel more unity and interest. Through collaboration, the multiple truths of social, historical and personal experience may be more powerfully conveyed.

Telling one's early life story is a construction of events relying on memory, family accounts, photographs, and primary source material such as letters and diaries. A component of wishful thinking also shapes the story. Remembering one's childhood in relation to another becomes a process of narrative selection. What is not said may be as significant as what is revealed. Small casual incidents which echo or contrast with the 'other' story may become more important than long term events or even relationships. Thus the narrative journey of constructing one's youthful self through a collaborative autobiographical novel makes it also a form of personal mythologising.

## Conclusion

Successful collaborative approaches depend on the relationship of the writers involved, the task at hand and the purposes and contexts of the work itself. *Shifting* breaks new ground in autobiography. In this critique, I argued that as a collaborative writing project, *Shifting* is at the cutting edge of the genre. It is a rare collaboration between a husband and wife with alternating narrative viewpoints of the same environment and experiences. A collaborative autobiography between two people, especially a man and a woman, is not impossible. It can be effective, if the co-writers share areas of commonality: similar backgrounds, experiences or relationships. Without shared interests and underpinning common experiences of narrative, an autobiographical collaboration could be unfocused and too fragmented for cohesive meaning. The thesis further problematised the concept of the collaborative writer of autobiography by making connections across boundaries of disciplines — history, linguistics, literature, sociology and communication studies. The discussion on collaboration focused on the nature of the co-writing process, particularly between a heterosexual couple but also explored intercultural exchanges, the notion of personal identity shifts, and the construction of the self through personal narrative.

The introduction raised several questions about collaborative practice which this thesis explored. In chapter one an examination of collaborative models revealed the best collaborative endeavours are built on principles of equality, involving non-hierarchical examples of mutual trust, negotiations of power and shared authority. Cooperative writing may involve univocal or polyvocal approaches depending on the task involved. There are no prescriptive ways of writing collaboratively. All writers create differently. Some research for months; others write spontaneously. Although Serge and I wrote independently, the discussion and subsequent reading of the manuscript triggered off associative memory, evocative insights and was an important part of our collaborative practice.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This was evident when the two protagonists experienced the same milieu: the Mildura, school or police station encounter for example. Serge, after reading my chapters, altered or included extra material such as the high school boys preening themselves in front of a mirror which juxtaposed with my description of similar behaviour in adolescent girls. I reshaped my accounts to include cultural references to Italians. Names, places and

Chapter two examined collaborative heterosexual creative practice and concluded that a man and a woman, even a husband and wife, can work equally together. One is not always silenced by the other. Nevertheless writing within a heterosexual relationship can be problematic. For Serge and myself, the mutual interests in the project determined our pragmatic choices about style and content. Ownership of the text, however, may become a problem in many writing partnerships where men have appropriated the work of their female writing partner. This chapter concluded heterosexual collaboration is difficult, particularly if there are domestic and emotional pressures within the relationship. A study of feminist theory on the plethora of female collaborative projects revealed that for various reasons, women appear better at collaboration than men. But when a heterosexual couple, such as Serge and myself, grow up in the same area, share the same socio-economic background, attend the same schools, become teachers, major in the same subjects at university, and read the same books, these mutual interests make it easier to collaborate. Heterosexual collaboration, although fraught, can be worthwhile and productive.

This, however, does not mean Serge and I write or think in the same way. We are individual writers. In *Shifting* we chose to contrast male and female perspectives and in other writing projects the choices are different. We do not want to be seen as a male writer and a female writer. For *Shifting* I chose to write in the voice of a growing girl. For another work I may choose to write from the perspective of an old man. Narrative choices change with each project.

Joy Hooton, however, argues that the main difference between male and female autobiographies appears to be one of content rather than style (Hooton 1992: 30). She maintains that a defining difference between male and female life stories is an interest in relatedness, 'the elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment' (Hooton: 34). Although I have reservations about this general observation, this is the case in *Shifting*. My character in the novel is a self in process which is continually repositioned within each cultural context and links with past relationships. Bonds to family and friends are constantly reiterated;

---

episodes also echo throughout the text: citrus fruit picking, Aldo, the girl chaser, and Raymond, the snotty nosed kid, and the changing nature of the suburbs with the influx of migrants.

each narrative episode is connected with someone, either family or friends. The need for such continuity is also explored. In Serge's chapters, his protagonist is usually alone, pitted against the environment; his acquaintances prove disloyal, not to be trusted, and in each ongoing section, they are always left behind. This masculine sense of self depicted as not as connected to the world as the female, is according to Hooton, a feature of male autobiographies: 'Women see themselves continuous with the past, men regard the past as another form of the 'Other' against which the self must strive to define itself' (Hooton 1992:36). Indeed, it could be argued this notion is further reflected in my determined interest in collaboration: I want to write with my partner and I want to theorise about my shared writing experiences with him. Serge, on the other hand, prefers to work alone.

The sense of dislocation, of isolation, however, is also the condition of displacement and is discussed in detail in chapter three. The loss of place, language and social contacts are exemplified by Sergio's experiences but they dovetail with the displaced experiences of myself shifting around Victoria in the 1950s and 1960s. The theoretical discussion detailed how discourses position subjects in relation to cultural narratives. Every identity is placed in a culture, a language, a history. As Stuart Hall maintains: 'Identity insists on difference ... it insists on specificity, on conjuncture ... But it is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion' (Hall 1987: 46). Collaborative writing, particularly, an autobiographical novel which explores cultural marginalisation, does involve a shifting of identity. In some collaborative writing, this shift may become a fusing with 'the other', both in the subject matter of the text or by the choice of a blended narrative voice. But this too is provisional. The self changes positions. It is an unfinished closure (Hall 1987: 45).

The commentary also revealed how collaborative writing practice can provide a more 'writerly' approach whereby readers have to find meaning for themselves between the two juxtaposed narratives. Unlike novels written by one 'author', the meaning from a dual text such as *Shifting* is on the edges of the two interweaving voices, that is, in the margins of the corresponding narratives.

Finally, chapter four discussed how the writing of autobiography is a construction of a mythology of the self. It explored further Hall's notion that if identity is an invention formed at the unstable point of



subjectivity and culture, then writing the story of one's life becomes a process of constructing a myth. Rather than the self as autonomous and transcendent, this view sees the self as contingent, provisional, dependent on language and others for its very existence. Deconstructionist theory continually reiterates the perennial gap between life and language, person and text. Writing autobiography is a process whereby the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination. The self becomes a fictive structure. As Sartre wrote about his autobiographical writing, 'I keep creating myself: I am the giver and the gift.' Pascal noted: 'Sartre demonstrated the fictive nature of selfhood and demonstrated even as he performed it, the dynamic of retrospect is rooted in illusion' (Pascal 1960: 182).

Some co-authors refer to the collaborative writing process as textual quilt-making, a jell/jail web, musical improvisation, salad making, 'screaming divas', part singing or alphabet soup (Laird 1994 : 15 ). Others see it as a blending of styles where notions mesh nicely and compare the practice to a round robin story game or doing 'it as a twain' (Anthony 1992: 255). The writing of *Shifting* was more like a relay race with only two runners, neither of whom is on the field at the same time, except to change or swap places. It is only in the last chapter where the voices mingle that the novel has a multivoiced, multivalent dimension.

Collaboration, as a married couple, has been an interesting, challenging task, and a changing process. To write an imaginary work together is one thing, but to write an autobiography analysing both your early lives and the birth of your relationship is quite another. In some ways, the process became a re-evaluation of that experience and a new reflection of our present selves which evolved through the writing of the text. This illustrates the notion that language is both internal and external. It is not only constructed by the self but constructs the self as well. Writing *Shifting* juxtaposed three time frames - the child self, the adult self, and the self at the time of writing; the memories of childhood became relevant for what they told us about the present. Roland Barthes (1975) distinguishes between the 'self who writes', 'the self who was' and 'the self who is'. Thus autobiography reveals gaps, a slippage between the now and then. It is not so much a recounting of events but a process of selecting, or inventing them. Liz Stanley argues in her article on autobiography that there is hardly any life writing that actually has the literal quality

of immediacy, of recoding something accurately as it happens: 'its description is highly selective and highly interpretive' (Stanley 1993: 49). Although Serge and I were concerned with accuracy of detail, we found we were searching for particular moments of insight which evoked certain states of mind: loneliness, belonging or acceptance. This telling of our story was both an experience of reunion and release: we found aspects of self no longer part of the present but this living memory shaped and informed our experience now. Serge and I relived our meeting all over again and this affected the way we related to each other during the process and afterwards. The self at the start of the MA research project was not the same self as at the completion. As Kent points out: 'The self of any autobiography ... can be nothing more than a creature of the text. As such it will evolve with the text: the 'I' at the beginning with the project ahead will be different from the ego which has lived the life of the text' (Kent 1996: 97). Through the writing of our novel, Serge and I realised shifting of self is a part of life but also a part of the collaborative autobiographical process. As a heterosexual couple writing about our own lives and our meeting the very act of collaboration made it a creation of a metaphor of ourselves. By choosing to write a commentary which explored our collaborative practice, I pushed this concept further by mythologising our personal and writing relationship.

## Bibliography

- Anthony, P. & Jose Farmer, P. 1992, *The Caterpillar's Question*, Berkley, New York.
- Baggio, R. 1989, *A Shoe in My Cheese*, R. A. Baggio, Footscray.
- Bakhtin, M. 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Holquist, M., University Texas Press, Austin, USA.
- Barthes, R. 1975, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', *Barthes, R. Selected Writings*, ed. Sontag, S., Fontana, Glasgow, pp. 251-295.
- 1977, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, ed. & trans. Heath, S., Fontana, London.
- Bauer, D. 1991, 'Gender in Bakhtin's Carnival' in Warhol, R. & Herndl, D. (eds), *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.
- Beauvoir, de S. 1976, *Force of Circumstance*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Bell, D. & Kein, R. (eds), 1996, *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, Spinifex, Melbourne.
- Benstock, S. (ed.) 1988, *The Private Self*, Routledge, London.
- Borges, L. 1976, in Plimpton, G. (ed.) *The Paris Review Interviews, Writers at Work*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Bottomley, G. (ed.) 1984, *Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Bottomley, G., deLepervanche, M. & Martin, J. (eds), 1991, *Intersexions: Gender/Class/Culture/Ethnicity*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Bovell, A. & Rayson, H. 1995, *Scenes from a Separation*, MTC Program, pp. 8-13.
- Boyce-Davies, C. 1995, 'Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Lifestory Production', in Smith, S. & Watson J. (eds), *De/Colonising the Subject: Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Brady, L. 1992, 'Collaboration as Conversation: Literary Cases', *Essays in Literature*, Fall, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 298-314.
- Bristow, J. 1989, 'Life Stories: Carol Steedman's History Writing', *New Formations*, pp. 113-129.
- Brunazzi, E. 1994, 'The Question of Colette and Collaboration', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Fall, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 281-290.
- Bruner, J. 1986, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

- Cappiello, R. 1984, *Oh Lucky Country*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- Carter, P. 1992, 'Lines of Communication: Meaning in the Migrant Environment', in Gunew S. (ed.) *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 9-17.
- Castles, S. (et al.) (eds), 1992, *Australian Italians, Culture and Community In a Changing Society*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Cerne, H. 1986, 'Assimilation,' *Saltwater*, Quikset, Footscray.
- 1994, 'Caught in Between and a Gentle Nightmare', *Australian Multicultural Book Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 10-11.
- Cerne, H. & S. 1996, *Shifting*, unpublished manuscript.
- Chadwick, W. & Courtivron, I. (eds), 1993, *Significant Others: Creative & Intimate Partnership*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Clark, C. 1994, 'Charles A. Eastman and Elaine Goodale Eastman: A Cross-cultural Collaboration,' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Fall, vol 13, no 2, pp. 271-280.
- Crook, C. 1996, *Computers and the Collaborative Experience of Learning*, Routledge, London.
- Cue, K. 1983, *Crooks, Chooks and Bloody Ratbags*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Daly, M. 1979, *Gyn/Ecology*, The Woman's Press, London.
- Davies, G. 1992, 'Writing without a Pencil' in *Collaboration and Writing*, Styles M. (ed.) Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Deakin Study Guide, Unit A: Narrative Situations, 1988, Deakin University Press, Geelong.
- Delaruelle, J. & Korakostas-Seda, A. (eds), 1985, *Writing in Multicultural Australia*, Australia Council, Sydney.
- Dever, M. 1995, 'Not Mine Or Thine But Ours: finding M. Barnard Eldershaw', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 65-76.
- Dick, W. 1965, *A Bunch of Ratbags*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Dickins, B. 1985, *The Crookes of Epping*, Pascoe Publishing, Carlton.
- Dingle, T. 1984, *Settling*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney.
- Doane, J. & Hodges, D. 1995, 'Writing from the Trenches: Women's Work and Collaborative Writing', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 51-57.
- Dugan, M. 1995, *Partnerships in Writing*, paper presented to the FAW September seminar.
- Eakin, P. 1985, *Fictions In Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention*, Princeton, New Jersey.

- Ede, L. & Lunsford, A. 1990, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.
- Elbrecht J. & Fakundiny L. 1994, 'Scenes from a Collaboration or Becoming Jael B. Juba' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Fall, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 241-257.
- Ferrier, C. (ed.), 1985, *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- Fullbrook, K. & Fullbrook, E. 1993, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Furphy, J. 1903, *Such is Life*, reprinted 1973, Rigby, Sydney.
- Gerster, R. & Bassett, J. 1991, *Seizures of Youth: The Sixties and Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne.
- Gottliebe, A. 1995, 'Beyond the Lonely Anthropologist: Collaboration in Research and Writing', *American Anthropological Association*, March, vol. 97, no. 1, pp. 22-27.
- Grenville, K. 1989, *The Writing Book*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Gunew, S. 1985, 'Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?' in Ferrier, C. (ed.), *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- (ed) 1987, *Displacements 2, Multicultural Storytellers*, Deakin University Press, Geelong.
- (ed.) 1992, *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- (ed.) 1994, *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Gunew, S. and Mahyuddin, J. (eds), 1988, *Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women's Writing*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
- Gurr, M. 1997, *Between the Lines*, ABC 2, 19-8-97.
- Hall, S., McGren, T. & Held, D. 1992, *Modernity and Its Futures*, Open University Press, London.
- Hall, S. 1987, 'Minimal Selves' in Appignanesi, L (ed.), *Identity*, ICA documents 6, London, pp. 44-46.
- Hanscombe, G. & Namjoshi S. 1994, *Flesh and Paper*, Jezebel books, Seaton, England.
- Hart, F. 1970, 'Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography', in *New Literary History*, no. 1, pp. 485-511.
- Henderson, A. (ed.) 1993, *From All Corners*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

- Hewett, D. 1990, *Wild Card: An Autobiography, 1923-1958*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood.
- Heyward, M. 1995, 'The Importance of Ern' in *National Review*, April 17, vol. 47, no. 7, pp. 63-66.
- Hodgson-Burnett, F. 1909, *The Secret Garden*, reprinted 1980, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.
- Hooton, J. 1992, 'Autobiography and Gender', in Magarey S., (ed.) *Writing Lives*, Research Centre for Women's Studies, Adelaide, pp. 25-39.
- Hutcheon, L. 1991, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London.
- Hutcheon, L. & Hutcheon, M. 1994, 'All Concord's Born of Contraries Marital Methodologies' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 59-67.
- Jonaitis, E. 1997, *Elena's Journey*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Joyce, J. 1916, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, reprinted in 1966, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Kefala, A. 1984, *The Island*, Hale & Monger, Sydney.
- Kent, S. 1996, 'Constructing McAuley' in *Island*, Summer, Issue 69.
- Ker Conway, J. 1989, *The Road from Coorain*, Vintage, New York.
- Kinnane, G. 1986, *George Johnston: A Biography*, Nelson, Melbourne.
- Koestenbaum, W. 1989, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration*, Routledge, New York.
- Lack, J. 1991, *A History of Footscray*, Hargreen, Melbourne.
- Laird, H. 1995, 'On Collaborations' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 14, no. 1, pp 11-18.
- Lapovsky Kennedy, E. 1995, 'In Pursuit of Connection: Reflections on Collaborative Work', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 97, no. 1, pp. 26-28.
- Lejeune, P. 1977, 'Autobiography in the Third Person', *New Literary History*, pp 27-49.
- Leonardi, S. & Pope, R. 1994, 'Screaming Divas: Collaboration as Feminist Practice', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 259-279.
- Levy, B. 1980, 'Looking in Mirrors: Reflecting on Poppy' in Magarey S. (ed.) *Writing Lives*, ARC, Adelaide.
- Lewitt, M. 1983, *Call Me Bob*, Scribe, Brunswick.
- Liverani, R. 1975, *The Winter Sparrows: Growing Up in Scotland and Australia*, Nelson, Melbourne.

- Lodge, D. 1990, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, Routledge, New York.
- Loh, M. 1980, *With Courage in their Cases*, Filef, Melbourne.
- Magarey, S. (ed.) 1992, *Writing Lives*, Australian Research Centre, Adelaide.
- Malouf, D. 1985, *12 Edmonstone Street*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Mandel, B. 1980, 'Full of Life Now' in Olney, J. (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- Mason, M. 1980, 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers', in Olney, J. (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- McCooley, D. 1996, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- Milner, A. 1991, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Modjeska, D. 1981, *Exiles at Home*, Sirius, Sydney.
- Moore, L. (ed.) 1997, *The Faber Book of Contemporary Stories About Childhood*, Faber, London.
- Morris, M. 1990, 'A Small Serve of Spaghetti' in *Meanjin*, vol. 3, no. 9.
- Mulvey, L. 1975 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Warhol, R. & Herndl, D. (eds), *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.
- Murray, K. 1989, 'The Construction of Identity in the Narratives of Romance and Comedy' in Shorter, J. & Gergen, K. (eds), *Texts of Identity*, Sage, London.
- Olney, J. (ed.) 1980, *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical & Critical*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- O'Neill, E. 1917, 'Ile' in Rees, L. (ed.), 1960, *Modern Short Plays*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Page, L. 1994, 'Not Without Each Other: William and Marilyn Hoffer', in *Writers Digest*, vol. 74, no. 11, pp. 50-54.
- Park, R. 1994, *Fishing in the Styx*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Pascal, R. 1960, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Pascoe, R. 1987, *Buongiorno Australia: Our Italian Heritage*, Greenhouse, Richmond.
- Patnai, D. (ed.) 1988, *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

- Perillo, J. 1995, *In An Alien Land*, J. Perillo, Melbourne.
- Pirandello, L. 1954, *Six Characters In Search of an Author*, reprinted in 1978, Heinemann, London.
- Plowman, L. 1993, 'Tracing the Evolution of a Co-authored Text,' *Language and Communication*, July, vol. 13, pp. 149-160.
- Porter, H. 1963, *The Watcher On the Cast Iron Balcony*, Faber & Faber, London.
- Rando, G. 1992, 'Selected Bibliography of Italo-Australian Literature', in Gunew, S. (ed.) *Striking Chords*, pp. 236-249.
- Romero, P. (ed.) 1988, *Life Histories of African Women*, Ashfield, New Jersey.
- Rushdie, S. 1985, 'Introduction', to Grass, G., *Writing and Politics 1967-1983*, Secker & Warburg, London, pp. ix-xv.
- Sanders, M. 1994, 'Theorising the Collaborative Self: the Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography' in *New Literary History*, Spring, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 445-459.
- Schlau, S. & Arenal, E. 1995 'On Co-laboring' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Spring, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 39-49.
- Schrage, M. 1990, *Shared Minds*, Random House, New York.
- Shearer, D. 1995, 'Intercultural Transformations - Experiences of being Hosts and Strangers' paper presented at *Framing Communication: Exclusions, Edges and Cores Conference*, ANZ Communication Association, July 1995.
- Shotter, J. and Gargen, K. 1989, *Texts of Identity*, Sage, London.
- Smith, B. 1984, *The Boy Aedotus: Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Smith, S. & Watson, J. 1992, *De/Colonising the Subject: Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Soldatow, S. & Tsiolkas, C. 1996, *Jump Cuts: An Autobiography*, Vintage, Australia.
- Somerville, M. 1991, 'Life History Writing: The Relationship Between Talk and Text', *Hecate*, vol. 17.
- Spacks P. 1976, 'Stages of Self: Notes on Autobiography and the Life Cycle', *Boston University Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 7-17.
- Stanley, L. 1992, *The Autobiographical I*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- 1993, 'On Autobiography in Sociology' in *Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1 February, pp. 41-52.



- Steedman, C. 1986, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Virago, London.
- 1989, 'Women's Biography and Autobiography: Forms of History, Histories of Form' in Carr, H. (ed.) *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, Pandora, London, pp. 98-111.
- Sterne, L. 1760, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, reprinted 1988, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- The Victorian Readers*, 1930, Ministry of Education, reprinted 1986, Melbourne.
- Townsend, H. 1988, *The Baby Boomers*, Simon & Shuster, Sydney.
- Tranter, J. & Mead, P. (eds), 1991, *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, Penguin, Ringwood, pp. 86-100.
- Trueheart, C. 1988, 'Marriage for Better or for Words: The Erdrich Doris team', *The Washington Post*, 19 October.
- Tuttle, L. 1987, *Encyclopaedia of Feminism*, Arrow Books, London.
- Vygotsky, L. 1986, *Thought and Language*, ed. Kozulin, A., MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Walwicz, A. 1989, *Boat*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Warhol, R. & Herndl, D. (eds), 1991, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.
- Waten, J. 1997, *Alien Son*, Sun Books, Adelaide.
- Wheatley, N. 1990, 'Afterword', Clift, C. & Johnston G., *High Valley* Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Woolf, V. 1929, *A Room of One's Own*, reprinted 1979, Triad/Granada, London.
- Woolf, V. 1978, *Moments of Being*, Triad/Granada, London.
- Zuma, L. 1993, 'Portrait of the Artist', in Landow, G. *Hypertext and Literary Theory*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

### Interviews/ Sessions 1995-1997

Helen Cerne interviewed Gillian Hanscombe about her literary collaboration with Suniti Namjoshi on their collective work: *Flesh and Paper*, VUT St Albans Campus, Wednesday, 13th September, 1995.

Helen Cerne attended a session at the Federation of Australian Writers, Victorian Writers' Centre, Monday, 25th September, 1995 with Michael Dugan and Graham Simmonds, who discussed writing

in partnership, difficulties with cooperative writing, problems of royalties, and working with an illustrator.

Helen Cerne attended several panels at the Melbourne's International Writers' Festivals, October 1995, 1996 and 1997 dealing with autobiography and writing about the past:

*Past Imperfect: Looking Back in Hindsight* 1995

*Stories of their Lives: Biography and Autobiography* 1995

*True or False* 1996

*Inventing The Child* 1996

*Grain of Truth* 1997

*Fatal Attraction* 1997

*Moi, Moi, Moi* 1997

Helen Cerne attended a Melbourne Theatre Company collaborative play, '*Scenes from a Separation*' 1995, written by Hannie Rayson and Andrew Bovell, which gave contrasting male and female perspectives on the breakdown of a relationship.

