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Circling and Shaping the Maelstrom

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two sections. The first section is a critical essay entitled *Lawrencian Streams in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction*. The second section is creative, consisting of a novella entitled *Cold River*. In both sections the flow of water is a metaphor for the protagonists' psychological journey and also a structuring device. The critical essay establishes D.H. Lawrence's general influence on Joyce Carol Oates, drawing on their various works of fiction and non-fiction to explore how and why Oates interrogates, appropriates and re-visions Lawrence. A comparative study of Oates' *Blackwater* and Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, identifies how Eros, symbolised by archetypal water imagery, functions as a force which drives the writing and shapes the form of both novellas. A water trope also features in the creative section, where intertextual allusions, a transformational theme and naturalistic imagery provide evidence that Lawrence and Oates' texts have functioned as mimetic models.

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“The novel is like a river uniformly flowing, each passage concurrent with all the others.”

Joyce Carol Oates

Introduction

This thesis consists of two sections: a critical and a creative section. The critical section comprises an essay which discusses D.H. Lawrence’s influence on Joyce Carol Oates’ writing. I explore, through a close reading of two novellas, *Blackwater* and *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, the parameters of that influence. In *Black Water* Oates appropriates Lawrence by depicting Eros, symbolised by archetypal water imagery, as a darker form of sexual desire, which nevertheless, like Lawrence’s Eros, manifests in a transformational experience. The water trope also functions as a force which drives the writing and shapes narrative form, not only of the novellas mentioned, but also, the novella *Cold River* that comprises the creative section of this thesis.

Both Joyce Carol Oates and D.H. Lawrence demonstrate that, at their most excessive, there is a propensity for their novels to turn into textual floods. I was convinced that authorial excess, curtailed by the precision of a novella, would highlight these authors’ distinctive skills enabling me to more easily accomplish an efficient close reading of their work. I also hoped the genre’s economic form could be trusted to contain my own writerly inclination to lose focus, while also showcasing literary artistry through a simplicity of form where “less is more” – an aphorism adopted as a principle of minimalist design. Ian McEwan reinforces these expectations when he considers that the novella “lays on the writer a duty of unity and the pursuit of perfection... where smoke and mirrors, rabbits and hats are more self-consciously applied than in the full-length novel...” (5).

Aside from an arbitrary word limit there is no definitive agreement as to what constitutes a novella. When I check-listed qualities, attributed to the novella by the few writers on the subject, against my own work, I found it to be in ambiguous territory that may

be the novella's defining quality (Conroy 11). This view is consistent with Henry James' deeply ambiguous definition of "our ideal, the beautiful and blessed nouvelle" that he glorifies in his Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*. The fluidity of language he advocates is "... not a licence to create loose, baggy monsters," rather it is "a further way of creating variety within form, moving towards a kind of fusion... a sense of something coming into being..." (xiv). Such ambiguity and "the sense of something new coming into being" is apparent in what Garrett Stewart labels D.H. Lawrence's fluid "allotropic style" (228). He writes: "'trope,' and the chemical term 'allotrope' derive from the same Greek root for 'turning' " which implies "a narrative that 'radiates deep beneath itself' within the form that frames it" (Stewart 239). I was straddling an undefined world between a short story and a novel, being on the borderline, like my *Cold River* protagonist, whose furious intensity and propensity to dig holes for herself takes her down below the surface to undiscovered depths.

I decided that it is the vertical depth of the narrative, its multilayers of meaning generated by a web-like complexity of theme that most typifies the novella form. Judith Leibowitz supports this thesis, as she posits the novella's minimalist design has a "framing effect" that resists definitive understanding because of its "compressive" nature (12). While the short story purposefully limits and the novel extends, the novella, in particular, produces "a generically distinct double effect of intensity and expansion" (16). It does so through revisiting and re-examining themes, signifying a repetitive structure.

The water trope in my novella functions to provide a structural repetitiveness that Judith Liebowitz considers to be a major factor contributing to the novella's density (111). A river that turns back on itself, parallels the meandering of memory that illuminates the impact of early life on the protagonist. Imagery arising from such symbolism allows the reader the freedom to dive to imaginative depths made possible by the "less is more" aphorism - the novella form functions like a poem in this respect, imploding in on itself.

In both Oates' and Lawrence's novellas, a water trope plays a central role in shaping form. Lawrence's novella, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, features a stream that becomes swollen after the collapse of a dammed up reservoir. Joyce Carol Oates' novella *Black Water* features a stagnant swamp. Naturalistic imagery, revealing a perception of nature as a wild, overpowering force, also serves as a metaphor for the forces of nature within the self. This dynamic is echoed in my novella, *Cold River*.

Having chosen genre and authors, I became intrigued with authorial vision and the writing style exhibited by Oates and Lawrence. Although both authors were historically and geographically years and miles apart, a shared metaphysical vision was evident in the transcendental imagery and pantheistic landscapes of their novellas. Using myth, symbolism, naturalistic and dream imagery they attempt a language of the 'psyche;' a term used by Jung to incorporate both the conscious and unconscious components of the human mind, the latter term 'mind' being preferred by cognitive psychologists who have largely eclipsed the psychoanalytic approach in academia (*Four Archetypes* 149). To explore further the etymology of such terms takes us beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the repetitive prose style, commonality of theme, and mythic and symbolic allusions in *Black Water* seemed disturbingly similar to Lawrence's allotropic style. Lawrence would have approved of an intuitive approach being as it was a major aspect of his spiritually-oriented philosophy. Further exploration of other works by Oates validated the sense of a Lawrencian ghost present in her machine.

Just as Oates attempts a textual mirror of Lawrence's work, so my creative project has a mimetic structure. Lawrence and Oates' focus on the conflict between the civilised self and the spontaneous self, and the ensuing struggle between life and death, are also themes in my novella *Cold River*. Their influence, however, was mitigated by the changing nature of my relationship to the two authors. As I became more familiar with their work I resonated more

with Lawrence than with Oates, who focuses less on the inner resources of her protagonists. Oates offers a mythical illusion of transformation for the reader in *Black Water*, rather than the personal experience of transformation for protagonists, who cannot emotionally connect, are frequently unlikeable, and seem developmentally arrested in their psychological functioning. For my novella I wanted a central character with whom the reader could empathise, despite her isolative position and disillusionment with conventional institutions. She finds her own power in God, as inherent in nature and each living being, not dissimilar to Lawrence's and Oates' spiritual vision. This being so, my protagonist is able to rise above (literally, in Phoenix-like form) a cornucopia of problems. My main aim was to provide a degree of "psychological complexity" and "atmospheric sensitivity" that Graham Good ascribes to Lawrence's best novellas (160). If achieved I will have fulfilled the criteria of "intensity and expansion" that Judith Leibowitz refers to as being the essential element of a novella.

SECTION 1

Circling and Shaping the Maelstrom:

Lawrencian Streams in Joyce Carol Oates Fiction

In this essay I will be arguing that Joyce Carol Oates interrogates, appropriates, and transforms Lawrence's concepts of Eros, the relationship of humans to the natural world, and the fluid narrative structures that result from such ideas. For both writers, sexual desire, personified by Eros and symbolised by archetypal water imagery, is a driving, uncontrollable force that propels the main protagonists into a version of the Nietzschean abyss, from which they emerge either transformed or redeemed.

Water symbolism, in the form of an ambiguous Eros, interplays through both authors' narratives, emblematic of both good and bad sex. D.H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy* is a tale of liberation from conventional social and religious institutions through benevolent Eros. The passionate nature of intimate connection propels Lawrence's protagonists towards a state of being, at one with the cosmos, which seems, paradoxically, to be a liberation from desire. Oates' Eros, in *Black Water*, offers a darker vision than that of Lawrence, symbolising transformation through death, rather than life. Her protagonists play into gender stereotypes typified under patriarchy, her ironic style subverting a romanticised view of Eros. While she borrows a Dionysian landscape from Lawrence, both her vision and characterisation seem Apollonian, more cerebral than 'soul,' suggesting a complex relationship to his work.

I

Without a methodological analysis of the texts, geographical, gender and generational differences between the authors might suggest convergent themes in their novellas to be merely coincidental. While both authors' rural, working class backgrounds could account for similarity of social and moral themes at the forefront of their work, there is a strong connective link between the two authors' in their metaphysical focus on human alienation, mythical modes of expression and an empathic relationship with nature. Lawrence railed against the industrialisation of England as Oates rails against corporate America, both considering modernisation as being destructive to the life of the 'soul.' Donald Spoto discerned a "mystic confluence of sex, nature and power" in Lawrence's writing (74). These confluences are also to be found in Oates' work, where the forces of nature and modern American values collide. To establish connective links beyond mere conjecture, however, requires an intertextual analysis to discern just how Lawrence has influenced Oates.

The term intertextuality, first coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966, has multiple meanings, but to explore fully the burgeoning literature on this subject is beyond the scope of this essay. Most simply, intertextuality refers to a narrative text which is perceived as a dynamic relational site riddled with the voices of other texts (Alfaro 268). Detecting Lawrence's ghost involved first, identifying Oates' intertextual allusions and second, exploring, predominantly through a psychoanalytic interpretive base, just how she has re-visioned Lawrence's work.

The irony of using primarily a psychoanalytical approach as an interpretive base for textual analysis is not lost on me. Lawrence and Oates would both resist Freud's rationally based reductionist model.¹ As a rigorous methodology requires more than one theory to enhance understanding, I also draw on a mythical approach, more suited to Lawrence's romanticism. A narratological model grounds the analysis of structural form and narrative

style. This theory takes a formal approach to describing how “each narrative text is constructed” (Bal 81). Feminist theory informs discussion of gender dynamics.

To substantiate the claim that Lawrence and Oates’ pervasive use of water imagery is symbolic of Eros requires a brief explanation of psychoanalytic constructs. In order to link Eros to watery desire I drew upon Freud’s theory of drives. Essentially, Freud posited a duality in human nature, proposing that sexuality and aggression correlate to basic human instincts, unconscious forces, coined respectively Eros – the life instinct governing reproductive sexuality - and the Death Instinct – a destructive aggressive drive pitted in perpetual war against life (Jones 273).

Freud’s use of watery metaphors to explain libido/sexual energy as a primary force motivating human behaviour, seemed a logical choice to substantiate the thesis that Eros, symbolising sexual desire, drives and shapes the narrative in both texts. Freud explained his model using metaphors of “floods,” “channels,” “streams” and “pent up dams,” thereby linking libido to flowing water (85, 156). In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud likens libido to a “stream” that threatens to overflow into “collateral channels” when its “main bed has become blocked” (85). The implication of his structural model of personality is that libidinal forces (Eros), in the form of psychic energy, dammed by repressive structures within the ego, erupt from the unconscious id, to threaten the stability of the ego and therefore need direction into the “right” channels (23).

Water, as a primary element, is also associated in psychoanalytic literature with both birth and death. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud posits dreams of “entering and leaving water,” as signifying birth, but he also connected water to a spiritual plane where it was open to dual interpretation signifying, both life and death (Schved and Rosenthal 554).

The problem with psychoanalytic interpretations of such imagery is that they were predominantly made by men delving into women’s secret selves to re-channel natural

sexuality (Boone 124). Although psychoanalytic theory is grounded in a large body of clinical work that substantiates interpretive claims, it is the gendered nature of these interpretations that remains problematic. One of the reasons Oates revises Lawrence is possibly because he was a man writing about women's sexuality in the same era as Freud. This makes it necessary to briefly outline feminist criticism of representations of women's sexuality in male literature. Two representations of women as fluid generally arises. One representation draws on an ancient metaphor of "woman as a container" with leaks that man cannot stop; women's desire is viewed as an un-channelled stream (Seigal 113). Klaus Theweleit's exploration of male fantasies confirms a representation of female sexuality as a surging ocean or raging stream that provokes men's "fear of dissolution" or engulfment while also threatening the breakdown of the "ancient dam of traditional state authority" (45, 231, 283). This first representation of woman as a "leaky vessel," and a second representation of women as virtuous "impermeable vessels" generalises into a simplistic Madonna/whore polarity where women, idealised or denigrated, become the subordinated, objectified "other" (Seigal 113).

The image of female desire as a raging flood was drawn upon repeatedly, by modernist writers, to symbolise women's sexual awakening. Lawrence's use of watery metaphors, to illustrate a state of flux in the libidinally² charged responses of his protagonists, drew inspiration from Victorian women writers, George Elliot and the Bronte sisters. In doing so he was attempting to give primacy to female desire by linking Eros to a positive life force that could overcome the deadening impact of social convention (Seigal 114).

Lawrence and Oates, by weaving the symbolism of myths and fairy tales into their narratives, are communicating the language of the psyche/soul that, according to structural theorists, resonates at a deep level in all of us. In this view, myths and fairy tales are "representations" containing cultural prescriptions that draw upon universal archetypal images, existing deep within the psyche, instinctively arising from what Jung termed the

“collective unconscious” (*Four Archetypes* 3-5). Similar to Freud, Jung, considered archetypal water imagery to be symbolic of the unconscious. Lawrence was not dissimilar to Jung in his intent on integrating opposing forces within the psyche. In deconstructing symbols inherent in the book of *Revelation* Lawrence claimed he had revealed an underlying pagan text merging dual symbols. For example, The Whore of Babylon and the Cosmic Mother were integrated into one entity (*Apocalypse* 22). The primordial archetype of this “loving and terrible” mother - usually representative of birth, death and transformation - occupies a central position in the triad of Persephone, Demeter and Pluto (Hayes ix). This myth, taking a prominent role in both novellas under study, gives positive value to women’s whole experience.

While the theoretical bases above provide a sound methodology to establish links between *The Virgin and the Gypsy* and *Black Water*, a review of literature reveals the full extent of authorial influence. Joyce Carol Oates has made it evident that D. H. Lawrence has been a model for her to emulate, in refining her sensibility and deepening her perception. In an interview in the *Ohio Review*, she says:

I’ve always had a blindness for, a real inability to appreciate, the purely ‘lyric’ ... but one yearns to know more. My heroes are people like Yeats’ ... and Lawrence, who, when you read their poetry, you know you are in immediate contact with an immense emotional reality (47).

Oates’ initial interest in Lawrence’s work was evident in the authorship of three critical essays, written during the 1970s.³ In her essay *The Hostile Sun* she identifies with Lawrence when she expounds that “only a spiritual brother or sister of Lawrence himself can understand his poems, ultimately; this is why we strain upward, puzzled but yearning for an equality with him, if only in flashes” (46). This same mimetic desire is evident in her published volumes of poetry. Oates’ first volume of poetry was entitled: *Women in Love and*

Other Poems - this title, a clear tribute to Lawrence, as is her volume *Tenderness*. Her work *Fantastic Beasts* is modelled on Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and her collection of critical essays in *New Heaven, New Earth: the Visionary Experience in Literature* (with epigraph containing an excerpt of his poem *New Heaven and New Earth*) was collated at a time when she was "particularly absorbed" in Lawrence's poetry (Johnson 210).

Oates' admiration for Lawrence's writing also extended to his novels, as she listed *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, to be among her top ten most influential books (Zane 104). Such was her zeal for his work she also continued to teach him regularly in her university courses, long after the waning of his star in academia over the last few decades. Although acknowledging of his "current unfashionability" she considers "the emotions of such language are no less relevant now than they were in Lawrence's time" (*Uncensored* 210). That Lawrence has been a pervasive influence over many years is evidenced in Oates' Preface to her 2005 collection of non-fiction, *Uncensored: Views and (Re)views*, where she writes:

when I feel most combative, disturbed, irritated and upset by another's writing, as in the case (long ago, in my early twenties) of D.H. Lawrence, it's probably a sign that I feel challenged, perhaps threatened, and need to carefully re-read, and re-think. (In the case of Lawrence years were required) (xii).

Oates seemingly displays none of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" towards Lawrence or other authorial predecessors. "There is very little originality" she explains of her writing, "my debt to other writers is very obvious I couldn't exist without them" (Clemons 35). However, without a context to this statement it is difficult to know if Oates is being self-effacing, ironic or humbly truthful. Bloom's deconstructive approach to discerning authorial influence comes under fire from Oates in her published Journal, where she writes that aside from particular influences the author reads: "many other people as well, and talked with people, and was 'influenced' by his own liver, the moon's tugging, the quality of breakfast"

(167). While Oates' response may be a resistance to what she labels as Bloom's "naïve," singularly rational approach to examining influence, she is characteristically enigmatic, challenging the critical reader to find intertextual links in her prose (Hamalian 135). This has been a difficult challenge as the number of critical studies of Lawrence's influence on individual writers has been surprisingly minimal.⁴ Therefore, it makes a strong point when a seminal work, like Gary F. Waller's book-length critical exploration discerns Lawrencian streams in her writing⁵ (Oates wrote the preface to Waller's volume, making a compelling statement as to the authenticity of his argument) (xii).

Beasts, written in 2002, most blatantly evidences Oates' continued obsession with Lawrence. The story is told in a flashback to 1976 when Professor Andre Harrow (a Lawrence avatar of Dionysian character) teaches D.H. Lawrence at a college where a series of mysterious fires are occurring. The description of the interior of the Harrow's house possibly derives from impressions from Oates' visit to Taos, New Mexico, the site of Lawrence's 'ranch,' in the early 1970s (Johnson 196). The main protagonist, an anorexic female student, after being seduced by the professor and his wife, exhibits Lawrence's baptism of fire literally by setting fire to the house, resulting in a harrowing death for the Harrows. The negative, thinly disguised portrayal of Lawrence going up in flames in *Beasts* possibly indicates Oates' idealisation of him, evident in the 1970s, has been upended by this satirical portrayal.

It is Lawrence's focus on the internal beast, his respect for the dark forces of the unconscious, expressed metaphorically through the primitive physicality of the natural world, that seems to resonate most with Oates. Inherent in this thinking is the idea of sexuality as an instinctual force, emanating from deep within the psyche, structures not only our internal world but external experience in our relationship to others and the wider cosmos. Oates' perception of Eros as a motivating transformative force is evident when she writes: "although desire may be a destructive passion born of many conflicting urges and destructive myths,

and therefore a kind of disease, love may yet lead to a transfiguration of self; it is an invitation to enter a new era of existence which is at once a risk and yet offers the possibility of transcendence” (Waller 46). Joanne Creighton considers the search for fulfilment through Eros as something that links both Lawrence and Oates’ writing (*Unliberated Women* 150).

That Lawrence’s cosmic vision, delineating Eros as a doorway to transcendence, resonates with Joyce Carol Oates is evident in the metaphysical beliefs she explicates in interviews and essays, the ‘alive’ naturalistic landscape she depicts, and the eroticised relationships portrayed in her narratives. Oates emulates Lawrence’s style in descriptions of the landscape as is evidenced in her interview with Robert Birnbaum, who records that she reads “Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence almost as much for the landscape and for the cityscape as for the characters, because the landscape is so vividly portrayed. So when I write I try and do the same thing” (1).

In an interview in 1972 with Walter Clemons, Oates stated: “Blake, Whitman, Lawrence and others had a vision of a transformation of the human spirit. I strongly agree with that myself” (39). Greg Johnson, Oates’ biographer, records her as being intensely interested in “visionary literature,” especially the experience of spiritual transcendence, in the early 1970s when she was reading Lawrence’s poetry (22, 291). During this period she purports to having had an out of body visionary experience that impacted permanently on her writing (Creighton 9).

Oates, like Freud, is of a view that instinctual forces govern the human condition, however, her hypothesis of the self aligns with Lawrence in opposition to Freud’s elevation of rational consciousness (ego) over nature (instinctual id). She maintains that unless humans risk setting aside ego control they have little hope of being authentic people (Hamalian 137). In this respect she believes “Lawrence has been more useful [to her] than Freud” (Hamalian 133). Both authors see the road to transcendence and a new society taking place through

intuitive sense experience, rather than through dichotomous rationalism - a path that will bring humanity to a dead end. Oates writes in her *Hostile Sun* essay that Lawrence saw the sensual/spiritual union as a “true marriage of heaven and hell” (48). Oates’ vision is less clear, as a dissident voice is detected at Lawrence’s elevating sensuality as the pivot of his metaphysical views (Hamalian 135).

Despite this area of dissent Oates, like Lawrence, hopes to offer a vision of renewal through her writing: “I feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time...and (hopefully) show some individual a way out, awaken, come alive move into the future” (Waller 22). She also sounds remarkably Lawrencian in hoping for “a gradual transformation of western culture” through a form of “intelligent pantheism” (qtd in Creighton 16) that includes regeneration where death is “a continuation of one’s consciousness in some other form” (*Journal* 128).

For both Lawrence and Oates modernization has cast humankind adrift from connections with nature, setting it on a road to “doom” (*The Hostile Sun* 80). The road to a new society means opening up to the unconscious forces of our nature, becoming alive to God, synonymous with the natural world, and at one with the cosmos (Creighton 110). Oates’ view of human nature, however, seems consistently darker than that of Lawrence, whose narrative offers some fleeting form of secular heaven for his protagonists. Her savage satirical style seems more in keeping with Thanatos - Freud’s Death Instinct - than Eros, though she might claim differently.

II

Clarifying just how Oates' vision aligns with Lawrence is dependent on how she appropriates him and to what purpose. In *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, a novella written in 1926 by Lawrence and *Black Water*, a novella written sixty-six years later by Oates, a similarity of metaphysical vision occurs, evidenced by the presence of transcendental imagery, imitation of descriptive style, commonality of theme, symbolism, mythic allusions and pantheistic landscapes. A collage of intertextual references indicate the presence of Lawrencian streams flowing through *Black Water* pointing to both an identification with Lawrence as well as complex re-envisioning of his ideas.

Lawrence's main theme in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* concerns itself with how conventional life blocks Eros, with deadening consequences. Set in England's rural Midlands, Lawrence's novella depicts sexual desire that transcends class. The relationship that develops between the Virgin (Yvette) and the Gypsy has a precedent example when Yvette and Lucille's mother ('She-who-was-Cynthia') runs off with a "despicable young man" abandoning their father, Rector Saywell, and 'proper' society (2). After this incident, both girls grow up within the confined space of the rectory, a site of oppression and hypocrisy, ruled over by the devouring figure of the Mater (the cruel and aged family matriarch). Lawrence takes an ironic playful tone when he introduces the Eastwoods (named after Lawrence's birthplace) who, living outside convention in an adulterous relationship, provide an alternative role model for Yvette but also become a source of conflict with her father.

In *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, Eros is symbolised metaphorically in the form of a flood that literally sweeps through the lower regions of the rectory where the family live, resulting in the death of the Mater. Ironically, the real destruction has not been caused by the flood; rather, it stops the destructive impact of the Mater on the two girls, and the stifling atmosphere of living death inside the rectory. The Gypsy's presence in the vicinity outside the rectory

saves Yvette's life. During the first phase of the flood, he takes her to the upper story of the rectory next to the chimney - a phallic column that stands against the flood. Stripping off their wet clothes (analogous to a psychic openness) they survive by sharing bodily warmth, moments that herald transformation and elevate desire to a spiritual plane (68, 69).

As textual analysis is dependent on clarifying the nature of Lawrence's definition of Eros, it is necessary to outline the distinction he made (in the Foreword to *Women in Love*) between sexual desire and sexual appetite:

Which Eros? Eros of the jaunty 'amours,' or Eros of the sacred mysteries? And if the latter, why accuse, why not respect, even venerate? ... the sensual passions and mysteries are equally sacred with the spiritual mysteries and passions (xi).

Lawrence fervently believed that sexual desire, as opposed to base instinctive appetite, enabled transcendence of the ego, where 'I' becomes an impersonal part of the cosmic spirit (*Apocalypse* 76). The difference between the two forms of desire - loosely defined as the difference between love and animal lust - is evident in the conversation that Yvette has with her sister Lucille in *The Virgin and the Gypsy*:

"What is it, Lucille," she asked, "that brings people together?... What is it?"

"I suppose its sex, whatever that is," said Lucille.

"Yes, what is it? It's not really anything common, like common sexuality, you know Lucille. It really isn't."

"No, I suppose not," said Lucille. "Anyhow, I suppose it needn't be."

"Because, you see, the common fellows, you know who make a girl feel low: nobody cares much about them. Nobody feels any connection with them. Yet they're supposed to be the sexual sort."

“I suppose,” said Lucille, “there’s the low sort of sex, and there’s the other sort, that isn’t low...” (51).

The differentiation of the ‘real thing’ from sexual appetite is a concept further developed by the Eastwoods in conversation with Yvette:

“I think,” said the Major, taking his pipe from his mouth, “that desire is the most wonderful thing in life. Anybody who can really feel it is a king, and I envy nobody else!” He put back his pipe.

The Jewess looked at him stupefied. “But, Charles!” she cried. “Every common low man in Halifax feels nothing else!”

He again took the pipe from his mouth. “That’s merely appetite,” he said (54).

In *The Virgin and the Gypsy* Lawrence draws on animal metaphors to illustrate instinctual nature, giving humans animal qualities so as to differentiate the two types of Eros. The Major, is a bird-like figure, an ironic allusion (as the Major is inclined towards intellectual abstractions) to Lawrence’s adoption of the Phoenix as a transformative image, representing the power to regenerate (49). The Gypsy is viewed by the Major as being skilled with horses (54). Lawrence often used horses to illustrate a natural, vital expression of sexuality (*Apocalypse*, 199). Accordingly, the flood water is “a wall of lions,” (65) an image Lawrence associates in *Apocalypse* with the sun and male libido (111). Lawrence also compares base men to dogs: “The Rector’s face has “a snarling doggish look...a mongrel sort of sneer” (23). The men in Lucille and Yvette’s social set exhibit domestic dog qualities; Yvette does not want to “mate with a housedog” (38).

Lawrence states, in his Foreword to *Women in Love*, that “lewdness was hateful because it impairs our integrity and our proud being,” implying such desire is ruled by selfish ego needs (xxxii). Eros, associated with interpersonal subjectivity, was considered superior to

bestial lust. Freud also alludes to this division when he writes “The whole sphere of love ... remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love” (251). Writing in a modernist age, Lawrence brought an element of Victorian morality into his theory by insisting that only within a certain kind of marriage was the highest order of love experienced (Hamalian 140).

In parallel with the two depictions of Eros, Lawrence’s water symbolism has dual connotations, - there is both good and bad water. For example: the water that once drove “the stone cotton mills” is an impotent stream (1). This stream, then, is bad water in the Lawrencian schema. On the other hand, water can serve as cleansing force, such as that of the flood which washes away the deadening influence of the Mater in the novella’s climatic scene (67). The damned up reservoir - analogous to a mental dam - symbolises repressed sexuality, restricting the flow of an unruly Eros. Sexually awakened by the Gypsy, Eros becomes a literal flood releasing Yvette from her social entrapment within the rectory (65).

Eros in Oates’ novella is limited to that aspect of desire which Lawrence defines as mere sexual appetite. Motivated politically to write *Black Water*, after the acquittal of Senator Edward Kennedy’s nephew for rape, Oates’ novella adds another perspective to the historical Chappaquiddick story, by giving a voice to the young woman who died in the ‘accident.’ Like Lawrence, Oates depicts sexual encounters without love as depleting to the spirit. Drawn together by lustful Eros at a fourth of July party, Kelly and The Senator’s lives converge without their ever attaining anything close to emotional intimacy. When Kelly makes a fateful decision to leave the party with The Senator, the narrative descends into myth; the car driven by the drunken Senator takes a wrong turn, plunges off the bridge, leaving Kelly to die beneath the surface of black water.

Oates’ caustic re-visioning of the Chappaquiddick incident allows the reader to see through the façade of the American dream to its base in patriarchal culture and the

corresponding rampant misogyny in operation. In *Black Water* women's bodies are buffed for men's pleasure, denoting women's secondary status as objects of male desire. Kelly's real persona is still that of Lisabeth, an angelic child, illustrating her arrested development. Kelly's anorexia and absence of sexual pleasure is indicative of bodily denial of desire that limits her options and plays into stereotypical conceptions of women. She remains a good girl wanting to please even if it means tolerating the Senator's drunken desire. The Senator, in his drive towards coupling is depicted as a wilful monster filled with what Lawrence would call "rotteness." Kelly, correspondingly, operates on a mechanical surface level, unable to fully comprehend the limitations forced on her by patriarchy.

That Oates is well acquainted with the two aspects of Lawrence's Eros is evident in her critical essay *Lawrence's Gotterdammerung: the Apocalyptic Vision of Women in Love*. In this essay she quotes Lawrence, who refers to the binary light and dark streams of Eros respectively as: "the silver river of life..." and "that dark river of dissolution... that black river of corruption" (Introduction. *Women in Love* xiii). Eros, in Oates' novella, is an overpowering aggressive lust that leads to Kelly's death in putrid black water. Oates parodies the discrepancy between surface ego and the unconscious id, making salient that her male protagonist's sexual desire is of a base kind, stemming from an ego centred personality:

The Senator with a love of life a love of people both men and women a zest for meeting new people for exchanging views an appetite for... perhaps it was appetite itself. Biting, sucking the very marrow. Thrusting yourself into it to the hilt. Christ how otherwise do you know you're alive? (117).

The Senator, fuelled on alcohol, intent on conquest, epitomises sexual appetite as a selfish instinct that, unmitigated by spiritual love, results in a gender power imbalance that silences Kelly. The Senator takes a back road, off the main road, leading to a confrontation

with nature that brings him face to face with his limitations; a symbolic representation that alludes to the dual struggle within the self between ego and id for dominance.

Like Lawrence, although in a more limited way, Oates equates ego-centred Eros with animal qualities: the Senator crouches “panting like a dog crouched in hiding...” (145); she writes of his “big teeth,” an allusion that likens him to a devouring wolf (20, 30, 107).

The presence in Oates’ narratives of similar themes, terminology, nature imagery, metaphoric and mythical symbolism, allude to the ghost of Lawrence. However, the metafictional devices she uses to revise Lawrence take her narratives beyond mere influence, pointing to a more complex intertextual relationship. Oates utilises the symbolism of naturalistic imagery dominant in Lawrence’s narratives, implying such motifs are emblematic of psychic energy stemming from Eros. The sun, the stars, and the moon feature as powerful emblems of the cosmos in Lawrence’s *Apocalypse* symbolising the forces of nature within ourselves.

The moon, as a tidal force governing water, features in both texts. Oates draws on Lawrence’s symbolic images such as the sun and moon parodying his positive connotations, presenting Eros instead as a negative force. Her description of the “pale glowering moon” in the following passage conveys erotic instinct as an emotionally disconnecting experience:

*At dusk, inland, darkness rose from the earth even as the sky retained light.
There was a pale glowering moon flat as a coin. Dyed-looking shred of
reddened cloud in the western sky and in the east at the ocean’s horizon a sky
shading subtly to night, bruised as an overripe plum (17).*

The words, “politics, the negotiating of power, Eros, the negotiating of power” (53), combined with the image of the moon as being analogous to a flat coin, suggests that politics and sexual appetite driven by the ego are the same side of the coin. The Senator’s celebrity

face and sexual appetite are ultimately disempowering for Kelly, the young woman he preys upon.

In contrast, Lawrence's life-giving Eros is a liberating force. Yvette and the Gypsy, subject to the threat of physical annihilation and psychic dissolution, are able to track a fragile path into the unknown. Lawrence, in describing the Gypsy's transcendental experience, alludes to a new moon as emblematic of transformation:

A terror creeping over his soul he went again to the door. The wind, roaring with the waters, blew in as he opened it. Through the awesome gap in the house he saw the world, the waters, the chaos of horrible waters, the twilight, the perfect new moon high above the sunset a faint thing, and clouds pushing dark into the sky, on the cold blustery wind (69).

Oates alludes to flowers, another Lawrencian motif, but her flowers are not the pure white snow flower of Lawrence's text (6, 7, 8, 47, 112). When Oates describes The Senator as "a famous face yet a comfortable face, a sunflower face" (105), she is alluding to sun imagery, that in Lawrence's cosmology is a symbol of the uncontrollable forces of nature. In conflating the sun image with that of a flower Oates' is parodying Lawrence's use of the snow flower as symbolic of woman's pure life force. She is also mocking The Senator who is not, in Lawrence's terms, an "aristocrat of the sun."

Word and phrase allusions to Lawrence are sprinkled throughout Oates' text. Derivatives of a repetitive line run through Kelly's consciousness as she remains trapped underwater: "Am I going to die? - like this" (3, 6); "not like this. No" (9, 48, 64). These phrases echo dialogue originally uttered by Birkin, in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, as he resists desire for erotic union. It is a phrase that Oates singles out for comment in her Introduction to *Women in Love*: "not this, not this" (viii). The words, when uttered by Kelly,

drip with ironic meaning, as instead of a transient ‘little death’ arising from sexual union with The Senator, she dies an actual death.

Oates links sexual appetite with death when she writes of orgasm during Kelly’s copulation with G: “G---’s lips were drawn back from his teeth in that grimace, that death’s-head triumph, that excluded her” (45). This imagery links G with a wilful ego driven Eros, an antithesis to life giving Eros. When Lawrence evokes imagery of the “death’s head” in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* he is alluding to sexual appetite devoid of spirit: “We have forfeited our flashing sensual power. And we have false teeth in our mouths. In the same way our lips go thinner and more meaningless in the compression of our ideal driven impulse” (58). Oates has clearly appropriated this image in a way that corresponds with Lawrence’s ideas.

Oates’ sexualises language typifying Lawrence when she writes: “the thin red needle jolting up beyond 40 mph as the Toyota hit a sandy rut and began to skid like an explosively expelled sign and The Senator braked hard and quick ...”(34). The words: “rut,” “explosively expelled,” “thin red needle,” “hard and quick,” carry sexual connotations. Oates’ “thin red needle” echoes Lawrence’s “needle of long red flint” from his poem *He Goat*, a creature full of “selfish will” who epitomises the ego centred lust exhibited by The Senator (*Complete Poems*, 313).

In both novellas identity is linked to voice and naming with the absence of voice indicative of a “lost” soul. Lawrence alludes to those with no identity as “the lost” in his poem, *Cypresses*:

They say the fit survive,
But I invoke the spirits of the lost.
Those that have not survived, the darkly lost,
To bring their meaning back into life again,

Which they have taken away... (Complete Poems 236).

In the first line Lawrence is alluding to Darwinism while the remainder of the poem epitomises what Oates seems trying to achieve in *Black Water*, that is, giving the woman who died a voice that has not been previously articulated. The constant repetition of the word “lost” (14, 17, 18, 19, 25, 31, 47, 51, 60, 61, 62, 63, 98, 99, 107, 124, 136, 148) evokes the memory of the girl who did not survive, whose memory pales beside that of a famous political figure. The girl whose life has been forgotten because “you could not speak, there were no words” (5). Lawrence writes similarly of the aptly named Aunt Cissie: “Aunt Cissie’s life had been sacrificed to the Mater...she had ceased to be Cissie; she had lost her life and her sex” (4). The Mater holds power over Aunt Cissie, in similar dominant fashion to The Senator, who briefly but irrevocably, controls Kelly’s fate.

Naming is associated with power that arises through Eros. At the end of Lawrence’s novella, Yvette learns the Gypsy’s name is Joe Boswell. With this knowledge, he is no longer a projection for her romantic fantasies, and this alteration attests to her transformative self-integration. Oates’ Kelly, however, dies having “no name to call the driver of the Toyota, no name that sprang naturally and spontaneously to her lips” (27), denoting the absence of emotional connection. Oates’ protagonist does not become an individual in her own right but remains trapped in her stereotypical role. Alternatively Lawrence’s Yvette gains access to her own power by learning the real name of the Gypsy, evoking awareness of the ambiguous nature of his real personage.

Water imagery takes on a different quality in *Black Water*, representing what Lawrence describes as sexual appetite in his novella. Oates’ black water evokes the threatening physicality of a lustful Eros that is deadening to both the self and the other: “it was the rapid churning water she could not see but feel, hear, smell, sense with every pore of her being: her enemy, it was: a predator, it was: her Death” (93). The predator Senator

submerges Kelly's voice, his poisonous desire overwhelming her as: "the black water splashed over her mouth...and filled her lungs and she died" (95).

For both authors water, representative of good and bad Eros, results in different outcomes for their female protagonists. Lawrence's flood enables his protagonists to "come through." Oates lustful Eros represented by black water contaminated with industrial wastes, leads to chaos. Oates parodies male representation of woman as a "leaky vessel" by inverting the flow; instead black water flows into Kelly poisoning and engulfing her: "thin trickles of water pushing through myriad holes, fissure cracks like the webbed cracks in the windshield by degrees the water level would rise...the filthy black water would rise to fill her mouth, her throat, her lungs" (77). The sexual symbolism in both novellas plays into binary divisions; mind/body, ego/id, blood consciousness/mental consciousness, civilization/chaos, light/dark, heat/cold, inside/outside, upper/lower that is expressed symbolically in nature forms, that is: sun and moon, day and night, water and fire, spirit and flesh, earth and sky.

Lawrence's prose reflects the ambivalent nature of such opposing forces within the self, - his protagonists are continuously in a state of flux - his transformative moments echoing Jung's concept of "integration" which takes place through the union of these forces (*Psyche and Symbol* xxvi). Light and dark forces integral to intimacy are reflections of ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards the other, testament that intimacy in relationships is not easy to achieve but necessary, Lawrence thought, if the world were to survive. His hope, in resurrecting myths for the modern age, was to provide a vision of a new path for humankind, the possibility of a man woman relationship held in "pure balance" as typified by his concept of "star equilibrium" (*Women in Love* 151).

Oates' satirical approach illuminates the deadening impact of social forces that contribute to Kelly's plight. She plays with binary divisions in a way that upends the dominant order but her savage satirical style offers no way forward, no redemptive narrative

hope. While her grim narrative poses transcendental change and vision of cosmic unity she provides no bridge to get there.

Lawrence's landscape is primeval, conveying "spirit of place" that evokes metaphysical dread. In *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, his description of the stone rectory, stone cotton mills, bleak stone streets is synonymous with pervading deadness (1). In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* Lawrence writes: "People only become subject to stones after having lost their integral souls" (77). Oates' landscape description similarly exudes a malefic presence in conveying the deadening influence of globalisation. By describing a swamp full of industrial wastes in *Black Water*, she is ironically commenting on the moral degeneration of a nation that is moving further from its natural roots (97).

The pantheistic landscape in both novellas serves as a metaphor for the forces of Eros, thus investing language with dual meaning. Oates exhibits in *Black Water* what Jeffrey Meyers and other reviewers of Lawrence's writing call his "chthonic energy," illuminating the impact of forces of nature (Eros) erupting within the protagonist. (4). The Senator's drunkenness and descriptions of "badly rutted" back roads (31), and "a snaky tangle of rushes," conjures up Dionysian images usually associated with Lawrence. Any illusion that nature is a beneficent mirror of the psyche/soul, is literally shattered. Oates writes of: "swamp water in sheets outspread for miles on every side like bright shards of mirror amid the tangled vegetation" (17). The broken mirror shards are emblematic of the lost American dream. Under the surface, swamped by watery desire, Kelly is dying, implying that the undercurrents of the psyche are dangerous and devouring: "black water flooded over the crumpled hood of the car, washed over the cracked windshield, ... a sudden profound darkening as if the swamp had lurched up to claim them" (27). Oates echoes Lawrence in conveying a sense of instinctual forces at work beneath surface appearances.

Eros, as a literal stream in Lawrence's novella and as a stagnant pool of black water in Oates work, is emblematic of libidinal forces that influence the flow of language and shape narrative form. Judith Roof encapsulates the linking of theme to textual form when she writes:

Freud's pervasive liquid metaphors of sexuality simultaneously serve as the fluid figures of narrative progress. Characterising libido as a current of water ... Freud envisions both story and sexuality as a single strong stream gushing gleefully into the wide sea of human generation (215).

The fluid nature of the narrative reflects the mental functioning of protagonists. In the tension-packed two hours it takes to read *Black Water*, (the time it took Mary Jo Kopechne to die in the real-life Chappaquiddick incident) we are party to a series of fragmented images of the past and present that parallel the traumatised mind of Kelly as she lies teetering on the edge of life, optimistically awaiting rescue. Kelly literally sinks beneath the world of appearances into the dark swamp of a timeless unconscious, desperately clinging to surface memories (154). The tension is implacable and the impact of content on structural form primary. Short chapters and white spaces separate out fragmented images arising from formless dreaming, reflection, delusions, and fantasy, all running together in a plot that circulates like churning water.

Written, predominantly, in the third person, the stream of consciousness sometimes slips and slides into second person pulling the reader into the water with Kelly. The brief, first person excerpts consist of derivatives of a repetitious thought, conveying numbed disbelief, circulating in Kelly's mind: "Am I going to die, like this?" Kelly has no other immediate voice and Oates use of the second person "you," effectively objectifies her, while at the same time signifying her entrapment within patriarchy (9).

In *The Virgin and the Gypsy* Eros, symbolized in the form of a climatic flood, unable to be contained, bursts through a dam of repression, giving power and life to Yvette. The two tiered plotline, in the form of a developmental ladder, signifies a generational continuance as Yvette repeats the conflict faced by her mother. Lawrence's spontaneous prose reflects a state of flux evident within the main protagonists. Vertical shifts occur as Yvette moves from conscious surface level of operating into the dream world of the unconscious. Yvette's sexual awakening promotes a somnambulist state where associative connections thwart a sense of the novella as a linear progression of events. Lawrence's use of a metaphoric ladder signifies Yvette's experience. She ascends to the upper story of the rectory to escape the forces of the literal flood (66). With the flood's subsidence, Yvette descends the ladder to the surface world below (72). Having reached a higher level of development, Yvette does not repeat her mother's experience by running off with the Gypsy and the plot ends ambiguously.

Mythic imagery, carefully integrated into the text of both novellas, intimates an inbuilt allegorical structure. Oates, by parodying Lawrence's imagery seems to be re-visioning, from a feminist perspective, so as to challenge patriarchal dominance. One can never be quite sure, however, of the purpose behind her playfulness in relation to Lawrence.

Like other modernists, Lawrence drew on the myth of Persephone as representative of energies present in nature that has the power to revitalise us. He writes in *A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover"*: "Knowledge has killed the sun, making it a ball of gas, with spot; 'knowledge' has killed the moon... How are we to get back Apollo and Attis, Demeter, Persephone, and the halls of Dis" (331). Lawrence's Yvette is Persephone journeying to the dark underworld of the unconscious id, where oceanic desire for the Plutonic Gypsy regenerates her.

In resurrecting Persephone, a feminist might accuse Lawrence of window-dressing the mind/body duality that subordinates women. One could riposte, however, that Lawrence's

mythic embed is a pre-classical pagan Persephone symbolising rebirth, fertility and purity, from a time when matriarchy supposedly reigned (Louis 32, 45). Margot Louis in her in-depth study, traces the rise of Persephone in modernist literature. She records that in the early 19th century, Margaret Fuller, an American author, feminist and transcendentalist, first shifted the emphasis from Demeter as the ‘Great Mother’ to a “rite of passage” for Persephone (Louis 38). Lawrence re-works this latter version of the myth in his novella. His protagonist Yvette transcends Persephone’s traumatic experience of seduction, remaining potent and powerful having sloughed off old consciousness (the social convention and rigid religiosity of the rectory). She is no longer “lost” but in touch with her body/self. The swarthy wolfish Gypsy woman - who tells Yvette, “to listen to the voice of the water” - epitomises a chthonic “Great Mother” who could eat the Mater for breakfast (18).

In his re-visioning of Persephone Lawrence did not buy into T.S. Elliot’s pessimism, epitomised in *The Wasteland*, with its allusion to Persephone as an alienated psyche trapped in the deathly underworld (Louis, 109). In *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, although Lawrence’s description of the young people’s ascent in their car to the “roof of England” (15) carries powerful imagery of an encroaching industrial wasteland, he depicts two visions of a psychic underworld in accordance with his two depictions of sexual desire: Eros as a deadening influence and Eros as vital and alive. Yvette descends to the wasteland when a proposal by her beau, the doggish Leo Wetherall, leaves her cold (37). She ascends to the upper story of the rectory with the Gypsy, where she attains spiritual heights, becoming alive to both worlds (70).

Oates’ playfully re-envisioned Lawrence in *Black Water*. In the excerpt below she inverts the myth of Pluto (God of the Underworld), by alluding to an earlier myth of Pluto as a feminine entity, that is, Demeter, the pre-classical Earth Goddess, who embodies both earth and underworld (Hayes 8). She writes:

Pluto, God of the Underworld, was originally NOT a man but a woman - daughter of the Earth Mother Rhea, Pluto is but a masculinized goddess! It is believed that with the dawning of the New Age long-suppressed Scorpio powers will be rediscovered and the Scorpion will evolve to a new level - The PHOENIX RESURRECTED (87).

Scorpio is Kelly's star sign: "Scorpio for the month, of July" (13). According to most astrological sources, Scorpio, as a water sign of the zodiac, has three different emblems: the scorpion, the eagle, and the Phoenix, the latter, a beautiful bird and sacred symbol of the sun that dies every night and is reborn in the morning. The Phoenix underwent continual regeneration, burning in flames only to rise again from the ashes. Lawrence's poem *Phoenix* describes this process. He took the Phoenix as his emblem. In the last line of the excerpt above, Oates is alluding to Lawrence, using capital letters to alert us to this connection.

By intermingling the Persephone myth with the image of the Phoenix, Oates signifies she is resurrecting Lawrence, blending his fiery bird image into the Persephone myth, as she cleverly inverts gender roles and subverts traditional outcomes. Kelly is Persephone journeying, not to the God, Pluto, but to her mother in the underworld. The naturalistic imagery conveys this underworld: The Senator "hurrying to get to the ferry" plunges Kelly over the bridge into black water, resembling the Styx, with a Plutonian hell beyond (9).

Kelly's tomb, Oates also describes as Mother Earth/Nature's "dark womb" (80). Oates supplies a rebirth image that fits with the following interpretation made by Schved and Rosenthal: "immersion in water signifies a return to the preformal state, with a sense of death and annihilation on one hand but rebirth and regeneration on the other"(557). Oates' symbolism, revealing a pantheistic thread linking God with nature, signifies death/rebirth/regeneration by constructing an image of a feminised Pluto (also known as Mother Earth) suckling her lost child. She writes:

She would be able to suck at the air bubble above her, irradiated by moonlight. So strangely shaped, luminous it seemed to her, her blinded eyes, bobbing against the seats now suspended from the ceiling but it has stopped leaking away she was certain, she would hold it fast to her sucking lips sucking like an infant's lips until help came to save her (99).

The bubble is a metaphor for Mother Earth's breast, and the moon, a feminine symbol, is a soothing source of life. Kelly becomes Persephone in her watery underworld sucking on her mother's life-giving nipple (Demeter reunited with Persephone). Oates illustrates the egolessness of a form of pantheism, viewed from a cosmic rather than the ego-centred perspective of the individual, thereby ascribing to beliefs, shared by Lawrence, "in humanity's power to re-establish the living organic connections with the cosmos..." (*Apocalypse* 11). Kelly's earthly self is dying, the not-self of the unconscious reunites with the cosmos. Although Oates, by embedding the myth of Persephone's descent into hell implies integration and spiritual resurgence, Kelly does not experience personal transformation, rather it is the reader who is presented with this naturalistic image intimating transcendence.

Both Lawrence and Oates revise myth and fairy tales, retaining the archetypes to upend the dominant order, indicating both narratives are organised by a subversive narrative structure. While a structuralist approach to myth posits a universal truth in the form of what Mikhail Bakhtin termed "monologic" discourse, Oates and Lawrence by playfully subverting and inverting mythic images open up a "dialogic form of discourse" (Alfaro, 269).

Lawrence draws on *Sleeping Beauty* (Yvette's sexual awakening) and *Cinderella* fairy tales to structure his narrative, subverting the traditional ending. Yvette, the archetypal sleeping beauty is saved by the Gypsy (class inversion), goes to sleep (a reversal), and on

awakening to life finds her prince is gone. Lucille, sacrificing her day off by making a blue dress for Yvette, evokes undertones of a fragmented form of *Cinderella* (27).

Oates interweaves a myriad of fairy tales into *Black Water*, challenging gender power dynamics and illuminating the illusory nature of romantic love. Like Lawrence, she plays with fairy tale motifs which are representative of sexual awakening: Cinderella (“SHE WAS THE ONE HE’D CHOSEN” (44); Sleeping Beauty (epitomised by Kelly’s limited insight); and Red Riding Hood (The Senator with his “big teeth” is the wolf synonymous with sexual predator). Oates draws on this latter analogy in relation to both male and female sexuality, with the implication that Eros is hungry and devouring (20, 30, 45, 98, 101, 107, 126, 150). Lawrence considered teeth as “instruments of biting, of resistance, of antagonism,” inferring that such imagery is indicative of disturbances to the vital flow of Eros (*Studies* 75).

Oates is parodying, writing with ironic wit to illuminate the illusory nature of love and the selfishness of an ego driven Eros when she subverts the fairy tale of *Cinderella*. Instead of the handsome Kennedy prince of Camelot rescuing his princess The Senator literally tramples Kelly under his feet in his quest to save himself. The dying Kelly is left holding The Senator’s canvas slipper (65), while her fantasy ‘prince’ flees in fear to rescue his own political career. He limps down the road after escaping from the submerged car which is fast becoming a pumpkin in his political career (144).

Oates melds the fairy tales of *Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose* and *Red Riding Hood*: On the beach The Senator reminisces how his grandmother steeped rosehips to “make rosehip tea” (122). They are surrounded by “wild roses everywhere with sharp thorns and rosehip, like tiny plums... a blood-swollen look to them, an erotic look”(121). The latter sentence mimics Lawrence’s propensity to sexualise fruit. According to Bruno Bettelheim, *Red Riding Hood* is a fairy tale that “deals with the daughter’s unconscious wish to be seduced by her father (the wolf)” (175). Kelly’s ‘affair’ with The Senator is analogous to the ‘special’

relationship she yearned for with her father. Struggling with an unresolved oedipal conflict, and unable to transcend this developmental impasse Kelly is devoured by dark Eros, ending up in a psychotic swamp synonymous with the literal swamp in which she drowns.

Oates use of fairy tales and myths are a means of exploring beneath the surface of the narrative. The embedding of such symbolism she believes is a way of relating “to the soul itself” (*Journal* 63). This implies that the reader should resonate at a deep level with the story. However, why Oates continues to write so often about young women, who have no coherent sense of identity except that of ‘victim,’ and takes them to depths that they are unable to transcend evokes questions about the nature of her vision.

Most of Lawrence’s main characters (both male and female) achieve integration of spirit and body where very few of Oates’ protagonists reach this milestone. In *Black Water*, Kelly’s struggle for identity reveals a duality represented by the limited roles of asexual good girl and sexual bad girl ascribed women under patriarchy. Kelly is unable to integrate the two disparate aspects of herself as signified by her impaired vision - Daddy directed an operation so she’d be perfect, indicating love is conditional on women meeting standards of value under patriarchy (78). Kelly’s idealism and her corresponding blindness to The Senator’s true nature means she kills her authentic self.

Oates draws on a blindness trope in her novella in a similar way to how Lawrence signifies those in the grips of white consciousness have no insight: In *the Virgin and the Gypsy*, the sexually inactive Mater is half blind and half deaf (9, 10). In a counter to blindness Lawrence portrays how psychological insight for Yvette is dependent on a sensual/spiritual connection. Oates’ Kelly cannot see beyond the cracked windscreen; her mind’s eye unconscious to how base desire has been instrumental in her demise (46). With The Senator’s dominant personality determining the outcome of her life, the fairy tale turns to nightmare as Oates subverts images literally: “trapped...she was upside down was she?” (47) “how the

moon (here Oates is borrowing Lawrence's symbol of the moon as representative of women's nature) would shortly topple from the sky turned upside down" (149).

Oates meta-fictive techniques generate multi-layered meaning making it difficult to know if Oates resurrection of Lawrence in her text is a mimetic appropriation, a parodying, a satirical challenging, or an ironic innovation of Lawrence's conceptions - all are intertextual possibilities.

Oates re-imagining of Lawrence reads as a form of imitation but her ironic inversion of his work exemplifies post-modern parody as defined by Linda Hutcheon: "repetition defined at a critical distance that marks difference rather than similarity..." (6). Parody is in Bakhtin's terms a "form of textual dialogism" or, in Hutcheon's terms a "double voiced discourse," dependent on the reader to discern the ironic context Oates produces in her attempts to revision Lawrence's work (Hutcheon xiv, 22). Oates' use of irony - which is inbuilt into parody - and satire often crosses the line into sarcasm and cynicism - all stylised forms of anger.

There is a scene in *Black Water* which suggests a parody of Lawrence, who is feminised as a red-haired Sleeping Beauty wearing gold. To Lawrence red and gold are colours of the sun, of fire, and symbolically associated with his concept of "blood consciousness." He writes in *Apocalypse*: "the sun like a lion, loves the bright red blood of life" (77). References to both colours are sprinkled liberally through all his texts. Many of his male protagonists (often thinly disguised self-portraits) have some element of red/gold colouring their personage. In *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, for example, the Gypsy wears a "big silk handkerchief of red and yellow tied around his neck" (16). Oates writes:

... beautiful woman who lies languorously sprawled as in a bed, long wavy red hair rippling out sensuously about her, perfect skin, heartbreak skin, lovely red mouth and a gown of some sumptuous gold lame material clinging to breasts,

belly, public area subtly defined by shimmering folds in the cloth, and The Lover stands erect and poised above her gazing down upon her his handsome darkish face not fully in focus...the perfume is opium (32).

In the same paragraph as the above quote Oates conjures up Lawrence in her specific use of the word “loins”⁶ (33). It is a word so closely associated with his lexicon that most authors would consciously avoid using it.

The complexity of Oates’ relationship to Lawrence’s work is also apparent when she plays with dualities, that is, the daylight world of appearances and the dark underworld beneath its surface. In his poem *The Evening Land* Lawrence alludes to these separate worlds by referring to the secretive power of native peoples:

*Dark elvish,
Modern, unissued, uncanny America
Your nascent demon people
Lurking among the deeps of your industrial thicket... (Poems 229).*

For Lawrence “white consciousness” is associated with modernisation while native people represent nature and the body. Oates parodies Lawrence’s conception by inverting this light and dark duality in *Black Water*. During Independence Day celebrations The Senator (white skin, dark nature) arrives in a black Toyota and is associated with the coming of white Jesus (72). Oates employs subtle irony, as just prior to The Senator’s arrival, Kelly is thinking about “Lucius, a Trinidadian, and not an American black,” (71) who is also at the party and with whom she “might have become, in time, very good friends” (72). Lucius epitomises a potential true Eros. The name Lucius, means luminous or white according to various sources on histories of naming. In designating him a Trinidadian Oates may possibly be alluding to The Trinity,⁷ this word bearing a close alliterative relationship. It is difficult to know if Oates is parodying Lawrence’s mythologizing of the dark native as possessing of “blood

consciousness”; a consciousness that has been subjugated by the white “mind consciousness” of contemporary life. Is she subverting Lawrence’s emphasis on the native man by introducing a dark outsider not native to America? Is he a Lawrencian avatar, come to America, dark Eros, that is, the phallic gypsy God in Lawrence? It is difficult to say and Oates’ is not telling. Lawrence’s style was to question in his didactic manner, Oates post-modern approach poses riddles for those clever enough to solve them.

Part of the complexity involved in discerning just how Oates re-visions Lawrence arises because she does not fit neatly into a feminist frame.⁸ A sign that Oates had moved on from her antagonism to feminism, apparent in the 1970s, was evident when she challenged Lawrence’s literary images of women in her 1983 essay *At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her*. In this essay she questions his “gospel of salvation by way of erotic love [that although] liberating in theory, may in fact constitute one more confinement...” (*Profane Art* 54). This stance would intimate Oates’ re-visions Lawrence to challenge the limited gender roles she perceives in his narratives.

Diane Bond claims that three of Oates novels,⁹ written during the time she was composing her essay *The Hostile Sun*, were forms of cultural reappraisal exploring Lawrence’s ideas on the nature of the self in contemporary America (169). In her essay *Lawrence’s Gotterdammerung* Oates charges Lawrence with a “total absence of concern for community” (xv) and is not convinced that his realist descriptions of the social community, the settings he described, had any defining influence on the divided nature of the self (Introduction. *Women in Love* xvii). Notwithstanding that Oates herself, according to Mary Grant, displays a “persistent absence of community, of loving, supportive, enduring commitments to others” (22). Oates’s fragile women characters, lacking contact with community, unable to achieve intimacy, mostly fall apart. Oates’ conflict with Lawrence’s work overall seems to centre on whether women, as the inferior other, can achieve self-

transcendence within patriarchy. This argument, implicit in her fiction, would assume Lawrence's novella to be a fable despite that both genders, the Gypsy (an outsider) and Yvette (an insider) achieve transcendence within a hostile environment.

Although Oates seems to offer the reader a feminist perspective, by illustrating the injustice of gender power dynamics through a satiric lens, overwhelmingly her female protagonists are anorexic women, tarnished with a masochistic edge, who rarely achieve transcendence and remain stereotypical caricatures resigned to their fate. In *Black Water* this is typified by Kelly who, overly-concerned with appearance, idealistically searches for self-fulfilment through romantic love. Kelly goes with The Senator, despite knowing at a subconscious level if she doesn't take the opportunity "there won't be any later" (115). While Kelly's comment is meant to suggest that she'll miss out on an important opportunity, Oates also intends the remark to be deeply ironic; Kelly's death means there will never be "any later." Lawrence would call the intimacy of such a relationship 'bad sex' characteristic of damned up sexual energy.

Women protagonists like Kelly, seem punished for their sexual desire in Oates' works, which on the surface seems to contradict her claims of Eros as a road to transcendence. A deeper psychological interpretation, however, could suggest that some of these women undergo both an awakening and redemption. In Oates' acclaimed story - "*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*" - her fifteen year old protagonist, Connie, in a dissociated state, moves towards the psychopathic Arnold Friend, (ostensibly going to her death) but also, looking beyond him towards the "vast sunlit reaches of the land" (48). Connie's story has parallels to Lawrence's Mrs Lederman who sacrifices herself to dark Gods in *The Woman Who Rode Away*. While Oates' narrative is, on one level, part allegory intimating good girls should not do bad things and a satiric portrayal of women's lot under patriarchy, on another level Oates is also inferring that Connie's somnambulistic state is synonymous with sexual

awakening. Connie's movement towards Arnold, is a movement towards her own projected dark side. (When Oates's protagonists women move beyond their victim roles and do display rage and revenge, like Gillian in *Beasts*, they often shift into a sadistic counter role exhibited by her male protagonists). The presence of Arnold signifies a split doppelganger where self is pitted against self. Going with Arnold is a unifying moment that signifies a death of the self, and a transformational re-entry into the great sunlit world of the cosmos. Both Connie and Kelly thus achieve integration in a cosmic sense. On a cultural level, however, the narratives reflect women's hopeless situations under patriarchal rule, that is, Connie trapped in soulless modern America and Mrs Lederman trapped in a deadening marriage may only achieve transcendence beyond the physical world. Oates believes, like Lawrence, that physical death could bring forth redemption, as witnessed in both *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* and *Black Water*.

Kate Millet, in her myopic polemic, labels Lawrence's *The Woman who Rode Away*¹⁰ as sadistic pornography" (292), his sexual doctrine a "combination of political fascism and male supremacy" (277). Oates defends Lawrence in her essay *The Hostile Sun*, justifying Lawrence's treatment of Hermione in *Women in Love*: "...it is wrong, I think, for critics to assume he is venting his sadistic hatred against such women..." (69). She considers instead that he exorcises his demons onto his intellectual women protagonists as a way of gaining clarity, maintaining he expressed such passionate vitriol towards those "people whose ideas were closest to his own" (69). Oates, in defending Lawrence, sides with his depiction of nature as a dark unrelenting force. She stands similarly accused of evoking a dark God of Pan in her narratives.

Unlike Lawrence, however, Oates fails to integrate split doppelgangers through intimate connection with the other. In her Introduction to *Women in Love* Oates critiques the ambivalence that characterises Lawrence's Eros. She writes that he does not seem to know

whether sexual love is a form of ecstasy or a “delusion,” a transcending experience or a delirium; a pathological condition that crazes the lover (xiv). It would seem that Oates for all her exploration is no clearer in this regard. Instead of being able to emotional connect with one another her protagonists get caught up in a series of melodramatic events as is evident in such works as *Black Water*, *Beasts*, *Where Are You Going*, *Where Have You Been*.

It is difficult to evidence Joanne Creighton’s claim that “The Lawrenceian baptism of fire in passion, the coming to fuller selfhood by losing control of the conscious self is a common Oatesian theme” (*Novels of the Middle Years* 20). Rather, Lawrence’s concept of white/mental consciousness, is evident in her works. Kelly, in *Black Water*, is driven by what Lawrence would consider a compulsive ‘will’ based need, indicative of a divided self rather than by true desire for intimacy. There is none of the turbulent ambivalent emotions - signalling a move towards integration - that characterise Lawrence’s Eros when he writes of Yvette’s divided experience thus: “Man and woman are made up of many selves. With one self, she loved this gipsy man. With many selves, she ignored him or had a distaste for him” (62).

Lawrence’s ambiguity, the open-ended nature of his writing, and what Amit Chaudhuri refers to as the unfinished nature of his poems mark him as a fluid writer who is “able to transcend a static position and undermine his position as Barthes’ author God” (11). For Lawrence true art involved the “double rhythm of creating and destroying” (*Studies* 66).

More often than not Joyce Carol Oates exhibits a lust of the mind that seeks to destroy. In her Gothic melodramas, caricatured protagonists with little hope of redemption, fail to evoke wider imagining, perhaps signifying a sterile nature to the writing and limited vision. One even begins to question the author’s moral turpitude in a work like *My Sister, My Love* - a five hundred page thinly disguised portrait of family dynamics and events

surrounding the murder of child star JoBenet Ramsey. Rather than causing the reader to reappraise the dominant culture one becomes mired in a violent world.

Supplying transcendental imagery drawn from Lawrence's cosmic vision signifies a form of liberation for her women, but it also reveals authorial limitations. For all Oates' claims of a spiritual shift as a result of her visionary experience in the 1970s this vision does not seem to have translated into her writing. In Elaine Showalter's Introduction to Oates' *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been* she quotes Oates' metaphoric description of her stories as "tributaries that flow into a single river" (3). This river does not reach the sea. Oates' stories consistently fail to leave this reader filled with oceanic feeling; a response usually evoked by writers whose vision resonates at a deep level within the psyche.

Notes

¹ Lawrence writes in *Apocalypse*: “the true symbol defies all explanation, so does the true myth,” implying that meanings cannot be reduced to simple interpretation as per psychoanalytic method (142). Oates shares Lawrence’s anathema to psychoanalysis, evident in entries in her published *Journal of Joyce Carol Oates* (201, 267); her essay *The Hostile Sun: the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence* (9); and in *New Heaven, New Earth* (72).

² Lawrence states in *Apocalypse*: “modern philosophers may call it Libido or Elan Vital, but the words are thin, they carry none of the wild suggestion of the dragon” (124).

³ *Candid Revelations on the Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence, The Hostile Sun: the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence, and Lawrence’s Gotterdammerung: the Apocalyptic Vision of Women in Love, 1978*. In her *Journal* Oates claims that this latter work, which also appeared as an Introduction to the 1993 publication of Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, took her ten years to complete, indicating her depth of involvement over time with his work (175).

⁴ Leo Hamalian 1990; Keith Cushman and Dennis Jackson 1991; and Jeffrey Meyers 1987.

⁵ *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates*.

⁶ Oates adopts Lawrencian terms in her everyday language as is evident in her *Journal*. She uses the word “tenderness” (15, 40, 51, 98, 139, 387, 476) from Lawrence’s lexicon. And, after finishing a novel: “Thank God! Thank God! To have *come through*...” (303).

⁷ In his essay *The Therapeutic as Mythmaker*, Philip Rieff discusses Lawrence’s interest in the figure of the Holy Ghost. As the third part of the Trinity in Christian religion, this figure was associated with the three parts of love (56). Oates, by referring to the Trinidadian, is playfully parodying Lawrence.

⁸ Entries in Oates’ *Journal*: “my disinterest in what people speak of as ‘women’s problems,’ ‘women’s literature...’” (168). “Where once I was sensitive with ‘feminism’ I find it all very tiresome now” (187). “Pathetic and pointless basic feminist concerns” (141). Between 1985-1990 Oates association with prominent feminists Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar may have been influential in changing her viewpoint (Johnson 346).

⁹ *Them, Wonderland and Do With Me What You Will*.

¹⁰ Oates’ *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) is a re-visioning of Lawrence’s *The Woman Who Rode Away*. The male protagonist considers becoming a sacrificial victim of Aztec ritual.

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SECTION 2

Cold River - A novella

I

The evening sky is aflame; a burnt, orange sunset, illuminating fine cobwebs that cling like a second skin to latticed window panes. Backlit, the cobweb threads resemble a topographical map of mountainous terrain with its ridges and rivers. Light, blazing through the window, streams into the interior of the garage. Dust particles, from where I've just swept the floor, are forming a hazy cloud in front of my face. I am cleaning out the garage, throwing out clutter Joey has accumulated over his lifetime. The library of empty tin cans and plastic bottles he's stored and forgotten about have been a turning point in deciding to get rid of 'treasures' that have no purpose. Things he's bought second hand in the first place, witnessed by the sewing machine-in-waiting to become an antique. Sorting a little bit each evening, I have taken most of his stuff to the rubbish tip. It is quite a ritual: I load up the trailer, hitch it to the car, get Joey out of his wheelchair into the front seat, positioning his cushions so he is comfortable. He enjoys car rides and we sail off, with him blissfully oblivious that it is his stuff I am firing into the concrete pit at the tip with such gusto.

I wave to my neighbour, Enid, out in her garden, as we drive by. She knows what is happening as we talk about it over the fence. She's had a tough time of it too, with *her* husband George, who has been in and out of hospital after having his leg off.

"His Highness is in 'The Groves' Rest home now, so he's not worried about earthly things. All this useless stuff he's left behind; I'm selling it on 'Trademe.' You don't want his bread slicer do you, still wrapped in the cellophane?"

"I'll swap you for Joey's parsley cutter, also never used."

“Gawd no, you win that one.”

After his pile reduces somewhat, I begin to come across things that are mine; things that have been obscured by his stuff. As I work, different shapes and forms loom in front of me and all the while I am aware of this orange light, out of the corner of my eye.

You know how it is, rummaging through remnants - you waver over letting go of some memento and decide to keep it for another day. Like the small, steel-handled spade I had used to dig holes when I was a kid. Behind it I find my picture of a winged fairy princess beneath a woodland tree, a prince bowing before her. It had hung on the wall adjacent to my bed when I was a teenager. Wiping dust off the glass with the back of my brown, leathery hand reveals an iridescent, silvery moon illuminating other fairy folk in the forest. All seems peaceful. I turn and flick on the fluorescent light switch. As the tubes hum and crackle into artificial light, it finally dawns that the orange haze, hovering in my peripheral vision, isn't coming from fiery light outside. Hanging suspended from a nail on a crossbeam are two small orange life jackets, reminders of a faraway time when I was a child, part of a family. When I had a sister who journeyed with me, coursing through the high country, riding the rapids on the back of Cold River.

Forty odd years ago my sister Felicia and I, puffin birds in our lifejackets, squashed in the front seat of the jet boat between Dad and Uncle Vern. Heading up the river, with our noses in the air, sniffing the warm nor'wester going the other way. Lighting out for Dad's hut, hidden amongst native bush on the north side of the river, an hour and a half upstream from Mother - I see her now as a cancerous growth infecting my life. Not that I knew then what a cancerous growth was. I just wanted to be the one who was looked after. I had fantasies about what would happen, but being the sick one was always Mother's role. She was a flamingo, hovering around the house in her pink, candlewick dressing gown.

A long, white ponytail of water sprayed out from the jet unit at the stern of the boat. We'd been sitting long enough for the drone of the engine to make us drowsy. When Dad, in the driver's seat, stood up it was a signal for us to hang on to the hand-rail on the dash-board. He would lean down and say "rapids." The ride would get bumpy with a series of jolts as the v-hull slammed down hard on choppy water. Soon enough we'd be past it, smoothly carving through deeper waters. Dad would sit down again and block the draught sweeping onto us.

The rock pinnacles signalled an S bend, and that we were nearing the hut and safety. It was here that the river looped to the west. Cliffs ended and the water became shallower as we emerged into a wide and stony riverbed. Looking above the treeline, the scrubby mountain top had been gouged out, as if a giant had been munching cake. Dad revved up the engine so the jet-boat rose higher in the water, cutting across the fast flow of a current threatening to force us against the sheer rock face of an adjacent cliff. The power of the jet easily won, propelling us over a shallow shingle bar and into a backwater. Dad cut the engine and we silently skimmed across the surface of a deep, turquoise, salmon pool. 'The Falcon' - for that was the name Dad had painted in neat letters on the side of the hull - nudged its nose onto sand, that edged the water, as white as a soft poached egg. The cliff back drop rose so steeply, I couldn't see the top from where I sat in the boat. Waterfalls cascaded over its rock face, watering ferns protruding from cracks.

Dad clambered out first, over the top of the windscreen. Uncle Vern started dumping our gear onto the forepeak of the boat for Dad to transfer onto the sand. Felicia and I undid our lifejackets and scrambled over the top too.

Now came the hard part, carrying cardboard boxes of food and sleeping gear along a well-worn path up to the hut. I hummed tunelessly as I walked. The ever-present sound of the river drowned out my voice. The sand gave way to caked mud that squelched over the sides of my sandals. As we passed a warm shallow pool, I dropped my box and waded in to wash

the mud off. Little fish darted out from under slimy stones. Picking up my load again, I stepped from stone to stone. A tall, kanuka tree loomed at the halfway point. Here Felicia and I sat and munched on ham sandwiches I'd made early that morning, before we'd left home. We knew, if we took our time, that Dad and Uncle Vern, up ahead, would have unlocked the hut door and be in the process of lighting the coal range to draw the chill and dampness out of the air.

We set off again, and, just when my arms were starting to ache - from the heavy cardboard box filled with bread, butter and milk - the path turned into the bush. The trail was clothed in a soft swathe of beech leaves. I stopped to rest momentarily under the green canopy before the short, steep climb to the hut. We crossed the shallow creek which served us as a fridge and water supply. There I laid two milk bottles on their sides in the cold water. In the creek Dad had half buried a copper from Mother's old washhouse. Water trickled into it constantly, keeping it full. He'd connected a Polythene pipe to the copper and run it across to the hut to provide water 'on tap' to the sink. He wanted all the mod cons. It was illegal to build up here, Dad said, but hardly anyone came this far up the river, so who was to know? Felicia and I crossed the creek and dumped our boxes on the porch. Inside, the kettle on the black coal range was near bubbling. Dad was setting out cups on the table in preparation for tea.

After our cup of tea, Felicia and I wandered back down to the pool. Felicia brought a plastic bucket and spade but I took my steel spade that Uncle Vern had given me for Christmas. As we dug, the sand flew out behind us. Dad's dog, Wally, ran around being a nuisance, caving in the sides of our hole until we chased him away. We crisscrossed the hole with thick vine stems that we cut from the bush with an old fishing knife and overlaid these with flax fronds that grew along the edge of the path. As a finishing touch we sprinkled a thin layer of sand across the flax and then waited.

Not too long afterwards Dad came wandering down to try out his new fishing rod. The foot of one of his brown bow legs side-swiped the hole and he was caught off balance. He put his hands on the ground to right himself.

“We got you, Dad,” Felicia and I shouted, laughing and laughing.

“Bloody kids. You want to watch out, someone could break a leg in that trap.”

We reset the trap while Dad was busy flinging his fly into the water and reeling it in. He had promised a salmon or a trout for dinner. Uncle Vern trudged by with his trousers rolled up, revealing white hairless legs. His foot missed the trap by about half a yard.

“Aww, Uncle Vern,” we shouted.

Dad looked up.

“You kids stop fooling around. Help Uncle Vern take some gear up to the hut.”

Dad was smiling though, and shaking his head, like he was surprised that two skinny girls had been smart enough to catch their wily old Dad. He certainly was wily, and he was definitely old, being in his fifties.

I know, looking back now, that it was because of the war that he'd had us late in life. Mother had waited a long time for him to come home. Perhaps it made her bitter, but maybe she'd always been that way. Dad used to say she looked like Ava Gardner. It was a lesson that taught me to dig beyond surface appearances.

Back at our house I was always digging holes for myself. I'd find things in the earth, pieces of porcelain, old bits of glass, small bones, traces of other lives from another time. With my new sharp-edged spade I'd begun serious digging out in the paddock, down through rainbow layers of soil. Sometimes I'd look up and catch the white blotch of Mother's face peering from the kitchen window. It was as if I was looking through the wrong end of binoculars; she seemed such a distance away, but I could still feel her gaze boring into me. I'd soon forget about her though, so intent was I on carrying out a design for an elaborate

underground hut. I'd already dug the outline of two rooms with a hallway down the middle; a bedroom for Felicia and one for me. They were coffin-sized and only shallow as I hadn't managed to get down far into the earth. Then Dad ran over the whole thing out in the paddock and got the tractor stuck in the middle of my clay hallway. It had been raining and the water was sitting in the channels I had dug. I had plans to get Felicia to help me drag the side of a rotting horse float over the top of the diggings for a roof, but because Dad had made such a mess of it I figured it wasn't going to work.

Dad wasn't too happy with me, either. Having Mother mad at me was a fact of life, but having them both mad at me at once was drama I could do without. I might as well tell you about what happened with the horse float carcass, as it will give you an idea of what I was up against.

The flat deck of the horse float remains lay on its side, leaning up against an old man pine tree. The pine had been recently hit by lightning; one thick branch had split off and was lying on the ground dying, with resin bleeding from its wound. I was standing at the base of the tree trunk, behind the horse float, using it as a shield. Felicia was in front, belting me with pine cones she had collected in a hidden reserve, pelting me with words as she threw each cone.

“Come out cowardly, come out.”

“Give me pax.”

“Come out custard.”

“I'll do the dishes.”

“Give me the Bible Grandma gave you.”

“No!”

As I squeezed from behind the shelter the horse float fell outwards towards Felicia.

“Run, Felicia, run!”

She almost made it but it fell across her skinny leg and cracked the bone.

Mother held her silence for days but the curl of her lip said what she felt. And Dad? His was the grave voice that told me I was lucky Felicia hadn't been permanently crippled. I crept away up the hill and sat in the bush, listening to the voice of the trickling creek saying it was a stupid place for him to put the horse float remains in the first place.

The voice of water could easily drown out Mother; that's why I loved going up the river in those early days. Those good times weren't to last; like my earth rainbow, you can't have just one shade of feeling without the other hues coming in and muddying everything. Our orange life jackets did nothing to save me from what happened at the hut during the five days of the flood. For years it remained a dark hole in my memory.

Up at the hut, the rain had started falling in late afternoon on the second day and by early evening we couldn't hear ourselves speak over the din on the corrugated iron roof. The coal range was roaring. Dad was busy stacking the wood he'd chopped earlier in the day, against the wall by the stove. Felicia and I were sitting on wooden stools at the formica, fold-down table Dad had affixed to the wall, just below the cobwebby picture window that gave us a view of the river. I made toast by laying slices of bread on a cake rack lying on top of the coal range. Felicia buttered the toast, divvying it up onto four plates set out on the table. Uncle Vern was frying sausages which were spitting in a pan atop a primus, on the far side of the table. When they were cooked he poured the leftover fat into a clean Watties fruit tin and emptied a couple of cans of baked beans into the greasy pan. We downed our dinner gazing out onto the river. Dad and Uncle Vern had trimmed and topped some of the beech trees a while back, with a mind to camouflaging the hut but maintaining a clear view of the river.

After dinner Dad made us all cups of coffee with sweetened condensed milk which we sipped slowly, savouring every sugary mouthful.

"Old Huey's sending it down," Dad said.

“We might have to go down and haul the Jet up, that river isn’t looking too bloody good, it’s rising fast,” Uncle Vern said.

“Might have to. Good thing we thought to put that wire rope across, eh.”

“Yeah, a good idea that,” Uncle Vern said.

“Might be an all-nighter.”

During the time we had been at the hut the river had turned from turquoise to green tea. Like a chameleon, it had changed again to now match the brown, milky coffee we were drinking. Uncle Vern was right, the water was rising fast.

Dad told us to put the dishes outside the door in a preserving pan, and to keep stoking the coal range with the wood he’d chopped. He and Uncle Vern put on their heavy oiled parkas. Dad had his woolly balaclava pulled down so there was just a slit for his birdy, blue eyes. Outside, the wind was whipping the trees, and slanting the heavy rain so it slashed against the window. Felicia and I ripped open the packet of chocolate Dad dug out of his pack, adding it to the pack of cards and crib board he’d put on the table. A cold blast hit us when Dad and Uncle Vern opened the door, but with the stove stoked and roaring our faces were flushed. We cleared the dishes as Dad said to do and afterward we sat at the table beneath the hissing kerosene lamp. Leaning forward on our perches, the cards forgotten, we pressed our noses to the window peering at the river through the curtain of water coursing down the glass. Water poured from every corner of the roof, the spouting overflowed, but the river was something else. We couldn’t take our eyes off it. It was brown and broiling, rising, rolling and roaring and then, as the last light faded, the window became a black mirror that reflected only our childish faces.

A few spots of rain, hitting the corrugated iron roof of the garage, contributes to my sense of *déjà vu*. I shake my head to clear it of the childhood reveries breaking into my

present, neither place being where I want to be. I throw the orange life jackets on the rubbish pile and head out to the washing line. Unpegging the clothes, I toss them into a wicker basket. Joey had done the washing this morning and I'd been grateful. It had taken him until lunch time after which he'd manoeuvred himself into his electronically operated lift chair to sleep through the afternoon.

It had taken me over a month to knit the eggshell blue jumper with its fine cable pattern wrought in four ply wool. It is now scarcely recognisable, staked out on the line exposed to the elements, tortured beyond recognition, the wool thick and matted, shrunken to a size that would fit a baby. That's what happens to delicate fabrics when they get chucked indiscriminately into the washing machine. Joey didn't know to separate out the whites from the coloureds either and had put the lot in together. No-one would want the jumper now. My three babies are grown, overseas, and living their own lives. They ring occasionally, a catharsis of concerns. In London, Jane is divorcing Sean, solving the problem of his always walking out in the middle of an argument. Emily is opening up a tailor's shop in New York and has little time to ring. And Andy? He is still on the West Coast, loving the rain and the bottle he hasn't weaned himself off. I keep reminding myself that being a good mother means keeping pain bridled when their comments on my life embed like shrapnel. It is my friend Alice who says family is just another word for stranger.

As I look across the valley, a swift river of cloud broils down the adjacent ridge line. Soon the houses across on the western slope are lost from view. Sweeping lower, the cloud transforms into thick fog, wiping out the remaining light so that everything beneath becomes shape-shifting shadow.

I unpeg the last of the washing and easily lift the clothes basket. Still strong, muscular, built for movement, I am more suited to working outside than indoors. My sister Felicia said once that my face was too open for lies. My inability to tell just little white lies upsets people

who don't want truth dished up like a rare steak, they want a fancy sauce on it. That is the difference between me and Felicia, who lies with impunity. No, not really suited to anything other than living alone. Except I'm not. Joey and I living a damp squib of a life.

Inside, I place the clothes' basket on a stool in the washhouse for ease of transfer into the airing cupboard. The telephone rings in the hall. *Somebody wanting something?*

"Hello, Grace?"

"Yes."

"Jean Rankle here Grace. How are you feeling?"

"Not much."

"I've got the results of your tests back. They're not showing up anything but I'm sending you to an ear, nose and throat specialist. You'll get an appointment in the mail."

"You're working late."

"I check test results this time of night."

"I haven't been sleeping; travelling at high speed. That lump is like a boiled egg on my neck. I'm gobbling Panadol."

"Well, if it gets worse come and see me immediately."

"Do you think it could be cancer?"

"I'm not ruling it out."

It is early the next morning. I begin water-blasting the weatherboards on the outside of the house, cleaning off the fungus and algae that has been spreading since the winter months. The force of the water doesn't break the cobwebs so I turn the machine on full blast but that strips some of the paint off as well. The house needs a new coat of paint, like me, the last few years having been particularly weathering.

It isn't just Joey being ill. There's been a tornado of other things: the flood washing half the hillside down upon the garage last May, and Deidre - a friend of years - turning into a gargoyle. The list goes on. I am attracting bad energy. I've even gone so far as to get special crystal salts to sprinkle on the ground around the house as a method of keeping evil spirits at bay, that's how persecuted I am feeling.

This latest by-blow feels like a phantom figure is beating me up physically; I have a lump on my neck to prove it. Felicia calls it "a bad patch." Word for word, over the phone: "it's just a bad patch." Then without drawing breath she begins launching into *her* latest woes. Last time she called, I just dropped my cell phone down the toilet. I hated it anyway.

Just thinking about her is dangerous. The large wooden crate I've upended and am standing on to water blast under the eaves of the house is wobbling. I jump down from it and turn off the water blaster, to sit bedraggled on the box for a minute.

Felicia has a hard veneer which makes it full on trying to connect with her. She is like that all the time, that's how it's always been. She is the only one who knows what really happened in the dark well of those early years and she doesn't know it all. Like what happened the night of the flood.

Joey doesn't know about those times, he'll never know. When he lost his mind it changed everything. Vibrant, that's how Joey was. He'd acted the part of a Roman soldier once down at the Playfair Theatre, towering over everyone. He looked the part too, but the sword in his hand was just for show, he wasn't a fighting man, more a philosopher. There is no seeing now in his milky blue eyes. The memory of him is gnawing a hole. I can't keep still.

Alice rings in the middle of when I'm water-blasting the outside steps. Her ninety-eight year old mother keeps her up at night. I know what it feels like. It's why we sometimes

skip breakfast. Alice starts crying, telling me that she's just heard on the news that the oldest woman in New Zealand has died.

"She was one hundred and nine for God's sake. Mum's really excited, she's composing a letter to the Queen saying she's going to be a hundred soon."

"Well, the Queen should know about these things. Her mother was a hundred and one when she finally died," I say. Alice keeps crying.

"If your Mum went to Rest Haven Castle she'd have a retinue of servants like the Queen Mother."

"I don't love my mother. That went out the window when God was a girl, but I do have compassion for her," Alice sobs.

"Shall I book us a Pacific cruise in July?"

"Absolutely, the Royal Suite please."

Alice and I go back a long way, twenty five years, so we have other things in common aside from the fact that we are confined to home looking after sick bodies. 'Home body,' that's what Alice puts down for her occupation on those forms that want your demographic information. You have to *be* somebody to fill out those forms.

I put the water blaster away in the back shed and head upstairs to the kitchen. I turn on the stove to heat up the vegetable soup I made yesterday by boiling bacon bones for the stock. Joey manoeuvres the controls on his chair to sit upright. He doesn't like the soup much; he is spilling it down his shirt front. "Getting better," said the GP last week, "his blood test shows everything is functioning well." I haven't liked his GP ever since she commented that the surgeon who botched Joey's nephrectomy operation was a "very busy man."

It's a few years now since Joey first got sick. It was sudden and dramatic. There had been a meeting at the over 60s club in the Savoy building. Joey was going through the door, engaged in conversation, when he missed his step falling headlong down two flights of stairs.

On reaching the landing of the first flight, he did a bank shot off the wall, and plunged down the second flight coming to a stop on the slate tiles at the bottom. I drove him down to see Ali, his GP, the next day as he was feeling off colour. She sent him straight down to the hospital for a CT scan to assess residual damage. It was a relatively short wait (in hospital time) before we were ushered into a small room where four medical staff were assembled. Mr Robbins, the consultant, a warm-mannered man with a white beard, led the charge.

“Mr Leishman, the scan showed up a large tumour in your brain; a meningioma we think. We will need to operate as early as next week - Monday, in fact.”

My Joey was something else in that session. He dispassionately asked questions, right up until the operation. Joey always describes himself as an ‘army brat,’ which means he has grown up all over the world. His military mind set contrasts with the florid expression typical of my family’s functioning. I say family, but I really mean Felicia now, as Mother’s illness fatally consumed her when I was eighteen - and Felicia sixteen. Dad contracted prostate cancer and died protractedly over the five years following Mother’s death. According to Felicia that made us bona fide orphans. I often think that if Joey had some of my family’s traits and Felicia had some of Joey’s it might make for more balance. I don’t think I’m exactly balanced though. I don’t talk much. I lost my voice for a long time - a legacy left by the flood.

When people talk a lot I tend to tune out the words, like turning down the television volume and watching the picture. It gives the impression that I’m a bit detached from the world, but usually I’m right there, alert to what’s *really* going on with myself and others. It helped me cope with people’s intrusions when Joey got sick. But it didn’t stop with the meningioma. They got most of it out and he eventually went back to work but then he had another fall in the summer, just as he was preparing his teaching for the academic year. He called me from his office.

“I just tripped over a concrete lip in the garage downstairs. I’m O.K., but can you come and get me?” Joey’s office is upstairs and usually filled with students but this time of year it wasn’t. Joey was sitting at his desk with his back to me. I went from mid-sentence to stunned silence when he swivelled around to face me, one eye looking like a white egg in a nest of blood. There was a large cut slashing through his eyebrow. He lost consciousness soon after we reached the hospital. The emergency operation was performed about an hour later.

The nurses let me stay in intensive care one night when they thought Joey might not make it, setting me up with a bed in a curtained off alcove. I couldn’t sleep, though, because I kept thinking I had left the heater on in the kitchen at home and imagining that the whole house might be in danger of catching fire. I stayed frozen in my designated place in the dark among the packing boxes, staring at the slit of light coming through the curtains and listening to the interminable sounds of the beeps and alarms.

When driving home the next day I went through a red light because I was looking at tree branches lying on the ground in the park, an aftermath of a storm during the night. The wind had died down and people were out cleaning up the mess. I had to park out on the street and walk up our driveway, as a huge silver dollar gum that our neighbour, George, had planted years ago on the boundary had blown over. The top part of the tree lay across our driveway. I walked down the thick smooth trunk to the base where its gnarled roots stuck up in the air like some petrified Medusa.

Back at the house I made a cup of tea, fed the cats and grabbed the chainsaw. The driveway didn’t take long to clear. I threw the branches over the bank where the rest of the tree lay. The crushed and bruised remains of a rhododendron could be seen under the trunk. Everything else seemed unchanged. The goats were out in the paddock with their heads through the fence trying to nip the centres out of the cabbage trees I had planted too close to the boundary. When they saw me they started bleating. I gave them a few handfuls of sheep

nuts, checked the electric fence unit up the hill was still going and cleaned out the water trough. I went back inside, made another cup of tea and was looking through my book of Hieronymus Bosch paintings when Felicia rang.

“How’s Joey?”

“He pulled through,” I said.

“Oh my God, he’s amazing, like a cat with nine lives.”

“Yep.”

“You don’t sound very excited. What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“I’m feeling a bit liverish.”

A consultant caught up with me some time after Joey’s discharge from intensive care.

“You realise, of course, it’s a miracle that he’s alive.”

“It’s a miracle we are all alive,” I said.

My world has grown smaller since then. I’ve had to quit my job at the library. Clawing back some semblance of our old life continues to elude. Our house, hidden from the street by a grove of native trees, wraps itself around the hillside in spiral fashion; a modern version of the tree house in Swiss Family Robinson. The friends that used to stream up the long driveway have slowed to a trickle; a one-way flow up a steep slope does not parallel the easy two way relationship they once had with Joey.

Joey looks strange; the right side of his head is a concave hollow from the subdural haematoma operation. He has lost hair from recent radiotherapy so there is a band of baldness around his head like he is wearing a skin sweatband. His eyes aren’t aligned; one eye stares straight at you and the other one stares into outer space. He walks with a cane and he wobbles sometimes as if he is going to fall over. When I take him out I get these benign smiles from

strangers. Potential 'do goods,' I think. I don't want whitewashed sentiment, 'dressed tripe' that Mother served up regularly with white sauce. Not you, standing on the bank looking down at me in my mud hole. It just seems that 'do goods' are not very aware of what's *really going on* with me which doesn't make for a good connection. Alice says that I have to learn to take things that are given generously. I take that from Alice because she's saying it for both of us.

When Joey was diagnosed with another cancer site - this time in his right kidney - a numbness started growing in me. An hour after the nephrectomy operation he haemorrhaged and then septicaemia set in. I know all the medical terms now. He spent forty-seven days in intensive care where he had another six operations. All that blood loss weakened his heart. During the last operation they finally found the site of bleeding. It was where they'd cut through the pancreatic artery in the initial operation.

I literally limped through this period. The day after the nephrectomy operation I went down to get some farm supplies and was wheeling the cart up to the counter when the twenty kilogram salt block, I had hurriedly balanced on top of two bags of grain, toppled onto my foot. Halfway home my toe was throbbing and wouldn't stop. At the Urgent Doctors they injected it in several places so I could drive the rest of the way home. With five bones broken the toe resembled a purple sausage. I wore a moon boot for six weeks, roughly the amount of time Joey was in intensive care. He was not of a mind to notice.

Replacing the numbness which had set in after Joey's botched nephrectomy came a taste like dark, bitter chocolate. It first arose when I began reading the pile of flowery cards full of sympathy; the elaborate calligraphy a puzzle to be deciphered - paper rustlers stealing my time. My pen made no neat marks on the white space in response. When are you coming to visit? I would like you to make me a cup of tea, and not ask me any questions. Tell me jokes that make me piss my pants, or sit with me in silence. Few people can do that.

It was when Joey was in rehabilitation after ICU that Felicia rang and said she was flying over from Sydney. Thinking she could be of some practical help, I drove twenty kilometres out of the city on a wet and windy night to pick her up from the airport. The plane was delayed, highlighting for me that waiting around for Felicia was a familiar feeling. Felicia was like the Queen, there was always a build-up to her arrival. Or non-arrival. She hadn't arrived when I married Jim, my first husband. When I married Joey, ten years ago, she wasn't coming, and then she was, and then she wasn't, but at the last minute she'd managed to get a flight and would we pick her up at two o'clock from the airport?

“Actually Felicia we are getting married at three o'clock.”

Somebody picked her up. I've forgotten who.

I was wondering if Felicia was on the plane when I heard familiar tones. Her haughty voice, contaminated with a *strine* accent, had a shrill note, signalling she'd recently been affronted by someone or other. That, too, was familiar. She was talking with a tall Lord Byron type, who was proving more athletic than she was, as she sailed in his wake down the corridor towards me, her red hair flying over a vintage fur coat. Her legs were encased in fish net stockings. She resembled an agitated red shaver hen about to dump a large egg in an empty nest. The egg would be fragile, freckled or a double yolker. Trust me; it wouldn't be a normal egg.

You can tell we are sisters but I'm ash blonde, blue eyed and smaller boned, like Dad, a quiet bantam rather than a showy shaver. Felicia waved furiously when she saw me. Lord Byron glanced briefly in my direction, mouthed some comment to her before he charged the opposite way, and melted into the crowd, heading for the escalator.

“God, I hate flying. Bloody Christchurch. You’ll never guess what happened,” Felicia said, the moment she reached me.

“Let’s head for your baggage while you tell me.”

We were passing by the figure of a giant moa in a display case. She pointed to the egg at its feet.

“You know that moa egg is the same size as an ostrich egg. My eggs are selling like crazy at the market. I’ve brought you a decorated one for your birthday. It’s in my bag here. Lucky it’s still in one piece. That guy I was with on the plane is really into Jungian thought. Dishy, eh. I told him you were a Freudian. My stomach’s in knots, after what happened in Christchurch.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t have much time to get to the plane, so I was running but these people were dawdling their way through the line-up at customs, so I just said: ‘Make way, I’m coming through.’ They did make way, but then these two security dolts flew in. Big bloated weasels, one each side of me. Grabbed me under the shoulder. I can still feel the pressure of their fingers. I bet there are huge bruises.”

Felicia paints a picture for effect. It’s difficult to discern the real story. I was visualising the guards attaching themselves to each side of her like dark winged angels, air-lifting her between them. Subsequently manhandled and frisked, she now had such ruffled feathers that it was going to take some time for her to settle - probably the rest of the visit.

Sometimes it made people sorry that she was the victim of such indignities. Can’t you see? They’d say to me, she’s just a sad, troubled woman who needs kind understanding. I’d tried that for years. It was another trap. I take Felicia’s crap because we both know we didn’t get much emotional food in our family, just lots of grit. When her anxiety level was high she

said whatever went through her mind, as if her mouth was the steam releasing valve on a pressure cooker.

“This meat’s an awful colour. I like a rich brown stew,” she said as she lifted the lid on my slow cooker. We were in my kitchen and she was drinking tea, with a dash of lemon, out of a large white mug with ‘Behaviour Counts’ stamped around the middle. Joey had picked it up at one of the psychology conferences he once regularly attended.

“Well, I could add some soy sauce to it. What do you suggest?”

“I’m not really hungry, eaten too much on the plane. Travelling always upsets my stomach.”

Trying to connect with Felicia was hard work. I didn’t offer her anything stronger to drink than tea. She’d caught Hepatitis C many years ago from a dirty needle a junkie boyfriend had used. Her liver was delicate, possibly the only thing about her that was.

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?”

“What?”

“The egg I brought you for your birthday.”

She had put a package on the bench where it had sat unnoticed by me. It took some time to unwrap as there were two boxes, one inside the other, a way of cushioning the egg from jolting movements. Pretty, pearly beads were inserted in the holes at either end. Painted rivers of green ran across the surface of the egg. We hung it from the chandelier above my bed.

It was early morning and the birds were not up yet, nor was Felicia. I was sitting on the step at the top level of the mezzanine floor drinking coffee laced with condensed milk, like they do in places where there are no fridges, and watching the goldfish swimming in the tank Joey gave me years ago. The big orange one was continuously opening and closing its

mouth as though struggling for oxygen. Its white gold companion was also in trouble. The black, bug-eyed fish I'd just introduced had turned cannibal, darting up and nibbling its tail. I padded in bare feet across the wood floor of the lounge like an assassin. I took down the net from its hook, retraced my steps to the aquarium and scooped out the black fish. Alice rang just after I'd flushed the toilet, to wish me a Happy Birthday. She told me that goldfish survive in the sewer; she doesn't think me a murderess.

Felicia came downstairs late, her fiery hair lying across her bath robe. Flinging open the French doors from the lounge she went out onto the deck and sat in a weathered patio chair. From her robe pocket she produced a packet of tobacco. It's always a ritual rolling a cigarette: inserting a filter in one end, and taking a match, to poke in stray tobacco fibres hanging out the other end. This done, Felicia lit up, tossing the match over the balcony. I imagined it smouldering somewhere below among the dry tussock. Loose, brooding, borderline.

"You want some pancakes?"

"Not really hungry. What else is there?"

"A chocolate frog, stale shortbread, Vogels and Marmite?"

"Do you go out much? Where's a good place to eat uptown?" Felicia flicked her hand in the air as if to wave away an annoying fly. "My stomach is so cramped. Having to change planes and wait around. Christchurch airport was just dreadful." She leaned forward, lifting up one shoulder wing. Her mouth compressed into a grimace and her eyes closed briefly. "My shoulder hurts. It started in the middle of the night and it's getting worse. Don't you have any Panadol?"

"Downstairs in the bathroom."

In the afternoon Felicia emerged more rested, with resurgent energy, and she proposed that we celebrate my birthday by dining out. She rang an old school friend living locally, whom she hadn't seen for about ten years, and invited her as well. There was an All Black game on at the stadium and every restaurant seemed booked out. She was still on the phone trying to arrange reservations when she started complaining again about the twinge in her right shoulder. It must have started spreading waves of pain down her arm. You could tell she was suffering by the way she was contorting her facial muscles; it was like she was experiencing a charge from an electric fence unit. I knew when each spasm happened because her lips compressed and her eyes closed momentarily. She finally made a booking at a little place by the sea, but by that time she'd had enough. It was all too much trouble and she wasn't feeling so well so the plans for the evening went out with the tide.

Later that night Felicia's pain spread into her right hand which curled itself into a fist. By ten o'clock it was so bad I had to take her in to Accident and Emergency. I left her there. Felicia requires a well of understanding to know what is really going on with her but I had nothing left over.

The lights from the taxi flashed across my bedroom window around three a.m. I heard the back door slam and her foot-falls, heavy down the hall, coming towards my door. There was a momentary pause and then the door flew open.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now."

"I waited hours down there for nothing. For absolutely bloody nothing. My shoulder still hurts like hell. At least in Sydney they gave me decent painkillers. They also gave me a name for this condition except I've forgotten what it was. Here they look at me like I'm some kind of drug addict. Like I'm putting this on! Bloody, hopeless hospital, you could have told

me what to expect. There were drunks everywhere. Nearly got assaulted by one coming out. If he'd come a step closer I would have wind-milled him flat."

Merlin, my cat, who had been sleeping behind my pillow, started meowing.

"Merlin's upset."

She stalked out, slamming the bedroom door. I heard her pounding down the hall, another door slamming as she entered her bedroom. Merlin was crying, squirming in my arms, so I got up and put him out the window. There was no moon in the sky. It was silent, until I heard light rain spill onto the roof. As I reached up to close the window Merlin leapt back in. I padded down to the kitchen, filled his bowl with cat biscuits and switched on the electric jug. I munched on a couple of wine biscuits while waiting for the tea to brew. As I headed back down the hall, the tea slopped over the lip of the cup into the saucer. I put the saucer down on the bedside cabinet and dropped a dry biscuit on the tea liquid to soak it up. If I tipped the liquid back into the cup, it would cool my tea. I couldn't stand lukewarm tea. It needed to be hot enough to potentially burn my oesophagus. I slid back into bed. The rain was no longer hitting the roof. There were no sounds in the house other than mine. I cherished the hours before dawn when others slept. I picked up the book lying on the bedside cabinet: *Apocalypse*, by D.H. Lawrence. It was dog eared on page 77 to mark my place. Joey would have frowned at me doing this in the old days. He once commented disapprovingly when I underlined passages in pencil. "It's my book to use as I see fit," I would respond.

...the cool, bright, ever varying moon. It is she who would caress our nerves, smooth them with the silky hand of her glowing, soothe them into serenity again with her cool presence. For the moon is the mistress and mother of our watery bodies ..."

My eyelids began to feel heavy as I read and the book dropped out of my hand. I heard it thud on the floor and knew no more.

I was sitting in the driver's seat, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. Droplets of water on the car windscreen sparkled as the morning sun rose from behind pine trees spearheading the crest of the hill. Old trees, they blocked the sun from reaching my house until late morning. I kept hoping a good storm might blow them over. Felicia and I were headed to the hospital to visit Joey. Except we weren't moving. Felicia had disappeared back inside the house at the last minute with some over the shoulder comment that I couldn't catch. I assumed she'd forgotten something. Just when I was about to go see what the problem was she reappeared and slid into the passenger's seat. When I glared at her she tossed her head, cleared her throat and sniffed. She was settling into her seat so there was no point in talking to her. I've learnt the hard way that if she is otherwise occupied you just get vague brush off comments until she is good and ready to answer you directly.

We were rounding a curve nearing the bottom of a descent. The vista of a boarded-up fifties style garage, surrounded by rusting car skeletons and corroded engine parts, triggered thoughts of a futuristic post-apocalyptic world.

"Why don't they get rid of that junk? It's a disgrace. It doesn't give a good first impression of the city," Felicia said.

"I agree with you. Shall I turn off up at the next junction and take the scenic route? It's longer but prettier."

"My stomach's upset. I don't want to go down some winding, pioneer road."

"What do you want, Felicia?"

As the words came out I felt the wind outside increase in velocity, buffeting the car. Stretched out before me was a straight piece of downhill road. Beyond the right hand side of the road was a ragged, barbed-wire fence bounding sloping scrub land. Among the matagouri and golden rushes I could discern a ragged sheep. The landscape was a ringer for the

brooding highlands of Scotland. There were probably dour Presbyterian descendants lurking about with faces cut from rock; the stony countenance apparent in the sepia photographs Joey and I had seen when we had visited the refurbished Settlers' Museum. All our family had been baptised Presbyterian, but by some quirk of Mother's Felicia had been christened in an Anglican Church. "She is Church of England," Mother used to say grandly, as if by her action both she and Felicia now officially belonged to a more civilised moiety.

Momentarily distracted by these thoughts I had loosened my grip on the wheel and the car swerved a little over the white line.

"What's the matter with you, can't you drive? Here, let me. You're going to kill us!" Felicia yelled. She made a grab at the wheel and there was a scream of metal on metal as the car hit fence wires. Then I felt no resistance anymore, just a shuffling sound as blonde rushes cleaned our side windows. The car swayed and sashayed across the ridge; there was screeching and grinding as it hit various rocks, hard bits of ground. Even louder than the din reverberating in my ears was the thought that I hated Felicia, and if anyone was going to die it should be Felicia. I bloody well wasn't going to die. We careened across the knob of a slope, my steely hands gripping the wheel. The cortisol must have been flooding through me, giving me superhuman powers. I wrenched the wheel to the left and the car veered upwards. The grid, I recognised at the last moment, as the looming fence. We burst through it a second time before the car spewed back onto the asphalt.

About two kilometres up the road I stopped and got out. There were bits of wire, like giant spider's legs, embedded in the grill, anchoring a rotten fence post to the hood. I glanced at Felicia as I slid back into the driver's seat. She was pale and her eyes were staring straight ahead. There seemed to be no light in them. For the first time that I could ever remember, she was speechless.

I turned the car around and we crawled home. Joey didn't see us that day. I switched off the engine and went inside to make a cup of tea. I couldn't drink it; I was shaking so much my teeth were chattering. I went to bed and turned the electric blanket to full heat in an attempt to stop the shivering. Felicia was still sitting in the car a few hours later when I came out to see how she was. She just sat there, waving me away.

She must have emerged sometime during the night because she poked her head around my bedroom door at ten o'clock the following morning. She was wearing her green dressing gown with the embroidered Chinese dragons. She looked haggard; there were blue valleys under her eyes.

"How are you?"

"I need a coffee, with some rum in it," I said.

"I've got some brewing downstairs. I'll bring you up some. I think I did something to my back getting out of the car."

The conversation died and Felicia left, ostensibly to get the coffee.

The coffee, laced with rum, came on a tray with a plate of crepe suzettes, maple syrup and bacon. There was a glass of orange and a small vase with a jonquil poking out of it. Felicia is a great cook when she puts her mind to it; the breakfast was superb. I savoured every morsel.

"What are you crying for?" Felicia was sitting in the sun by the round table just below the latticed window, staring at me.

"It's a long time since I've had someone cook me breakfast."

"Yeah well, it's timely then."

"What happened, Felicia, in the car?"

"God knows, might have been some black ice on the road, it's really shaded there. You were great getting us both out. Saved our lives probably."

Felicia had never apologised to me in her life but she was coming close. She damn well needed to. She climbed onto the end of my bed and sat there for a moment, her hand smoothing down the eiderdown. She picked at something and then pulled out a goose-down feather that must have been poking through the material. She ran the feather down the side of her face.

“Remember the ostrich feathers mother wore on that magnificent hat of hers.”

“She was such a classy dresser eh.”

“Too bad nobody could see past it. Never let anybody see you down,” Felicia said, mimicking Mother.

“Remember the patchwork quilts she made for our beds?”

“She was such a good sewer.”

We started talking then about Mother, the aunts, remembering old times before Mother became ill, and after, when Dad took care of us. We recounted the fishing stories: how Dad had nearly died getting himself stuck upside down in the forty gallon drum salmon smoker he'd made; why Dad was wearing Mother's slacks when he nearly choked to death on a fishbone; how I'd hooked Dad in the forehead with a fishhook and drawn blood; the time I caught the stingray that rose to the surface under the jet boat when we went out to sea. Only Felicia and I can understand why we laugh until we cry at such things.

She'd quit her mail run job with the post office somewhere in the Blue Mountains out of Sydney.

“They put me on this really tough mail run, biking up into the clouds. I'm not getting any younger. Do you think this supercilious flab sitting behind the desk would listen. I asked him to put me on an easier run. You know what he said?”

“No.”

“We’re not creating a Granny run just for you, dear! I was so mad I stalked out. Hit my head on the *Australian Post* sign he had newly hung, too low, just outside his door. Stupid place to put it. First time I’ve ever seen stars. Laid me out flat on the floor. There was blood on the sign, blood on me. He was on his knees blubbering for an ambulance. I could have got a soft mail run out of him after all, but then ‘the Indian’ got deported back to India.”

“The universe hitting back,” I said, surveying my right foot recently out of the moonboot. My big toe stuck out like a sore thumb. “I’ll have to wear a bigger size shoe now. Too bad my shoes are too small for you.”

Felicia gave me a fleeting glance, sniffed and started up about ‘the Indian’ - he didn’t seem to have a name. “Three years I was with him. Gone just like that. Nothing to show for it. He hasn’t written. Probably had a wife back in Mumbai. Well, there’s no point in staying there now so I’m coming home.”

“Where’s home going to be? Felicia I can’t...”

She cut me off.

“I’m getting my furniture shipped to Nelson.”

“You sure?”

“It was a sort of home for us once.”

“It was never home. They took us from our home.”

“One of Mother’s half-baked schemes to get well. You can’t blame her.”

“It was so lonely there.”

It went quiet. Then I heard Felicia’s voice chime, “I’ll stay for a week or two then head north.”

We established a routine. I went to see Joey at the hospital in the afternoons, Felicia cooked and cleaned and fed the animals. We had been high country, front-range girls. We knew practical.

I came home one afternoon from the hospital to find Felicia had set up a makeshift easel in the spare room downstairs. She had found a piece of hardboard in the garage, positioning it atop two old tea chests. In the throes of transferring paint to palette she threw me a cursory glance.

“I’m doing you a painting. You have to promise to hang it on the wall though. I see no point in doing it otherwise.”

“An abstract?” I asked, ignoring Felicia’s bossy imperative and thinking of her usual style. She claimed to paint what was inside; always she made circles, whirling vortexes of colour but at the heart a void filled with dirty cream like the colour you see on kitchen walls in old houses. Definitely no mountains or rivers, none of the landscape stuff we grew up with.

“You’ll see.”

It took her the rest of the visit to finish the work. She was fiercely adamant that I was not to look at it. My time was taken up with seeing Joey everyday anyway. The nurses were busy strapping him onto a swivelling, disc-like contraption like a gigantic flat moon, to help get him on his feet and walking again. Felicia expressed no more interest in seeing Joey. She had only met him once at the wedding, so seeing him while his mind was still in outer space was pointless. If I am completely honest it would have brought out her green streak to watch all the attention he was getting, never mind that it was raw and cruel suffering she couldn’t emulate.

Felicia was using a lot of blues, browns and bruising purples in her painting. It was all over her face and tee shirt when we sat down to eat our evening meal. I’d stop at the supermarket on the way home to get the list of food ingredients she wanted. Felicia would set the table like we were having Christmas dinner. She covered my round oak table with an Irish linen tablecloth, one of the presents for Mother that Dad had sailed home with from the war.

Our late grandmother's brass candlesticks flickered dim light as we ate with yellowed, bone-handled knives and forks, originally part of mother's silver cutlery set.

The weeks went by with no further altercations. The day before Felicia was due to leave we had the unveiling of her painting. She positioned me in front of her makeshift easel, on a wicker chair. Placing a brandy glass of Pinot Noir in my hand she drew back the old sheet that had been covering it. I was drawn into the thick swirls and whorls of the paint. Was it illusion? My mind interpreting shapes akin to a Rorschach inkblot test? The bush seemed full of leering faces and the trees looked like they had human limbs. As I peered closer I saw Felicia had painted ghost-like presences into the work. Dark demon faces lurked in the foliage. The hut itself was a land lighthouse, back lit, like there was a halo around it. Two little blonde heads were at the helm, staring out a picture window at dirty brown water pouring across the forefront of the painting.

It wasn't until Felicia unveiled the painting that I remembered. It was as if something had hovered all that time in my peripheral vision, but every time I turned to face it, it faded like furniture beaten on by the sun. Another person had been there that week, at the hut, during the flood. A person who had no right to my interior. No right, no right at all. There had been no sun for the five long days of the flood and since then no sun had shone 'happily ever after.'

I tell the story now by piecing together snippets heard as a child, about 'Uncle Maurie.' Listening to parental conversations helps you colour in the person. I won't call him what Dad said, he was no uncle of mine. I'll name him. I can say his name. He was Maurice Winter.

Imagine a B grade movie being projected onto a blank screen. It's difficult to get a clear perspective if you are being bombarded with loud noise and bright images from the front row. Because it is such a bad movie you view it from a faraway place inside yourself.

The projector breaks down at particular times during the screening, so you get the story in fragments. Then someone fixes it and the movie starts up again. It's the only way I know to tell about him and what happened.

Dad had the war in common with Maurice Winter. Winter walked with a limp because of his wooden leg. A result of being wounded, at Monte Cassino, during the second World War. Dad said that Winter's amputation had been a 'crude field operation' leaving him battling for his life. He was a long time getting well and when he eventually did come home he found that one of our allies who, according to Dad, were 'over-sexed, over-paid and over-here' had taken a fancy to the wife he'd left behind. There hadn't been many Americans stationed in the South Island, but Mother said that The Country Women's Institute had specially organised for American officers, suffering from malaria in the Pacific, to be billeted on some of the high country and front range farms. When his wife flitted the coop with an American, Maurice Winter was left to run the poultry farm alone.

Dad was working for the Rabbit Board, arranging to lay poison around Winter's farm, when he drove us over in his Land-Rover for a visit. We saw thousands of hens, white blots, dotting Maurice Winter's paddocks, pecking and scratching the ground. While he and Dad were talking, Felicia and I explored the wooden hen houses. Inside, along the front wall of each hut were a row of boxes, lined with straw, where the hens laid their eggs. Right across the back wall there were round wooden rails for the hens to perch on at night. A woody smell came from a thick layer of fresh sawdust Maurice Winter had shovelled onto the floor beneath. Winter's farmhouse, in contrast to the hen houses, was dirty and untidy like himself. Lichen and green mould were growing on the south walls. The windows hadn't been cleaned

for a long time, probably since his wife left. Cobwebs, that I imagined were once as fine as the silk of antique wedding veils, hung raggedly from the eaves.

Sheila, Winter's pet sheep, roamed the yard. "She keeps the grass down," Winter said, stroking her ears. Sheila faithfully followed Winter around the farm. He paid no mind that she was eating roses Mrs Winter had won prizes for at the A & P show. The flower garden was fast disappearing down Sheila's throat.

During the night of heaviest rain I dream a wooden man came to visit me. The sound of rain, during this tumultuous time, drowns out the beating of my heart. In the days after, I stay hidden among the blankets in the lower bunk bed, biting my tongue to threads so it bleeds and swells and I can't talk except to make thick sounds like I am underwater. I keep looking up and seeing the wooden hull of a boat above. It must be calm on the surface where Felicia is. Dark waves flood over me, I am unable to get my breath, as a shadow drowns my light. A wooden splinter embeds itself in my flesh, festering.

Dad said he'd never seen such a flood. The waters rose so high that first night it washed away the outhouse, about three yards below and to the right of our hut. It was curling a slaving tongue around the hut foundations before it pulled back. Five days passed before the river settled down enough for the jet to ride her. We were down to eating the last of the canned food - spaghetti worms and stodgy stew that Dad liked. I threw up after a mouthful of worms. Dad, feeling my forehead with his hand, thought I had a temperature. He brought me a glass of powdered milk he'd mixed in cold, boiled water. I drank it down, shrinking back from the shadow passing across the picture window behind him. I sank down into the sleeping bag, cocooning myself. It didn't stop this hissing sound replaying over and over in my mind: 'shh...shhh.'

The noise of the jet boat sounded like droning music at a funeral as we headed back down the river. At the launching site on the edge of the riverbed we found Dad's V8 and Uncle Vern's Austin lying turned over on their sides. The flood water had coursed right through the cars covering everything with brown muck.

Auntie Nora had taken Mother over to her place after the local farmers had found the boat trailer and cars overturned. Mother was in a terrible state. I could understand that. The problem was her state went on for weeks after, Mother wringing it for all it was worth.

Once Dad had reconditioned the engine of the V8 and got it running again he parked it on the front lawn one afternoon during a weekend. He set about painting it olive green. I sat on my red tricycle behind the V8, watching him, until Mother called me inside to do the potatoes for dinner. While I was still at the sink bench Dad came in for a cup of tea. He didn't have good news; he'd backed over my tricycle by accident. As I looked at Mother's smirking face a cold, arid desert welled up inside me, so vast she disappeared from view. I wasn't to get another tricycle, she said, I was too old now for such childish things. Senseless woman. I already knew my childhood was over.

Winging her way north, Felicia had left a sunless sky behind her. She had some intuition of what happened at the hut, of this I was now sure; her paint brush putting into form her knowing. It was as though she had been watching from afar, across vast tundra wastes, waiting for the right moment to strike. I should have known better than to let her inside. She was Mother's daughter, after all. The pipes of her emotions freeze up like she has them permanently in hibernation. All that strain of keeping everything inside means the pipes burst occasionally. I couldn't find my voice with her, I couldn't find words as I swirled down into the murky depths of her painting. It seemed to me Felicia was the *'Ice Queen'* snowing up my world.

Felicia left other things behind, a red notebook, some toiletries. Checking the bedside table drawers I found a small, pounamu adze. A black cord, woven around one end, enabled it to be worn around the neck. It was shiny new and hardly worn, so I put it on. If she wanted it back she could ask me for it. I kept imagining an obsidian glitter in Felicia's hazel eyes; the same dark gaze Mother had laid upon me. I treaded heavy up the stairs to the drinks cabinet. It was eleven in the morning. I wasn't a drinker, nor was Joey. We had blackberry gin, whisky, rum, port, you name it, all aging pointlessly. I poured myself a glass of brandy and took a sip, shivering at its taste. Putting the glass down, I headed downstairs, where I opened a carved, antique chest that Joey had converted into a wine cabinet. Wine seemed to offer a more earthy escape than spirits.

It was late afternoon when I awoke. I had a bath and rummaged through the wardrobe, taking out a sky blue linen dress with a crimson velvet rose flopped on its right shoulder. Joey had bought me the rose, one of gifts he used to spring on me. Pulling on flat heeled, Italian boots I walked down the driveway to the garage and drove to the hospital car park. Walking the white lines of a pedestrian crossing, up the stairs to the entrance and through the corridor into the main section of the hospital had become automated action. I then pressed the button to the lift taking me to where Joey was harboured in Room 606.

Joey smiled crookedly, reached out and touched the velvet rose. Was he seeing one rose or two? One of me, or two of me? Double vision was one of the legacies he'd been left with after the accident. I sat with him for two hours, read him the paper, took him for a wobbly walk around the corridor and helped feed him pumpkin soup, soggy chips and two sausages. Then I filled out the form for his next meal, smiled at the nurses, and hoped like hell I didn't run into any of his friends coming to visit him.

At home on the coffee table in the lounge, Felicia had left unfinished one of those thousand piece cardboard puzzles consisting of endless pieces of sky. How was I to fit her

puzzling pieces together? Did Maurice Winter get to her too? I don't think I'll ever know the truth because Felicia twists it to meet her own needs. She's always got a worse story by far; no-one can ever, ever, imagine such suffering. And so she purses her lips, stares stoically into outer space searching for a southern cross she can nail herself to.

Any idea that the painting was a gift from the heart went down the stream, like the paper boats we used to sail in the creek below our childhood home. I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't want to look at it, so I put it out in the garage. Perhaps it was Felicia's idea of truth, but it was more than that; it was her cold intention to inflict pain. I thought I knew Felicia, believing there was kindness there somewhere.

I ripped the pages out of Felicia's notebook and threw them in the fireplace. Setting them alight, I watched as they curled in the flames, turning into ash flakes and floating up the chimney. The sound of her voice seared my mind. Dad's voice too, chiming his last words: "You didn't make me enough porridge." Dad, dribbling in his dotage. There had never been enough emotional food with Felicia and Mother's greedy gobbling, spiting and spitting. You have to detach from life sometimes because if you open yourself to the evil that comes your way it will kill you.

II

By the time Joey finally came home from the hospital a few months later I'd bought a sharp spade and was doing a lot of digging. There are plenty of rocks to be found when digging fence post-holes. I used the rocks to make French drains, channelling water away from the house. It didn't take me long to erect a boundary fence to keep dogs and the occasional rambler out. Then I began marshalling materials towards erecting internal fences to keep the animals in their proper place, that is, out in the paddock and not at my back door. Down in the subterranean depths, scratching and scooping dirt, examining various life forms, I'd get interrupted with a flashback or two that reminded me of how life used to be; my old life reappearing down a post-hole.

Corner postholes for deer fences have to be dug deep. I was working on the second to last one, down nearly two metres, hanging upside down by my boots, which were hooked over the edge of the post hole, scraping the last few clay sods out of the bottom of the hole with an empty fruit tin can, when I realized I was bone tired and unable to manoeuvre myself back up to the surface. Being end up didn't bother me as I did headstands as part of a regular yoga routine. What bothered me was the thought of my maggot riddled corpse being found head down in a stand-up grave. What really got up my nose though, apart from the dank smell of the earth, was the image of Felicia appearing at my funeral in a feathered hat with black net over her face pretending to care. I felt adrenaline coursing through me then and my body began to sway in an undulating rhythm, like the way a worm moves through soil. When I finally popped my head out and was able to look around I saw the merino reclining on the

grass a few yards from the hole chewing his cud. I crawled over and used him as a pillow support until I got my breath back.

The merino was shaped like a barrel so that if he stumbled, which he didn't, he would roll easily down the hill. Originally I'd adopted two, sheep being social, to keep the grass down in the orchard, but as soon as I weaned them off the bottle they were reaching up and nipping buds off the fruit trees. The other lamb had fallen and broken its leg climbing out on a limb so I had to get it put down. I hate that; it kills me. The merino then went into the top paddock with the goats, and they adapted to him as he adopted their fence busting ways.

I still had the problem of long grass in the orchard but I fixed that. There were ostriches going cheap on the Taieri plains, so I acquired two. They did the job, didn't touch trees, flowers or vegetables, while also doubling as guards, patrolling the flat areas around the fence line better than any dog.

And so the days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. I'd had enough by then of digging potential coffins and shifted to digging smaller holes for new trees to green up the property. I wasn't sure whether I was aiming for self-sufficiency or sustainability. Self-sufficiency took me back to the seventies, when I'd lived on a West Coast commune with the alcoholic-best-forgotten. Sustainability, I finally decided as I stamped the ground to tamp in each infant tree. My mind was ringing with thoughts of what would happen when I met up with Felicia again. I'd be planting a black locust or golden poplar, imagining the former as representative of her and the latter of me, and we'd be having an extended conversation out there in the paddock. I'd reverse roles to try and gain empathy for her position but if things didn't go well the black locust would be minus a limb or two and destined for a life of deformity. Spring turned to summer and as autumn deepened, my focus turned indoors.

III

I'm now halfway through clearing out all the junk populating the house and garage, but I can feel myself running down, from the effort expended in caring for Joey and suppressing my own life at the same time. I know I have to get away for a while.

Some things you cannot make happen. I want to travel up to Cold River but can't seem to get there. It is like being in one of my old dream states, the one where my feet feel like they are slugging through mud as I try to run from a stranger who is catching up with me at every step. For years after the flood, there had been many dreams like that. I couldn't outrun the faceless stranger. Sometimes I escaped him and sometimes not; awakening in a sweat in the middle of the night feeling the cold steel of a knife penetrating my skin going deep into my flesh. I learnt to wake myself up before that happened but then it was my head that ached from where I'd been banging it against the tongue-in-groove wall. That was a long time ago now and I don't have to do that anymore.

I ring Alice.

"Alice, I'm on steroids to root out this so called thyroid infection. It's making me feel like 'the Terminator.' I could stand in front of a firing squad and kill the buggers with my eyes."

"It's not that kind of steroid, you wally, but I know what you mean."

"I'm thinking of going north, back to see the old place for a few days, otherwise I might murder Joey or myself. How are you going?"

"I'm doing it, getting good deeds in the bank. Mum's gone psychotic again."

It turns out that Alice's 98 year old mother is dying. It's taken three weeks so far. I think that I better stick around until the end so I put my trip on hold.

"She's not even drinking water now. She's going to enter one of those Buddhist trance states which might go on for months."

"She's a Christian Alice, she won't turn Buddhist now."

"I've had an epiphany."

"Yes?"

"We talked, you know, just before she slipped under. I've always tried to make her feel better, but that's been the problem for us. It's meant I've been dissing her reality for seventy one years, her truth for all that time."

"All the time you've been alive and looking after her then," I say, visualizing Alice's mother's pinched face and vacant eyes, sitting off her rocker, in Alice's living room.

"She was telling me she was evil and would be punished by God for not being a good mother."

"Yes, and did you agree with her?"

"Yes, yes, after all these years I said to her: 'Yes, Mum you have not been a good mother.' She smiled at me and said: 'You understand.' That's all I had to do, accept her reality. It's been staring me in the face for years and I couldn't see."

I don't go to the funeral. Alice said not to because the important things had been said. Instead, early that morning, I go for a walk, out the back, up the hill, and sit a while staring down over the valley. From my crow's nest perch it is eerily quiet with no cars yet on the road. The sun is just rising, emblazoning the west hillside, but here on the north face all is still in shadow. The goats are jumping at my back wanting more attention. I nuzzle into their tawny coats, smelling the grassy sweetness, trying to shake off memory of a dream about Mother I'd woken from. She'd been standing by my bed, so close that I could have reached

out and touched her. *Why was she haunting me? What did she want from me? Forgiveness? Understanding?* I shiver. *The nether regions must be icy cold.*

My temperature rises in the evening, part of this strange malady I am grappling with. I toss about, unable to sleep, and at first light there was this white apparition, coming closer, hovering, extending her hand. At first I couldn't hear the words and then slowly, softly, they washed over me.

“Do you need my help?”

I hadn't wanted to move, to blink. It behoved me to answer but I couldn't form words. She wasn't behaving like Mother and yet she seemed real enough. She was wanting an answer. I hardly dared to breathe. There was this struggle going on inside me. I couldn't look at her. And then some words came. “No, look after my kids.”

She went away. A hallucination from the fever, yet it had seemed so real.

Why was she wearing white? Red had always been Mother's colour. There had been a time when Mother had gone away for several months, to visit a spiritual healer, in the hope he was a reincarnation of Jesus and would heal her of her illness. Resplendent in the red wool, signifying style, elegance and dark-eyed beauty as she came down the steps off the plane. Her walking stick with its pronged bone handle would be confiscated at airports these days as a dangerous weapon. Blind love for the healer had morphed into blissful love for mankind, being of humankind meant I was an exception. Mother had seen the Holy Grail, so she no longer saw what was in front of her. Uncanny to be looked through, as though I wasn't even there, making it worse than it was before she went. It was a relief when Death appeared, leaping out of the shadows and strangling her not long after. The hospital doctors said it was the cigarettes that had finally got her, coughing and choking on all that black tar. Now I know otherwise. She became lost in the shadows, looking for those she loved, making it impossible for me to find her.

Felicia wears red as much as Mother did, but she warps the style, adding highlights like red dangly earrings. Tampons, dipped in cochineal, the blood of dead insects, hung from her earlobes at my fiftieth birthday party because she wanted to gross out my friends. Red is usually slashed across her thin lips so they stand out like an equal sign. It is a misnomer, the semblance of equality I mean. Felicia is five foot eight, tall like Mother, reaching her full height at twelve she towered three inches above me, using those extra inches as muscle for wrestling what she wanted back then.

I sometimes imagine her coming to my funeral late. I'll have to give Alice instructions to clout her with Mother's alligator handbag, another present Dad brought back from the war. Alice will do it too, she's always true to her word. I sigh, wishing the mind chatter to stop. As always, I feel the sense of having to be close by for Joey, and so I start back down the hill, the goats zigzagging in front of me.

I am preparing the Sunday mid-day dinner, a roast hogget forequarter, stuffing garlic and rosemary into the meat, when the phone rings. The arborist's voice at the other end.

"It's Jeff here, I'll be there tomorrow."

"I have an appointment at eleven."

"That's alright. I know what needs to be done."

Nice to have someone do the heavy work. Jeff does a good job too with few words. There is a pine on the western boundary line planted by Enid's husband. It is blocking my sun. Enid is all for having it removed and for Jeff to top another tree on her place as well. A shed full of wood for winter.

I finish stuffing the roast and wonder what else to with it. I don't feel like eating meat, I don't feel like eating at all. I chop up some leeks, onions and carrots, throw them in the pan, plonk the roast on top, add some water, put the lid on and shove the whole thing in

the oven. I'm not feeling so good. It is becoming hard to swallow, like there is a permanent lump in my throat.

"Well dinner's done, what's next Grace?" I've developed this habit of having conversations with myself.

"What did you say?" Joey is speaking from his lift chair. He is in my direct line of vision through the hatch to the lounge. He has headphones on but in a lopsided way. One speaker is on his left ear, through which he is listening to the television. The other speaker is stuck in the air, ranging over his hair on the right side of his head. His right ear has attuned to my voice. Multitasking.

"We'll have dinner in two hours."

"We'll have done in Sue. Who is Sue?"

"Jesus Christ." I immediately regret saying this. I regret starting a conversation with myself at all.

"Bees are nice? What are you talking about?"

Joey is screwing up his face and his voice is getting louder. I go over to his chair, lift his earphones off his head and, raising my voice, say clearly straight to his face.

"I am cooking roast lamb. Meat. It will be ready in two hours. We'll eat dinner after your T.V. programme finishes." He nods. I put the headphones back straight on his head, so they cover both ears. One eye is gazing back at the television and one is looking right through me.

I need some fresh air. The sun feels warm on my face as I walk next door to Enid's place, letting her know Jeff will be there on the morrow.

"He's left me with a lot," Enid says. She is speaking to me from the middle of her

vegetable garden, talking about the pine and gum trees George had planted, which now have her house surrounded. The cigarette she is puffing on hangs out the side of her mouth as she bends over to dump a pile of weeds into a bucket.

“That big gum George planted on our boundary has gone now,” I say, referring to the silver dollar gum that had fallen over in the storm the night of Joey’s first operation.

“I’ll never forget that day, if the wind had been blowing the other way that gum might have come straight down on my house. And those cowboys George hired to do in that pine last year. They must have been smoking something funny. A Sunday afternoon jaunt. You heard the crash, another few yards and I wouldn’t have woken from my afternoon nap. Bastards near killed me.”

George has a lot to answer for.

“Jeff will saw off a few limbs tomorrow. No problems.”

It is a few weeks after the funeral and Alice has gone away; on a cruise around the Pacific Islands. There it will be sea and sunshine, here it is pea soup weather, damp and close. I am running hot and cold, the specialist putting me on hold for yet another week. It is my second appointment and I don’t seem any further ahead. He is smooth skinned with carefully combed strands of thin hair lying across a shiny pate. The collar of his crisp white shirt is being choked by a crimson bow tie.

“We have the results back from your blood test. This time there is conclusive evidence of problems in the thyroid.”

“Any idea what the problem is?”

It doesn’t give me any confidence that Mr Ear, Nose and Throat is trawling through the internet, typing in my symptoms, homing in on something called Hashimoto’s Disease. I’ve already done that at home, ticking two of the boxes (muscle cramps and dry skin) which

is not enough to be convincing. Everything else listed just doesn't fit. Sleepiness, for instance.

"I can't sleep, I haven't slept for ages, my mind won't stop, it's chattering, I can't keep still."

"Hmm, Hmmm, Hmmmm."

Is his hmmm, a variant on a Buddhist chant? I can't see any signs of compassion leaking from his face. I have heard he does cosmetic surgery. What Buddhist does that?

"I've lost more weight, and now I can't eat properly because of this lump in my throat."

"Hmmmm."

I wait.

"I'm referring you for a CT scan. You will get an appointment in the mail. I'll see you again next week."

"What about my temperature, what about the pain, what if it is cancer?"

"If it were cancer, you wouldn't be feeling pain."

Dismissed, I wander back down to my car. I feel rotten, a seething boil of rottenness that wants to explode brown stuff all over the world.

I arrive home to find the compost has spontaneously combusted and there's been quite a fire. It has consumed the plastic bin, singed the trees and made a gap in the boundary hedge. Inside the house things haven't been idle either. The cat is chasing a live rat around the lounge and Joey and the caregiver have locked themselves in the top bedroom. I go back outside and sit in the gazebo for a while.

I have to get out of town, into the bush, away like I did as a child when it all got too much. I set about arranging rotating caregivers for Joey and preparing meals he will need

over the next five days: a casserole, hamburgers, meatloaf, heavy meat meals, without which he complains.

What else is left? I look around. A final check. It is early, around five in the morning. Rain is pouring down the highway as I gun the car north to *Cold River*.

IV

As I drive into Springburn, the great dome of a moon lights up snow covered mountains surrounding the ragged township. Our family had once lived here, about four miles northwest at the base of the foothills. As a child I was forever climbing the hills behind our place; there was always another hill beyond the next one, they just got higher until they became mountains.

In winter, snow spills downhill like white feathers. Cold River, full up with snow melt, courses swiftly through the foothills until it braids across a broad river-bed gashing through the Canterbury plains north of Christchurch. The air at dusk is crisp, chill and deathly silent. So quiet, we all retreated indoors. Dad would light the open fire in the sitting room and stoke the coal range in the kitchen so it went all night.

A tea caddy used to sit on the right of the mantelpiece above the range. It was Dad who began each day making breakfast. He'd get up first and resurrect the fire to make a pot of tea, the proper way, warming the pot by setting it on the outer edges of the stove top. Then he'd take down the tea caddy, put his hand in amongst the tea leaves, feeling for the brass spoon, shaped like a large concave penny which he used to measure out the tea leaves - one spoonful for each person and one for the pot. I still have the caddy, and that brass spoon is still inside after all these years. On the short handle is a carved Maori head with distinctive thick lips; a piece of colonial artistry, no doubt. The pictures on the side of the tea caddy are worn, barely visible, but I daren't wash them or what remains might disappear altogether, like Mother and Dad and the life we lived together so long ago. Don't get me wrong; I'm not

bathing in warm ambiance toward my family, but they are part of my *whakapapa*, where we have come from filling me with a sense of who I am in the world. I can't cut that invisible cord linking us together like Felicia can. "I didn't feel connected to Mother or Dad," she said, once. She's hacked away at the cord connecting us. She's like that, but I hold on to our sistership thread, that is, until now, because it's blood after all.

It was the war, like a steam train coming down the line, that smashed apart a small community, derailed our parent's lives, a war that hasn't ended with Felicia and I fighting to keep on the rails, not knowing how to be allies. The past is alive with images - Dad's eyes, brimming blue wells staring out of his pain-mapped face. Mother lying on her sick bed, listening to the radio, the air thick with smoke from her cigarette.

When people say, 'Pain lessens with time,' they don't know what they are talking about. When pain seeps into the very marrow of your bones, shadowing your life and colouring your choices, this platitude will cease to cross your lips. Chattering clichés and self-help maxims ring in my ears: 'Stop clinging to the wreckage,' 'Let go of the past,' 'Forgive your enemies.' Alice's therapist and mine had ready repertoires at hand. It must have been hard work trying to make them sound fresh and original.

Early one morning her therapist had roared past us in his shiny new SUV, as we were running up 'butt breaker hill,' out towards the airport, getting miles in the bank for a forthcoming marathon marked on our calendars.

"I paid for that SUV," she said.

"All those expensive minutes."

"He's going to be in heaven soon looking down on us."

"He isn't Jesus, you know, but idealising him is a sure sign the therapy is working."

“No, I mean he really, really, is going there soon. He’s headed for the airport now. He’ll be in the clouds in about half an hour, swooping over us in his little glider. He’s taking flying lessons. I’m probably paying for those as well.”

At Springburn’s roadside sign I turn into a driveway that leads into a parking area around the back of the township’s only motel. Getting out of the car I stretch and look around. Over the low, wooden fence, where the grocery store used to be, there is now an empty lot. Mr Hogman, the grocer who’d been a central figure in the town, is gone too. Every Tuesday he’d drive a van around the district, delivering orders people had phoned through on their party lines. Our house, being at the end of the road, had meant we were last on his delivery run. I’d stand with Mother, at the van’s rear doors, looking at the packets of jellies and tinned fruit lined neatly on shelves. She would buy one or two things, extra to our order, and give them to me to carry inside. With Mother in front, I would trail Mr Hogman carrying the cardboard box of our order into the kitchen.

“Well, thank you Fred, just put it on the table there.”

“A pleasure as always, Mrs Gold.”

“I hear it’s going to snow. Last winter we were snowed in for days.”

“Well, good thing you stocked up, then.”

“We’ll see you again on Friday night - when we come to pick up our main order, that is, if we can get out.”

“Look forward to it.”

Mother and I would stack the groceries on the pantry shelves.

“What shall I do with this?” I had opened a cake tin filled with stale sponge cake.

“How about you make us a trifle for dessert tonight?”

I cut the sponge into squares and spread each square with raspberry jam. Then I placed each sponge cake piece inside a fancy glass bowl.

“Good girl. Now for the fruit juice and sherry. Mix two tablespoons of sherry in the fruit juice and pour it over the sponge. Toss in the fruit too.”

“What do I do now?”

Mother came out of the pantry with a packet of Edmond’s custard powder and set it on the bench. When she looked down at me and smiled I became set on making the best trifle ever. I mixed the custard powder with milk in a pot and then set it on the coal range. When it was just about to bubble I took it off and poured the yellow mixture over the top of the sponge and fruit. I went back to helping Mother unpack the groceries while I waited for it to cool. Later I whipped the cream, until it was thick, and spread it over the custard. Then, as a finishing touch, I sprinkled coconut, with a few dots of cochineal rubbed through it, over the cream.

“It’s the best trifle I’ve ever had,” Dad and Mother said in unison that night at the dinner table, helping themselves to second portions. I was full to bursting, and not from the trifle, either.

We didn’t see Mr Hogman that Friday night as we were snowed in by a record snowfall. It had been the following Tuesday morning. Mr Hogman was parked in front of his grocery store, loading in a cardboard box of groceries when a car came careening around the wide corner in a hurry, heading for the ski fields probably, intent on having a good time, but then the world’s axis shifted. It didn’t for me. I used to wish I was part of some tragedy, going into daydreams about how I would get all this caring attention. Dad had said quietly at the dinner table, while Felicia and I were trying to digest mother’s horrible kidney stew, that Mr Hogman had been *decapitated*. I mulled over this new word. Someone told me what it meant at school the next day; the idea of Mr Hogman’s bleeding head bounding across the asphalt figured disproportionality in my imagination for a while.

Down the road was the Springburn pub, a leftover from colonial days. It would fill up on a Friday night, but less so on Saturday when a movie played in the newly built concrete block community hall. The hall would be packed. War movies were popular, but the one I remember the best had child actress Shirley Temple in British India. Shirley's voice was heard in just about every scene. My aspiration after seeing the movie was to be an actress, but I didn't want to be Shirley. I had a more adult model in mind. I plucked my eyebrows one day, borrowing the tweezers from Mother's makeup cupboard in the bathroom. I did a thin, curved line, copying an actress who stared out at me from a magazine. It was after dinner and I was piecing together a puzzle on the oak table in the sitting room. Dad was reading the paper with his feet up in front of the open fire and Felicia was sorting out her stamp book. Mother's voice cut across the room.

"What are you doing *that* for? You shouldn't be doing *that* at your age."

I stared blankly at her. Alert. Waiting.

"Plucking your eyebrows, for goodness sake. Well, come on. Don't just sit there like the dummy you are."

So I stood up and plucked a *Woman's Weekly* from the stack Auntie Nora had given Mother last week and pointed at the woman with thin, curved eyebrows on the cover.

"But she's a real woman for goodness sake. Isn't that right, John?"

Dad was looking as he usually did when Mother started up on me, like he wanted to be some other place. He nodded and went back to his paper. That's what I hated about my father, he was weak. I don't mean he was weak physically or lacked courage to face up to whatever adversity came his way - my father showed great courage in that respect - it was just that he crumbled in the face of my mother, and her sisters who stood like shadows behind her. Men they'd married all turned into rabbits, like those we hunted when Dad took us out night

shooting. Caught in the spotlight the rabbits froze, the terror in their blinded eyes blown away by the blast of the double barrelled shotgun.

I didn't remind Mother that I was newly suffering from the woman's complaint. The week before I had discovered blood on my white cotton bloomers. I'd had to tell Mother because it came with a crippling pain in the stomach. Mother didn't say anything; she just bought out this strap that went around my waist, with some safety pins and a white gauze pad. She gave me a book to read. It was all about becoming a woman and had all these happy faces in it. I didn't get the full picture. It was only later, at a bible class camp, when I saw the word 'fuck' scrawled on the wall of my bunk and said out loud, 'What does fuck mean?' that I got the bigger picture. The room I was sharing with four other girls, who were lying in their bunk beds went real quiet. Beth Hare's voice in the adjacent bunk whispered. "It's when a boy puts his thing in you."

I have never forgotten the advice Beth gave me: "always rinse your hair in lukewarm water so you don't wash all the oil out."

Springburn's still night air chills. I grab my bags out of the back seat and lock the car door. The skin on my face is shrinking as I walk up the steps to the motel office. My head aches as I ring the silver bell on the counter. The man who appears is expecting me; he has a portable heater under his arm.

"Hi, I'm Trev. When you made the booking I thought that after driving all that way you might need something extra. The wife put some home baking on your kitchenette counter. There's going to be a helluva frost. The heater in your room is on a timer, so you'll need extra heating. There's spare blankets in the cupboard. You're heading away up the river in the morning, I hear?"

“Tell your wife, thanks very much. Yes, if the weather holds and it doesn’t rain, I’ll be up there a few days.”

“By yourself, too - that’s a bit adventurous isn’t it?”

“We went up the river regularly when we were kids, every second weekend or so. I’m fairly used to camping.”

“Well, the Jet Boat Association are doing the old hut up at some point. But look, really, nobody’s been up there for years. DOC keeps threatening to pull it down. It’s probably overrun with rats.”

The cheap curtains are a spiral pattern backed with nylon lining. I draw them back when Trev leaves, turn off the light, and sit on a sagging sofa staring straight at the mountains. According to Trev, the township hasn’t seen much business lately because of the Christchurch earthquake. His wife’s baking lies untouched on the counter. My headache has extended to stabbing pains in my left eye and ear. Beads of sweat are dripping down my forehead. Rummaging in my bag, I find painkillers my GP has prescribed and down two. At midnight I slip into my sheepskin jacket, slid back the glass ranch-slider door and step out onto a small porch. The cold air stings my cheeks. Above, the stars so clear and close become the bright lights of celestial cities. A satellite traffics across the sky, followed by another.

The township is silent, deathly quiet like it has been frozen for some time. The people who once had been pivotal in my life are ghosts now, utterly lost to me. Dad and Mother are buried in the cemetery a quarter mile down the road. At home Joey is a ghost of himself, unable to remember my name or his own from one day to the next. And Felicia? It must be over a year now since I’ve heard from her. If I met her at the moment I’d probably strive to kill her, which tells me that at least she isn’t dead to me, yet.

So I stand here in the cold, staring up at the heavens, thinking of Felicia. Her and I,

disconnected from each other, from our roots, adrift in space. She is on Mars at the moment, the war planet. Larger than the surrounding stars, its unblinking red eye stares down at me. I'm the only one who knows how to go back. That's why I'm here, heading up Cold River; looking for a way to 'get over it.'

I step back inside, boil the jug, make a milky Milo, and help myself to a chocolate chip biscuit. I put Milo and biscuit on the side table while I climb into bed. The mattress sags in the middle, the sheets feel slightly damp, the blankets are musty smelling, but it is warm from the electric blanket.

It had been around the time of Dad's death when I was last in Springburn. It must be difficult to deal with senile dementia at the best of times, but Felicia and I didn't even know what it was back then. As usual, nobody told us that, aside from prostate cancer, Dad was developing this additional problem. Dad's last days were complicated by not having a home from which to make his last stand.

It was a few months after Mother finally died that Dad had taken up with a younger woman. Dad was always saying he wished he could be eighteen again and know what he knew in his sixties. It was just an obtuse way of saying he wanted to live a hedonistic lifestyle. Nothing would change; he would still be driven by testosterone, and everything would end up in the river. He went 'courting' like he had at eighteen, forgetting we were in a different era. For a start, nobody used that word anymore. He lost everything when the younger woman took him to the High Court. Our "blighted inheritance," Felicia said. For once we were in agreement.

So Dad came to live with us. Felicia was living in a rented house up North and I was trying to study at University down South. I would have Dad for a few months and then Felicia would take him. I saw him through radiotherapy and couldn't handle it anymore. He was

wandering at night, fixated on laxatives, making a mess, being old. So I rang Felicia, asking her to take a turn. She agreed to drive down and meet me in Springburn, a halfway point between her northern abode and my southern habitat.

The morning we left I parked the car in the driveway at the bottom of brick steps that led up to my flat. I tossed Dad's battered suitcase, sitting on the porch, into the equally battered hatchback I owned back then. I had cleaned the car out the night before, putting some cushions and a tartan rug in the front bucket seat, packing in most things in order to get an early start. It had been quite a night. Dad had woken me in the middle of it, banging his bedroom door on one of several visits to the toilet because he'd been into the laxatives again. By the time I'd cleaned up the hallway and got him back to bed I wasn't in the best of moods. Lying there awake, wondering why when the cloak of old age descended, it did not dignify its inhabitant.

That it wasn't going to be an early start was evident when I saw Dad's beady blue eyes darting all over the place, indicating a busy mind brewing bad behaviour. On his gold gilt-edged plate was toast with lashings of thick strawberry jam. Getting food from the plate up to his mouth occupied his attention for some time. As I put his empty plate in the sink he picked up his walking stick and crept through an arched doorway into the lounge, lowering himself into the gold coloured Lazyboy I'd bought him for Christmas. The sun shining through the window, glinted on his silver hair as he fiddled with the control on the left hand side of the chair. With a thud the footpad came up to support thin legs encased in tweedy slippers. His big toe peeked out a hole in the left slipper. He had cut the elasticised tops off his socks to ease the pressure of the thin bands on his skin. He flicked open the side of his paisley patterned dressing gown to reveal wrinkly genitals nested in grey hair. I walked quickly into the hallway closing it with more force than I intended. Getting him dressed was going to take a while.

On the road Dad was quiet. The movement of the car seemed to soothe him; his eyes looked bright as he took in the changing scenes moving past the window. We stopped once, at a diner on the south side of Timaru. While I was ordering Dad a pot of tea and a lamington, two Asian tourists came in. Dad stared at them for a while. As I was pouring his tea, a stage whisper echoed in my ear: *“There’s a lot of these Japs around.”* Reliving the war meant more meanderings would follow. It was time to go.

Evening was closing in when I turned off the main highway, taking a straight run up a back road towards Springburn, its foothills fringed by a purple haze beneath white peaks. On the grass verge dying red geraniums, planted in a row of tubs on Uncle Vern’s front porch, saluted me. Uncle Vern wasn’t in, so I went around the back to the woodshed, sliding the door key off a rusty four inch nail just inside. In the two bed rooms at the rear of the house, old rag mats covered the wooden floor. One of the bedrooms had a fireplace and at the corner of the hearth a hole revealed no air space beneath worm eaten floorboards and the ground. Damp chill pervaded the rooms like a shrouded presence. I put Dad’s suitcase on a chair in the smaller mustard coloured room and took mine through to the larger blue room which had a double bed. As I pulled the curtains across a Holden drove up, Uncle Vern’s craggy face profiled in the side window. I went out onto the front porch, watching him limp across the lawn toward me. His hair was parted in the middle and slicked down. A skin tag had grown just below his left eye. His hand felt like I had grabbed a wet fish.

It was one of those eerie Canterbury nights - still, crystalline air, the silence so loud it screamed. The first zombie to arrive was Auntie Nora with a casserole. Uncle Vern boiled potatoes. He’d grown a great crop of Ilam Hardy spuds to last him through the winter. Dad sat in his chair, hunched over, looking like a sparrow. He knew he had an audience and was playing for sympathy, pecking at his food. I was abandoning him to Felicia. They were flying

off back to her place in the morning, so it wasn't hard to figure out I was the magpie to blame for robbing him of his life. I was waiting for him to fire a feathered arrow my way.

It was a relief to hear Felicia's operatic voice reverberating through the door. Felicia was like a gust of nor'west wind blowing in.

"Con," announced Auntie Nora, "will be arriving later." The last time I'd seen cousin Con was in the audience, at the end-of-year school concert, where I was dressed as Cinderella in Mother's lace petticoat that I'd sewn sequins on. Con had been making faces at me from the back of the hall, trying to make me laugh, while a short, red haired freckled prince squashed my foot into a slipper.

The knock on the door, however, was not Con, but Wes Smythe, whom I hadn't seen in years. He was a widower now, living down the road from Uncle Vern, he said, stretching out his one arm to me - the other one having been caught in a harvester at haymaking time - and gripping my hand with the four remaining fingers he had left. There was a raised, fleshy lump on the top of this hand that looked like a piece of shortbread. Staring at my hand clamped in Wes's, it seemed not to belong to the rest of my body. I pried it free but Wes stayed close, plying me with questions, wanting to know what I was doing with my life. I'm not sure he was hearing my answers as his eyes were busy running up and down my body, alighting on a cream pearl that hung down from a chain around my neck. If he was looking for cleavage he was out of luck. All the running around after Dad and trying to keep up with my studies meant there wasn't much girl flesh on me. My face must have shown an expression like I had just bitten into a green plum, but with men like Wes it doesn't seem to register.

Dad raised himself slowly, getting out of his chair, and was precariously taking a step towards centre stage. I picked up his walking stick and put it in his hand. Felicia was laughing it up with Con, who had come in the back door. Uncle Vern was talking with Auntie Nora.

Dad, sensing he'd lost his audience, was priming himself to get it back. The back door opened again and Maurice Winter stooped under it, his round face and bulky frame filling the room. There was a gaping hole in his trouser leg through which I caught a glimpse of his wooden leg. Dad flew across the room making a beeline for Winter.

“Well, well, old Maurie Winter.” Dad’s Alzheimer’s momentarily abated. Uncle Vern brought out the whisky and put a lively record on the radiogram turntable. It was fair thumping. I could see the full moon outside, like a large polka dot, filling up the space in the curtain-less lattice window. The frost sparkled as I cut a crisp path across to the car. I lay down the back of the seat, plumped the pillows, pressed down hard on locks of all four doors and slipped into my sleeping bag.

Dad had once said that the mountains, through which Cold River coursed, were his home, and when it was time to die he would walk into the bush. Instead he died after three weeks in a crummy hospice. Felicia put him there a week after she got back because she couldn’t handle him anymore, either. I never saw him again. His last words to me, before I left Uncle Vern’s early the next morning, were that I hadn’t cooked him enough porridge. As I drove out to the highway, turning south, a river of tears streamed down my face.

As I lie in the musty motel room, close to sleep, it drifts mistily through my mind why I have returned to Springburn. Dad isn’t at rest, none of us are. Our home, Cold River, shadowed by the mountains, is our *turangawaewae*. I need to feel old ghosts, heed their wailing; their wanderings in the netherworld are upending my life.

I wake early. A crisp frost carpets the ground. My shoes make a crunching sound as I walk seven minutes to the cemetery from the Bed and Breakfast. Dad and Mother are buried side by side under exotic trees in the corner of Springburn cemetery. Dad’s concrete headstone has sunk a few inches lower than Mother’s. His brass plate is corroding. Mother’s

plate is weathering well. I don't have a vase for the four dinner plate dahlias I've bought with me to put on Dad's grave, so I borrow the glass jar I've found sitting on Auntie Nora's grave. There are some deceased brown papery roses in it. I tip them out. I head over to the creek, parallel to the highway and adjacent to the cemetery, and scoop fresh water into the vase. Uncle Vern's grave, by a gate in the hedge on the western boundary, is overlooked by the church next door. The dahlias glower at me like shaggy, alien suns. Dad's favourite flowers. He'd grown them in a sheltered corner of the garden, in a spot outside Felicia's and my bedroom, where the sun shone all day. In winter he'd dig up the tubers and divide them.

"They're gross feeders," he'd say. I'd hang out the window watching him cart barrow loads of compost to the site, forking it into the holes he made for each tuber.

"Overgrown fellows," said Mother, who preferred chrysanthemums, of a deep, red variety, that required staking as they were always blowing over in the wind.

And further over, towards the middle of the cemetery are other members of the Gold family going back to last century: grandparents, aunts, uncles, and at their feet in an unmarked grave lies my dead brother.

The sky is clouding over when I sling my pack into the car's backseat and head over to 'Sunbath' - Dad's name for our old family home. Two driveways lead off the shingled road that dead-ends at the top of a steep hill. A 'FOR SALE' sign is attached to the gate of the neighbouring property - I can see a modest, wooden bungalow peeping out from the back of that property. Our house, on the other side of the road, is nowhere to be seen. The trees Dad had planted as saplings now cloak it from view. Unlatching the heavy wrought iron gate, I walk up the driveway past a row of hazelnut trees, my tramping boots clomping across the loose metal. There doesn't seem to be anyone around so I wander around the back of the sprawling kauri timbered house that was built at the turn of the century. I stand under the

window outside the kitchen, built on the south side as was the norm in those days. The paddock below me is bounded by a creek that had once been filled with watercress; home for frogs, cockabullies and snails - dragonflies had once skimmed across the surface of the water. A bucolic scene, now spoiled by digger's blades that have cleaned out the weed and scraped clay banks clean.

Deer fences, surrounding paddocks on the other side of the creek, have replaced the gorse hedges sheep used to shelter against during snowstorms. In autumn, these paddocks were bright with buttercups that hummed with bees, and clouded with brown mushrooms that Felicia and I would pick by the bucketful. If Mother was sick for the day Dad would cook. He'd put the mushrooms in the oven of the coal range, dotting them with butter and plenty of salt and pepper.

The coal range went night and day, so Dad was always out on the weekends getting in loads of wood from a plantation of pines behind the house. He was more often out of the house than in. I'd hear his chainsaw starting up and head outside too. With my spade I'd dig around in the dirt, unearthing treasures, bits of broken china. It was how I'd found one of Dad's lost war medals, 'The Africa Star.'

"Bloody Vichy French, treacherous sods, would kill their own mother," Dad muttered, as he put the medal I'd handed him into his pocket. I trailed behind him as he trudged back up the hill rolling along in front of him a forty-four gallon drum to serve as a salmon smoker. He was in what Mother called his 'at war with the world' mood where he didn't talk much. It didn't matter, I understood his plan for the salmon smoker. He wanted to set the drum over one end of the trench and light a fire at the other end. The space in between would be covered with corrugated iron, spread over with clay soil, so it fashioned a sloping chimney. Wood smoke would waft up through the chimney, into the drum, over neat rows of dried salmon that were to be hooked onto the steel rods he had welded in.

Dad wanted me to clean out the loose soil in the trench he'd dug while he was positioning the drum. I was up to my waist in the trench, keeping a watchful eye for any enemies that might catch us unawares. It was easy to see the path Mother's slow murderer had taken, creeping through the back way to steal her life. It wasn't well known she was already dead of course, had been but a shell of herself for years. The murderous illness that finally killed her also killed something in all of us. Unhealed wounds scarring our adult lives. Felicia, now wobbling atop a grandiose wall, reigning down on me in the shadows, where I scabble around, collecting shell fragments, rescuing from memory bits of our lives and trying to piece us back together again. It's painstaking work.

I peer through cracks in the rough board cladding of the windowless shed just below the house. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the darkness within. In the adjacent north-west corner there is a space where the copper had been. Sounds came through the wall from the woodshed next door. Mother would chop kindling, using it to light the copper to heat water for the laundry. Sometimes she would make soap in the copper from big buckets of white fat rendered from dead animals.

The woodshed was the site of blood. A chopping block was positioned just inside the door. Felicia would watch with me as Mother raised the executioner's axe over the neck of an unlucky white leghorn fowl she had stretched across the block. I always wanted to see how things panned out. The hens made spectacles of themselves exiting the shed, their neck stumps dripping blood as their legs made a frenzied dash across the yard. Mother swore loudly the time one raced under the porch and died there. Dad swore that time too, as he had to take the porch apart to get at it.

I wander up behind the house to where rotting foundation posts are all that remain of where the goat shed used to be; where Dad had milked Nanny every day before he went to work. It was because of my allergy to cow's milk that Dad had to go to all this trouble,

Mother said. Nanny had five acres of gorse infested land she could roam around in. Dad was for-ever clearing gorse and sowing grass seed, so that brilliant green patches grew among the gorse like oases in a desert.

There had been other goats to keep Nanny company, but Mother decided she didn't want any more responsibility than she already had, so Dad sold them all. It was probably because Nanny was lonely that she walked up the angled stay post on the strainer and leapt over the fence into the vegetable garden while we were at school. Mother said she died munching on a cabbage. Shot through the head by Wes Smythe, the neighbour down the road, her body buried in the potato patch. A better use dead than alive, said Mother.

Dad and I gave Nanny a decent burial. In the woodshed I'd found two pieces of flat wood. I took them to Dad who was tacking out possum skins in the tool shed. Tacking out the skins was usually my job but I'd left it a bit late that morning, and I think Dad was worried the skins would dry out. He didn't say anything though, just took the boards, nailed them together and handed me a tin of black paint. I set about printing **Nannie** carefully in pencil on the cross piece before painting the letters. When the paint had dried, I carried the cross and Dad carried the mallet to Nannie's grave. He knocked the cross into the ground with the mallet and we both stood looking at it for a while.

"The sun is a great healer," Dad said on the way back, noting that the glass in the windows in *Sunbath* were designed to let the goodness of the sun through. I lay on my rough cotton bedspread in the afternoon and soaked up its rays.

There is no-one around at the jet boat launching site when I drive up. It is a good half hour before anybody arrives. While the driver is sliding the jet boat off the trailer into the water, I walk across the expanse of riverbed below the tributary. Dad, Felicia and I had once

wandered across here, berated by a pair of banded dotterels, one of which was dragging a wing.

I count twenty-two seats in the jet boat. Where are the other jet boat passengers? I skim stones across the water until they finally turn up in a red camper van, all three of them. There is plenty of space; not much profit in that.

My hair whips all over the place as the jet speeds along the water. The trees aren't stirring, denoting a calm day. The native trees haven't changed their dress but there has been an influx of exotic intruders over the intervening years. Willows with golden cloaks line the river bank like an invading army landing on foreign shores. In some places they are marching up the valleys between the ridges. Near the Staircase Viaduct it looks as though the marauding willows are themselves under attack from young warrior pines that tower over them, and cut a swathe through their path. Kowhai trees have been routed out or reduced to slave status.

The main trunk railway line to the West Coast followed the course of the river, taking shortcuts when its curves became too elaborate. There used to be railway worker settlements for the purpose of maintaining the track for heavy, coal laden steam trains. Staircase was one such place; a huddle of small weather-board huts, just before the viaduct; a historical wonder of engineering, that crossed the deep gully just before No. 8 tunnel. Staircase doesn't exist now. The single men's huts and a married couple's accommodation pulled down, erasing evidence of lives once lived there, leaving it a mystery to most.

Autumn is my favourite time of year, if not my favourite time of life. It has not been a neat balance sheet of late with more loss than profit. All the life changing cumulative events are making me wonder if I shouldn't get an expert, a *tohunga*, to drive out bad spirits hovering around my house. Felicia, one evening during her last visit, consulted prophetic instruments like tarot cards and the *I Ching*, declaring that my "bad patch" was due to bad

karma pouring down on me from a previous reprobate life. She'd been a courtesan once in Venice, she said, as she traced the split life line on my left palm. An early death was foreseen.

My cynicism of Felicia's predictions, aside from the fact she is about as psychically attuned as my toaster, is due to the experience of Dad's consultation with old Minnie Anderson. I guess he wanted some answers after Mother became terminally ill and had been given a year to live. Minnie Anderson was a professed psychic who had lived down the bottom of our hill and over the railway line. "You will have a lot of trials and tribulations in your life, John, but you will come out on top in the end," she'd said. Dad repeated these words often during the long years it took us to grow up and Mother to die. Sometimes, though, he said different words. When cooking us breakfast or dinner he would just stare out the kitchen window over the paddock where we went mushrooming in autumn.

"Life gets tedious," he would say.

In the past, coming up the river had been like entry into a new world, where the river tribe of my imagination had taken over and the world down the river had vanished for a time. With more traffic now, the outside world is intruding into the interior; motor sounds of other jet boats we pass override the voice of the river. As we round the last S bend the hut hoves into view. Its exposed shape - for the bush around has been butchered - sticks out like an oversized boxer dog's head. The picture window, a Cyclops' eye, stares out unblinking.

I step over the windscreen onto the nose of the jet. The driver holds out his hand to help me down onto the sand. His hand is warm, like the afternoon sun which has lost its ability to burn. I am glad to leave the other passengers behind; a couple in their early fifties, their complexions approaching the colour of red cabbage. A hue, due to broken thread veins road mapping their faces. From the padded front seat of the boat their dull eyes stare blankly at me standing on the sandy bank. Any animation, deriving from the thrilling turns the driver

had taken the trouble to manoeuvre on our way up, has dissipated. A few nights in a rat infested bush hut with opossums for company would probably finish them off. It might well finish me off. The couple aren't about to get out of the boat. Will their fresh-faced son?

"You had to look hard to see the hut from the river when I used to come up here," I say, to the driver.

"Yeah, the conservation department stipulated that the trees be cut down as part of the upgrade they're doing."

The couple's son doesn't follow me out of the boat, doesn't even get out to stretch his legs. A wilted cabbage look is creeping over his face too.

"Look, I land here every day, around one, taking passengers up. Unless it rains. So just wander down here in five days and we'll take you back. You did say five days? We'll check out nothing's got hold of you if you're not here waiting Friday. Five days is a long time - you sure you've got enough food in there?" he asks, lifting up my pack.

So the boats come up every day and stop here; that would ruin the fishing.

"Yes, came well prepared. Do you sometimes bring people up to the hut itself?"

"Naw, it'll be a long time before it's up to grade. You'll be on your own. If it gets too rough just come down here around one, any day. You'll hear me coming."

"Thanks, Kevin."

"Well, best be off. It gets cold at night, you realise, and when it rains the river rises fast. The gorge is a bottleneck. O.K. love, it's your funeral."

The growl of the jet boat returning down the river dies away as it rounds the bend and I lose sight of it. Now there is only the raw voice of the river coursing like milky green tea over the rocks. The level is up a bit, as there has been some rain in the catchment over the last few days.

As I stoop to pick up my pack my eye catches colours in the sand. Various bits of plastic, broken pieces of brown glass and shotgun casings are scattered like confetti. Heaving the pack over one shoulder I walk along beside willows growing on the edge of the riverbed, passing shiny green leafed tutu, a few flax bushes and some spindly kowhais. I use the rounded river rocks as stepping stones to the hut. I stop where the path turns straight up the hill - my shoulder hurts from the pack so I drop it on the ground. It doesn't seem like there is much of an upgrade taking place from where I stand. I can see a line, cutting into the bank, where the flood, all those years ago, reached. An outhouse peeps from the trees to the left of the hut, in the same place as the old one. This tells me that no flood since then has ever been so high.

There has been a chainsaw massacre of trees. Up close it looks a bloody mess; a frenzy of killing with not much thought involved, just prostrate dead bodies of black beech. A few trees have had their limbs sawn off, their branches tossed into a bony pile. Whoever had cut the trees had taken those on the east side. Tree's still standing on the west side of the hut means it remains shaded from the sun. At my feet are the ash remains of a bonfire the working party had lit.

I trudge straight uphill; the old zig-zag path is buried somewhere under the cut trees. Beneath the hut, firewood is stacked in the space below the floor boards. Somebody has chopped a small stack of kindling from treated wood - a 'townie' who didn't know any better. I'd bet he'd take one look at me and dismiss me as a crone of no importance. Such was the lack of respect nowadays for petrified things in a denuded forest.

The out-door to the porch has been taken off, so it is wide open. I turn the knob of the master door accessing the inner recess of the hut. It comes off in my hand.

I am worried about rats that first night, but I need not have been. I don't hear a sound. I toss around but the soft glow of the fire and the constant shish sound of the river lull me into an early sleep.

When first light slides through the window, I pull a heavy blue jumper over my dishevelled, aching head, slip my feet into jandals and grab the billy off the table. As I fiddle with the rope that latches the door, the door knob falls off onto the floor again. I stuff it back on temporarily, thinking to fix it later. Hunching my shoulders against the cold, I tread the rough path to the creek. Water trickles over moss-covered rock, where we once cooled the milk bottles. The old copper is still there, doing its job. I fill the billy. The dawn chorus is breaking over the rush of the river. Dad had been tuned in to all the different bird calls and to the ways of wildlife, teaching me some of what he knew. I lean down, peering at deer tracks in the soft mud. That they were this close to the hut means no-one has been around for some time. The deer droppings are dry and about a week old.

Dad had mounted the dressed head of the first deer he'd shot, on the hall wall at 'Sunbath' - a sixteen pointer in full velvet. I had lain, one morning half sleep, unable to move for fear the deer had come alive again, for I could hear it roaring loudly from the hallway. When fully awake I realised it was the sound of Mother snoring from the far bedroom, a thirsty animal baying for my blood. That's how she loomed, monstrous in my mind through the later years. I have to dig deeper to mine better memories when Mother gave me gems, but as her illness moved in she moved out. Glimmers of golden light in her hazel eyes were replaced by the glitter of obsidian stone. Came the time when she would whip herself into a frenzy over trifles.

Why is it that everything turns out to have some hidden hurdle around a corner that isn't on the map, isn't expected and isn't planned? Like this illness that dogs my every move. Another night and I can't sleep; Mickey the rat and I tussle as to who will occupy the heart of

the hut. Tonight he pokes his nose out just above the chimney to make my acquaintance. I whack at him with a straw broom. Then I hear him directly above, squeaking and scrabbling across the half covered ceiling. Whoever took over the hut after Dad left, built this mezzanine in which to store things; half the hut has exposed beams, half has an A-shaped attic. If there was a ladder you could store stuff up there. The only thing there now, aside from some loose timber, is Mickey, who is using it like a main highway to the lower regions where I am. I have put all the food in high cupboards so he can't access it. There are holes in some of the lower cupboards where the wood has been gnawed through. It's the smell of food, not my flesh - although he would have that too - that is making him bold. I cut a long manuka stick and every so often put the end of it in the fire. When it starts flaming I take it outside and smother the flames on the damp ground. Then I come back in, climb onto a chair and stab the smoking stick into the inner recess of the attic. I wave it around, shouting and swearing at Mickey in the vain hope it will inspire him to bugger off.

Joey's voice is in my ear: "Be careful that you don't set the place on fire." I keep hearing Joey's voice along with every other spoiler that ever lived in my life telling me not to do things they know absolutely nothing about. These chattering voices are wearing me down. I clamber up onto the top bunk to shore up the inherited belief that I will, 'come out on top in the end.' I can't sleep, as I am over-heated. Tonight my temperature must be breaking through barriers, giving me an inroad to another world. The pattern on the old ragged curtains starts to move and I see golden dragons talking to each other. Two dark gremlins sit on the end of my bed and chatter away. I can't determine their words. Muppets are dancing on the table. It sure beats television hands down, but then it becomes too busy. I close my eyes, thinking it will all go away. But another movie begins playing inside my head. The boat I am lying in starts to rock. I open my eyes again. A glow of light, issuing from the direction of the coal range, is growing fainter. I'll soon be in darkness. One good thing is that these fantasy

creatures are benign. It is comforting to know that my internal world is not of a paranoid nature, not directly persecuting like my childhood dreams, like Mickey the rat. Where is he I want to know? I strain to hear any signal of his presence, but he is lying low.

These movies could go on all night, so I get up and poke around in the embers, sliding some kindling in to resurrect the fire. I swallow a couple of Panadol using warm water from the copper kettle. I fit the poker into the stove ring indent above the firebox, hook out the round plate and place the kettle directly on the flame. The whistle gains in pitch as the water heats to boiling point. I drop two herbal tea bags into a gold-leaf rimmed bone china tea cup, recognising the latter as one of the remains from our old dinner set. There are other bits and pieces here too, the ones I threw out the door onto the porch this morning when I was sweeping out all the dust, rat shit, bits of wood, and shredded paper. Rubbish that had accumulated over the years. Dust had dulled the colours, but I recognised my old patchwork quilt. Each patch, blanket stitched in red embroidery cotton, was my grandmother's fine work. Rats have gnawed holes in the maroon corduroy and tartan hexagon shapes that make up the pattern.

Today I think to climb above the treeline, and so I walk down to the pool to view the best route up. To get an even better view I traipse across the pebbles and boulders to the edge of the main stream. The riverbed is much wider than when I first arrived. It is wider because the river has fallen nearly a metre, no longer milky green tea, it is turning to turquoise emerald. From this vantage point I survey the broad expanse of bush and beyond this a blonde strip, patch-worked with grey; there are cattle up there, tiny dots feeding among the high tussock. The land beyond is part of Woodvale sheep station, where 'Hunting is Forbidden.' These words are written in the hut's visitors' book, lying dusty in the cupboard.

Four ridges divide the land along this section of the river; two come down on the left hand side of the hut and two on the right. The right-side ridges end in perpendicular rock bluffs at the top which means a full stop to any intention of using those routes as ladders. I could go via the ridge to the left of the hut but getting through the clinging bush lawyer and thick undergrowth to open ground does not appeal. I retrace my steps to the pool and then veer off to the left, following the slow trickling creek upstream as it winds its way through the bush. I spy the relic of a winch lying among ferns just as the land starts to rise steeply. During the night of the great flood Dad and Uncle Vern had used the winch to haul the jet boat up the hill. A monster piece of rusting steel, they must have transported it here in pieces. There is no wire rope round the cable drum though, that was long gone.

Thick vines hang all around me. I'm not swinging through the trees with the greatest of ease. I'm half crawling up the steep slope, following the creek, wondering about the limits of my heart which is beating overtime again, as it has been wont to do recently. I swerve to the right where the undergrowth thins out, but then I see the rock edge of the cliff about five strides from me. I begin to hyperventilate, my thoughts are racing but my body freezes. I am acrophobic, claustrophobic as well as myopic. Heights didn't bother others in the family. Dad and Mother's brothers both, having piloted planes. Their coming to a bad end that way meant my being doomed to inhabit the lowlands didn't ordinarily bother me. However, right now I'm not doing too well in the confidence stakes that the world's a safe place. So I rest a while under a beech tree, breathing purposefully... slowly... the bush seems to be crowding in on me. As I sit here in the tranquil green I am bomb-blasted with red thoughts. I'd been aged twelve when I was last up the river, just before we'd shifted from the district because of Mother's illness (It's made me cautious ever since about moving house). We'd left 'Sunbath' one frosty morning in the old V8, setting out for either "sunny Nelson," as Mother called it, or "sleepy hollow," as Dad kept saying it was. We were about to find out the truth of naming.

The sky had been red, with globular marshmallow clouds hanging suspended in the sky like alien spaceships. It should have been a warning, but Mother, convinced by her colour therapist that red was a healing colour, paid no heed to the ancient mariners' 'rule of thumb.' I search the sky now through the lacy beech canopy, for ominous threads of red in its myriad of monotonous greys but I see none.

Back then a trying time for us all was about to get worse. Moving wasn't voluntary on Dad's part, he'd been coerced - a polite way of putting it, but I'll spare you the details. If you were to search about for a villainous other like Dad did, who'd set our lives on a downhill course, it would have to be the colour therapist Mother was seeing at the time. Mother's rainbow of hope was that the colour therapist would cure her if she moved to Nelson where his practice was based. You couldn't blame her, for exploring all alternative routes to getting well. I started to hear Dad's 'life gets tedious' line more often. Dad left his job; we left school. He'd worked out in the open air, walking for miles, laying trails of carrots laced with strychnine for unwary rabbits. "I'm my own boss," he would say. Given the influence of Mother this was doubtful.

I stand up slowly and move away from the cliff face, because I don't want to end up doing a hundred foot dive into the pool. My body doesn't obey me nearly as well these days; it gets rubbery, shaky and might do something stupid like slip or trip which will tip me where I don't want to go. I draw closer to the creek, weaving around shrubs and trees, the vegetation thinning the higher I climb. I come across narrow sheep tracks that wind their way out onto the plateau above the bush line. The contours follow the wend of the river below after millions of years gouging a valley out of the land's flesh. Unburdened by further uphill effort, my body feels light and easy. A warm nor'wester is blowing in my face. I keep a leisurely pace, absorbing the panoramic view both of the riverbed below and of the heights above. There are signs of human presence that signal I am not as far from civilisation as I first

thought. The answer to how a pile of rotting beehive boxes got to be stacked under a beech tree is answered by four wheel drive tracks that weave among the spiny matagouri clumps that cut across my path. The tracks head upwards across the face of the range. I hadn't expected a main highway here. Higher up, cattle are fanned out across the slopes. Sheep play hide-and-seek among the tussock feeding on rough grassland.

I am looking for a place to re-enter the bush, a spur I can follow that will lead me along a path of least resistance back down to the hut. I curve around, passing the perpendicular cliffs. Walking along the flat is so pleasant I am lulled into thinking it doesn't matter which spur I take as they all head downhill. I keep walking longer than I should, entering the bush on a spur too far along, thinking 'all roads lead to Rome.' It is easy coming down at first but then it becomes steep and I start to slide and scabble, clutching at bushes, coming to a full stop above the cliff face. Twenty feet below me I see the river flowing fast and swift around a corner, so I retrace my steps, clawing my way back up to the ridge line. My hands are bleeding from cuts and scratches caused by grabbing bush lawyer to keep myself from sliding down the steep inclines. Once it has its talons into me the bush lawyer doesn't let go, its serrated edges ripping at my clothes and skin, entangling itself in my hair and pinning me to the spot so I have to stop and detach its claws. I've come here to get away from human-kind but nature is proving more merciless.

Bedraggled with bits of bush sticking out of my hair, I emerge through a thicket onto the river bed as light is fading. It has been a rough afternoon, reminding me to never be complacent in the bush. I am cursing, labouring up the slippery straight-up path forced on me by the thoughtless, who had cut down the trees around the hut. They hadn't even checked that maybe, just maybe, the water supply might get buried under the debris. "Idiots," I mutter, stepping through the door-less porch and pushing open the knob-less door into the hut. I've

started talking to myself out loud on this third day here. I notice I am swearing quite a bit. I hear myself say “fuck.”

There is a man sitting around the fold down table drinking a cup of tea. Coffee? What do I care what he is drinking? More to the point, what is he doing here? How did he get here? Had he also been dropped off by the jet boat? I haven't heard one. He has an abundance of silver-grey hair. He has dark brown skin indicating he is an outdoors type.

“Hi,” he says, smiling. “I've just made some coffee. You look like you could use some.”

“Thanks,” I say.

I'm aware I'm not in a rational state of mind. I need to get to my bed on the top bunk. Fast.

“Would you kindly pass my cup to me, when I get up to my bunk?” I ask.

“Sure.” He smiles again.

I am clambering up into the top bunk. Some idiot back in time has taken away the ladder and I have to contort myself to get up to where I feel safe. I can hear him shuffling about, heating something on the coal range, a clatter of dishes, and then movement underneath in the bunk, getting himself into bed. After it has been quiet for some time I slip down and softly steal outside to relieve myself. On the way back I grab some bread and cheese from the cupboard and gnaw on it while lying down. Then I strain to hear sonorous sounds above the constant hiss of the river. Intermittent light snoring reassures me the man in the bed below is no longer conscious. I swallow a sleeping tablet.

Early morning light seeping into the upper reaches of the bunk, accompanied by the keening cries of birds, wakes me. I detect no movement, no sound of breathing from underneath. I grab my spectacles off the horizontal timber joist I'm using as a shelf, and shove them on. Stretching over to view the bunk below, I see it is empty except for an orange

sleeping bag. My eyes flicker over the rest of the interior. He isn't inside. Intruding from outdoors, cutting the air above the rushing of the river and birds chirping, comes the chip, chip, chipping of kindling.

The door opens and footsteps soft-boot across the jarrah timbered flooring. Jarrah is iron wood, difficult to drive a nail into, material from the old days. Built to last. This salient piece of information is my way of distracting myself from the situation at hand. There are other ways; I place my specs back on the shelf and hunker down into my sleeping bag. Memories crowd my internal world... Dad and Uncle Vern pulling apart a disused railway hut further down the river to rebuild here...transporting the jarrah timbers had taken many trips...jetboats were smaller and slower back then. A light clatter as kindling wood is set down. The rustling of newspaper and a clank of metal stops my train of thought. The bastard I met last night is fiddling around trying to light the stove. I'm not being negative here, I'm quoting a legendary '*good keen man,*' who'd been anything but good to his wives. The man below is unknown and therefore unpredictable. Any minute now and he'll be smoking me out of my lair. I will have to emerge like Persephone from a hellish fate. I am getting riled up just thinking about it. My fears are disconfirmed as the coal range sparks into life immediately; a hollow roar shooting up the chimney. That he is competent at lighting the stove ignites me more than if he hadn't been. Why is he here?

I begin to lean over, preparing to poke my head out the end of the bunk, intent on asking him. Then I realise I won't be able to see the stranger's face without my specs and I will need to see what is mirrored in his eyes, what is staring back at me. How bad is my myopia? Bad. I have Dad's blue eyes but not his twenty-twenty vision. He could shoot a deer from five hundred yards away, I can't see clearly more than two feet. My spectacles are sitting there looking respectable one foot away on the timber shelf; they have graduated tinted lenses with tiny sparkling diamantes on the outer edges of the frameless frame, subtle though,

classy, not the blatant face furniture of Dame Edna Everage. I am wishing them a focal point on my face now as they would at least curtain me from the stranger's gaze. But I am having another of my frozen moments, not wanting to alert him that I am awake. So what's it going to be? Squinting my eyes at him in an attempt to see clearer might have this grey haired fox confirming, rather than suspecting I really am bonkers.

I'm lying in the bunk Dad usually slept in. He'd fallen over the side one night. His body crashed to the floor and shook us awake. He wasn't hurt, just bemused, he was always that way when danger happened. Not like me, quaking at being stuck in the hut with company I don't want for God knows how long, did I say God?... perhaps I am word-associating God with the heaven's opening... rain is beginning to pelt down out there... I stopped believing in God the night hell came in the form of Maurice Winter. The relentless nature of events of late feels due to another malevolent force, a haunting spectre persecuting from the nether regions, generating storms, destructive in its attempts to cower me into submission.

The kettle's high pitched whistle wakes me a second time. A clunk on the table and the sound of water being poured, the smell of toast, and then bacon sizzling. Like setting a trap for a mouse.

"Are you awake up there?"

"Yes."

"You want a coffee?"

"Sure."

"Condensed milk? Sugar?"

"Both thanks."

A hand, holding a cup comes up over the edge of the bed. The coffee tastes good. A little while later: "You want some bacon and eggs?"

"Sure."

“Easy over?”

“Sunny side up, please.”

A steaming plate with a fork on the side comes into my line of vision.

“Hey, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Did I detect an accent there? Not the taciturn New Zealand phrase, ‘That’s alright,’ carrying implications of favours conferred.

He cleans the greasy dishes too. Boiling up the water for washing them, clattering about in the sink, asking for my cup and plate. I’m not used to this service, being as it is usually the other way round. I don’t want to get up so I start reading a book I have sitting on my timber shelf.

There isn’t much to read at the hut. Just the usual paraphernalia lying about that you’d expect from a place inhabited mostly by men over the years - *Playboy* and cheaper versions of the same genre; the odd hunting and fishing magazine and a few western paperbacks added to the mix. Nothing that challenges the reader unless you are female. I’d found some girly calendars hidden away in a bottom cupboard - you know the kind - curvy big breasted women in bare skin. There was one calendar with a woman tied with ropes and slung over the bonnet of a Landrover; an avatar of a deer hunting trophy. I used that calendar for starting the fire when I’d first arrived; it had a Neanderthal feel to it. The fire smouldered and went out. Shiny paper doesn’t ignite well, exuding a green flame that slow burns across the surface.

I have brought along two books to read, a slim volume and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The slim volume is by an American woman. It is a watery book, a fictionalised version of what happened at Chappaquiddick, when a Kennedy had driven a car off a bridge into black water. In the story, the young woman survives for several hours in an air bubble, taking a long time to die, so she might have been rescued during that time, but she isn’t, because the

coward seeks to save himself and his political career instead. Dangerous drivers, the Kennedys, bad luck to be a woman in the passenger seat. It takes me two and a half hours to read the book, roughly the time it had taken, in real life, for Mary Jo Kopechne to die.

Where is justice? Sometimes it gets so bad inside I want to kill: Winter, Mother, Felicia, the ex, the gargoyle wiping out the sun. Rape happens in war where there is a lot of death. Perhaps Winter was afraid of dying that night of the flood, or perhaps the war killed a part of him long before that - a living death - the kind of death Joey is living. Maurice Winter, dying before I could deal with him, and the surgeon, who botched Joey's operation, whose careless cold steel seared through our lives? I fought to have it known what happened, but it gets taken out of your hands.

I place the book back on the shelf. Raising my head slightly I sneak a peek at the intruder sitting at the table. What kind of driver is he? His head is bent over. A picture of domesticity, he is sewing a button on one of his shirts. A cloth sewing kit is lying open on the table packed with different coloured threads, a tiny pair of scissors, a packet of needles and a needle threader lie on the table. A silver thimble is set upon his index finger. Thimbles are obsolete now, aren't they? He must have heard my movement because he looks up at me and smiles.

"Hey, can't be that bad," he says.

"Pardon?"

"You look worried"

I want to say that I was once a pleasant person but this illness, whatever it is, is making me really cranky. It will not get the better of me though. I can be singly determined when I want to.

"Thanks for the coffee and bacon and eggs, I really appreciated it. I haven't been feeling too well lately. Sorry I'm not the best company."

“Hey, I’m up here for peace and quiet too.”

It feels like an accord of sorts. I rummage around and find my jeans at the bottom of the bed, pulling them on along with a tee shirt, red possum socks, and a tartan wool shirt. I shove my spectacles up on top of my head as I habitually do when I don’t wish to view the world clearly. Duly dressed, I slither down over the open end of the bunk. Feeling grubby, and in need of a wash, I grab my toiletry bag and towel, give the blurry human form a nod and close the door, hearing the clank of the door knob falling off inside, onto the floor.

It is spitting rain. I put my spectacles back on after giving them a wipe. The river level is unchanged from yesterday. I walk on damp rocks down to the pool. From there I turn into the bush, clambering my way slowly upwards. It takes me about an hour to get to a rocky alcove, just to the right of the trickling stream, running down the steepest parts in short waterfalls. Some way off, parallel to the stream, is the sheer cliff face. I just lie there in the alcove, watching a watery sun seep through the clouds. I hear, rather than see, Kevin roar up in the jet boat. That’s why I know it is about one o’clock. His voice floats up the cliff face. He is telling stories to entertain his passengers. They are a livelier lot than the ones I came here with because their laughter permeates the air. I’m invisible here in my shelter, like a child unnoticed when adults are talking. The afternoon sun is shining directly on me, warming me to drowsiness. The voices fade as I lie watching cotton-wool clouds speed across a now blue sky. The sound of the great jet engine, roaring back the way it had come, signals it is safe to venture out, so I slowly make my way back down to the pool.

I arrived how many days ago now? The days are blurring together. The bank slopes steeply, about half a metre down to the water that darkens to turquoise as it deepens. Because the water level has dropped I can’t lie flat across the sand anymore to dip my head in the pool. I slide my jeans off, deciding on a swim to cool me off. Beads of sweat are breaking out on my forehead. As I sit down on the bank, sand flies swoop onto a landing strip of soft skin.

I'll have to get into the water to avoid being covered in bites. I crawl lizard-like down the bank, staring into the water. The rest of the pool blurs and all I can see is my own reflection. An up-ended body staring into a mirror... hair rippling in waves, the aquiline nose, a handsome face, the ravages of time dimmed in an imperfect mirror. I laugh, putting my hand in the water, disturbing the reflection, not wanting to see the whole picture... me and my shadow. The lyrics of an old song Mother used to croak comes exploding into my head: *'just me and my shadow, all alone and feeling blue.'* I pull the curtain down on the performance, look back into the water: me, my shadow, and I, me, my shadow, I and Mother, parts of the same. I lie staring at my reflection until I feel sand flies' relentless nibbling, this time at my ankles. There's always something nipping at you, no peace. Wriggling snake-like, feet first, back up the bank. By the water I see my gold wedding ring lies in the sand. It has fallen off my bony finger. I shimmy back down and pluck it out, enclosing it in the palm of my hand while I again worm backwards up the steep bank. As I drop the small gold ring into the pocket of my shirt, something sharp in there pricks my finger, a thorn, a squashed rose, leftover from Auntie Nora's grave. Fresh daisy flowers are growing just back from the pool. I walk over, pick them and scatter the petals across the water like confetti at a wedding. "Rest in peace," I say, as they swirl, being drawn into the current flowing out into the main braid of the river. Alice's words about her mother come back to me, *'That's all I had to do, accept her reality.'* It is all I need to do too; for too long I've been blinded by dark coloured perceptions of Mother. I take my specs off, putting them in my shirt pocket and slide back down the bank, into the water, following the flowers. The water is so cold it feels warm.

My head is a swirling maelstrom, flooding inside. I duck under the surface of the water, thinking to swim down to the fishes. I see a flash of red, a salmon with a silver minnow shimmering beside her like some royal escort. She is moving into the outer reaches of the pool. Moving away. I want to shout: "Wait," but my mouth is closed against the water.

Of course she doesn't do what I want, why should she? I never did what Mother wanted either. Eyes wide open and I can see her skating across the sandy bottom. I surface and lose sight of her. Then I put my head under the water again and catch a glimpse of her.

Momentarily still, stationary, and then she is off. I'm not about to let her get away lightly.

The current is getting stronger and the water colder. Unable to swim against it, I'm carried swiftly along, as the force of the water hurls me into the main stream. I scoop my arms to keep afloat. The salmon is gone. I am cursing my stupidity, scrabbling about with nothing to hold to, an abandoned derelict, arms automatically cutting the surface.

Go with the flow. Oh sure. I beat the water. It has a minnow effect. The force is too strong, I go under, then swirl upwards again; there is light, I have breath, I've come through! But no, water curtained eyes see a grey boulder looming large, sucking me in, the boulder, that uncovered itself a little more each day as the water level lowered, now in front of me. And all the while lifting, pressing at my rag doll body, drawing me into its deadly maw. I curl in the water, a rubbery form, hurtling into a hard face. The force of the water, pressing down, bursting apart, my ears a thunderous roaring, caught in a churning eddy, blind, shunting around and around, dark as Hades, unseeing. Is this the end? No! Upside down sideways, lungs bursting, exploding, screaming and then... light, bubbles, champagne popping, suspended... and surfacing, coughing, choking, but I go down a second time. I must hold, bursting inside, my head exploding, suffocating, a dark tunnel, and at the end a light, a pin dot, looming large like a white moon, and I break, arms flailing. The current is speeding me downstream, gasping for air, swallowing water, as the swift, surging river sweeps me on. Furiously scooping my arms to keep afloat, kicking with whatever I have left, swinging out of the fast flow now. I feel slippery rocks. Serpent-like slithering, using my hands... I course face down into muddy sand. Lying there spent, a voice inside screams, *Get Up. Get out of the water.* On rubber knees, hands skating across slime, inching slowly, numbly onto a slab of warm rock.

I open my eyes, feeling feverishly hot. No matter. Willing myself to move. I push down with my hands, raising my chest off the rock and lift myself into a crawling position. On my knees again. Everything is a blur. My spectacles lost in the river. No! They are in my pocket. I fumble them out and put them on. Sitting up now, marvelling at my forethought. Telling myself, "Haven't I done well?" And then another voice saying what an idiot being here in the first place. "Well, you can shut up," I hear myself saying. I begin talking or rather muttering out loud to myself. "It's not so bad, you've been in worse places." This is no time for an argument. I look around, getting my bearings; I am on the same side of the river as the hut, but downstream, blocked from reaching the pool by the perpendicular cliff. "There, you see, a stroke of luck." For from this south side it is a gentle slope to the apex above the cliff face; an easier climb and more open - a giant piece of cake.

My body, in no danger of stiffening up with disuse, is oiling itself for the challenge ahead. Movement eases it back into its proper shape. Become a human tractor, just keep going, that's what I have to do. Willing against gravity, it is easier in the water; on land my body is leaden. I curl around and look at bare, brown legs. They are dotted with blood specks, dried from the sun - sand fly bites, a few cuts, nothing serious, crimson blotches still forming; swirling whorl patterns, bruises from the rocks. My jeans, and shoes are sitting neat on the sandy bank back at the pool. What if the stranger has found them? Funny, the things that get you going at times like this. *What would Miss Slade, my old bible class teacher think?* And then there is the idea of a Neanderthal, the fishing, hunting and shooting kind who inhabit these parts, staring at my bare legs and me having to explain why I'd gone down the river without a boat. I have to get to the bottom half of my clothes alive, unseen, no matter the cost.

Belligerent, with renewed energy I raise myself to a sitting position and stare at my about to be battered feet. My enlarged big toe, the one I dropped the salt block on, is in for some more torture. I pull over my head the tartan wool shirt that was once Joey's. Looking along the bank, I seek a tool, anything that will serve as a makeshift hole punch. My eyes alight upon a broken *coprosma rugosa* shrub growing on the low bank of the riverbed. I stand

wobbly at first, and make a beeline towards it. The coprosma's wooden spears serve as prongs to make a line of holes in the upper sleeve of the shirt. I rip the material along the line so that the sleeve separates off from the rest of the shirt. Then I repeat the same arduous process with the other sleeve, remembering, too late, that Felicia's pounamu adze hanging around my neck would have done a better job. I pull the shirt-cum-waistcoat back on over my merino top; layers for warmth. *Must get moving*. I figure it is around mid-afternoon judging by the position of the sun. Not much time. No time. I do up the cuff buttons on the amputated sleeve. I put one foot inside a sleeve and my big toe comes sticking out through the cuff bracket; chipped red polish on my toenail twinkles at me. I promise my foot, a pedicure in the islands after this. What do I do now, Mother? This isn't a trifle, no recipe of clear cut steps what to do next. It is a green pickle situation where you improvise and hope it works.

There is an army of flax bushes positioned about ten metres away by a stagnant pool. I limp over and hack some spears off with my trusty adze. Then I tear the spear leaves into thin strips. Next I flay them with the adze to make them pliable to my whims. Felicia's adze proves multi-purposeful, not quite Swiss army knife material, but adequate to cut strategic small slits in both sleeves through which I thread the tortured strips, winding and binding the flax around my foot several times, finally tying it at the ankle. Satisfied my foot is tightly imprisoned, and won't escape on the journey over the hill, I begin preparing the other for incarceration, all the while swiping at sand-flies.

It is an easy gradient along the river flat, interspersed with tutu shrubs and rough pasture. The smell hits me as I close in on the south side of hill. The decomposing bodies of two cattle tell a story that has ended badly. *They like the tutu too much*. This line always comes into my head when I see tutu's dark green leaves. Tutu is deadly poisonous this time of year. The easy access to this side of the hill means stock wander here from above. I've seen

this death scene before, on the West Coast. There was a river there too, coursing along the bottom boundary of our first home, the one the ex and I bought when we first married. A local farmer, Old Ken, had been renting the flats to graze his cattle over the winter (he was called Old Ken to differentiate him from his son, Young Ken). “They like the tutu too much,” Old Ken had quipped, sighting the bloated cows’ bodies belly up on the river bank. He’d driven up in a battered ute in response to my phone call. If he’d been any slower he’d have been catatonic. By the time he got his tractor up to bury them their fluids were seeping all over the ground.

“Good blood and bone that,” said Old Ken. He was looking at me in such a way that I was wondering just which angle he was coming from. Was I a winner in this exchange? The whole bloody mess didn’t bode well for our new life; all those rotting bodies must have been a sign heralding that our marriage would also go belly up.

I pull the waistcoat up over my nose and sidle around the beasts. The bush is more open this side, making the gradual climb easy walking. I slowly ascend step by step to the plateau. The sun is losing its strength and there is a nip in the air. I reach the point where I’d come up the cliff face from the pool, the other day. Was that yesterday? It might have been eons ago.

Re-entering the bush, I slide down the steep incline mostly on my backside, rueful there will be more scratches, more bruises. Going down this way avoids a strain on my knees. The cold creek water cools my feet. I’m halfway down when I slip and lose control, gathering momentum like one of the rocks I’ve loosened; not sure where this will end. I can see rocks hurtling down yards in front of me, picking up speed. A grey trunk looms into my path and stops me dead. Not literally dead, of course, but I’m feeling close to it.

I lie there, tuning in to areas of possible body damage, as a steam train thunders through my mind. Has Mother finally caught up with me here, in the wilds of Cold River? I

remember when she went searching for me, years ago up Flagpole Hill, but didn't find me, wilfully set on going my own way. She hadn't given up on me then, rather I'd given up on her. I'd had to at the time, but then I went on expecting her to be a mother long after she couldn't raise herself up off her bed, unable to move or even feed herself. I'd hardly known her - her role of sick mother eating up any sense of who she was as a person.

I descend down to where the creek by-passes the old winch to the left of the pool. I've come full circle. Safe to come out? As I gingerly peer out of the trees, I feel caught in a strobe light with bits of bright reality flashing on and off. This signals I'm going to run down anytime soon. I spy my jeans and shoes sitting neatly where I've left them. Out in the open now I make a run and scoop them up, numbly stumbling up the path to the hut, not giving a damn about what Miss Slade would think.

He is standing in the middle of the river, a tall man, the water swirling around the middle of his thighs. Wearing denim cut offs? I'm always particular about fashion. It's queer what you fixate on in the midst of a crisis. What is he contemplating? I don't know, but he doesn't look good. He seems stuck there like he has reached the limits of his strength. His eyes are staring at me from a concrete face. A statue precarious in its place, the force of the water midstream furiously eddying around him may tip him over. If he takes a step either way, he is in trouble. Why is he out in the middle of the river? I am in no mood to dwell on it. I am on limited time myself, to get to the hut, to keep warm. I am shaky on my feet and periodically hallucinating. The man seems real enough, though. It is all starting to feel surreal. There are only two of us up here in the wilderness. You'd think the lack of people and technological trappings would mean a slow and simple life. Peace and quiet, bucolic bliss - how hard can that be? What is really galling, sticking like a claw in my throat, is the same old story spouting up again, like water intermittently gushing through the clogged up pipes of a fountain's classical statue, the kind you find in a pool in the middle of Rome. Why does it

always seem to end with someone centring themselves in the middle of my story, sucking leech-like on my life; worming parasitic dependence. And me in a state of heightened flux, drawing on what miniscule resources I have left.

I am swelling up inside, feeling pregnant, giving birth to red memories. In the middle of the waves of contractions I have a vision. A bare back rider, galloping through a battlefield, waving a bannered flag. A message of courage, rousing one to soldier on, to glory, be faithful to one's band of Custer battlers. Do not disgrace the family uniform, stand tall, do not crack, do not bail out in the face of the black bearer of death riding fast from the other direction. A proud stance, nose in the wind and "chin up." Dad's fatalist voice, this time issuing a cliché. And me? What am I doing here? Stoicism be damned. Why couldn't I wallow in the mud, in the shallows and splash about a bit. At these thoughts the fire inside bursts into flames:

"Get the hell out of there!"

I begin gesturing, waving furiously at the frozen figure standing in the middle of Cold River, beckoning him towards me in wide sweeping motions. If he can't hear me, he can at least see me. I imagine my long hair is stuck out in all directions, as it does after it gets wet and dries. It gets springy and frizzled and feels wiry to touch - hair coarsens as you go grey, never mind it's dead. There is no everlasting life. The last rays of the sun filtering through from behind are probably giving me a halo. At the bottom of my bare legs the improvised shoes are coming apart; spiky spears of bruised flax sticking up around my swelling ankles reminiscent of Mercury's winged sandals. My message to the man in the middle of the river comes from the underworld.

"Get out of the bloody water!" I wave my driftwood walking stick at him and jump up and down.

“Think you’ve had a hard life? Life gets rough! Reached the rapids yet? Want to hear where I’ve been? Course not. Typical!”

He is still staring blankly at me. I don’t know who I am mad at any more, so I start hoarsely singing, part of me wanting to calm myself and part of me wanting to taunt him further.

“Sailing down the river on a Sunday afternoon.”

My body begins swaying in synchrony to the sound coming out of my mouth, my feet weaving around the river stones; a south sea maiden of Te Waipounamu.

“The one you love, the sun above, waiting for the moon.” I am getting fully into the swing of it when I stub my toe hard on some slippery stone monster. My mouth and throat feel full of ashes, but I’m not giving up.

“Get on with it. Go on, Bambi.” I am spent now, shaking, glaring at him. If I could reach him I would push him over. Anything to stop the gormless gaze he is directing at me. As I turn to go I hear a voice roar above the sound of the river. On the periphery of my vision I see movement. He is sparking alight. There are lights everywhere, dancing Xmas trees in front of me. I feel electric all over but the plug is pulled and all goes grey.

I drop to my knees on the rocks. There are dark spots in my field of vision. *Low blood pressure.* I have to get to the hut. I begin crawling crablike, unable to stand; my head feels as though it is swelling, and I want to puke, but there is nothing inside to heave up. Picking up speed, I high tail it up to the hut as though bitten, dancing some wild version of the tarantella. I can hear him behind me, grunting like a wild pig.

I stagger, almost falling through the door. Thank God! The fire still has hot embers in the grate. I strip off my sticky clothes, grab a towel, rub myself down roughly, and rummage around for a soft wool singlet, pulling it over my head. Another layer. *Where are my bloody possum socks?* I tip out everything left in my pack and, of course, Murphy’s law reigns -

everything but my socks. *In the side pocket - yes!* I sit on the bottom bunk and pull them on, along with some fleecy trackers. I don't hear the River Lord coming yet.

Inside the cupboard I find a slab of nutty Gruyere cheese I bought for a special occasion, and rip off the wrapping, then tear at the cellophane around a packet of sweet bran biscuits. Unable to make headway, I use the pounamu adze from around my neck and stab the cellophane, making holes. Then I squash a piece of cheese off the main square with my fingers and lump it onto a biscuit. My mouth feels as dry as stale bread. Where is the juice? I hear a sound outside, clomping on the porch floorboards. The Hulk bearing down on me. I leap across to the bottom bunk, fire the biscuit and the cheese up and over so it lands on the top bunk; clambering up after it to lie panting on the top of the mattress. Working the cheese like Plasticine while masticating the biscuit. I can hear clanking sounds...then the sound of the damper in the stove being pulled out. Mouse quiet, straining to hear; a soft roar up the chimney. The kettle is being filled, the poker hooking into the cleft in the ring plate on the stove. He is closer now, below me, the air moving as he sweeps some article of clothing over the top of his head. A faint smell of musk or was it my own? The bed below creaking, the flap of boot laces on the wooden floor and then couple of thumps. A disembodied voice speaks:

“I dropped my fishing rod in the river.”

Is he being metaphorically truthful, lying or a simpleton? A cornucopia of meaning, no doubt. It isn't the meaning of what he said that matters though, it is the sound of his voice, which somehow reassures me that he is in some semblance of right mind. In better shape than me, at least. I open my mouth but frog sounds come out. He must have heard me because he says, “I'll get you a cuppa.”

He does too. It is hot and steaming. The best tea I've ever tasted. When able, I lean over the bunk and look down with near-sighted eyes at his shadow sitting at the table. I croak at him: "I need another, please?"

"I'll make it weaker or you won't sleep."

"Sure."

The second cup of tea tastes like sweet, hot water, but I drink it down regardless. Five minutes or so and I'm lying there spent, with paralysis creeping through my limbs but my mind still racing. A glass of wine might help but the bottle's on top of the cupboard.

"I'm not feeling well."

"I'm opening a can of soup. It'll be ready in five. You'll sleep better on a full stomach. Want some toast with it?"

"No, I've eaten bread with cheese." I sound hoarse to myself.

He passes up the chicken noodle soup in a one of those thick-rimmed cups I hate, but it keeps the heat from burning my hands. I sip it continuously until it is gone. I am about to put the empty cup on the rafter ledge when I see movement and his open hand comes up from below. I put the cup in it.

"I'll keep an eye on everything. I won't wake you, but I'll just check you're alright, if that's O.K., before I turn in."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I know a few things about measuring respiration rate. I'm not sure that sleeping up there will be helping if you have a temperature."

"Sure." 'Sure' is what I always say when I can't think of anything else to say.

I just lie there then, aware of all the words chattering at speed through my head. The boat is coming tomorrow. I am going home. I need to pack, have to be ready, be down at the pool. Attending to details somehow makes the world seem more under control. How is Joey

managing? How are the carer's coping? How am I going to cope? Make an appointment with the GP, for me, not Joey, he'll want to come too, of course, hyper alert to any sign of a car ride, any hint we are going out. His mind fleeing from a brain eating amoeba or his brain, an amoeba fleeing his mind? Felicia. Where is Felicia? Even the sound of her voice right now would be good, and beneath this alphabet stream there is another part of me. Always that other part, since the night of the flood - a child giving birth to a thing that stood back and watched myself and others, like some dark animal always on alert.

Rain pelting on the roof, wakes me, after the best sleep I've had in a long time. But when I stretch to get out of bed my whole body groans. My sacroiliac joint is playing up. It does this in wet weather, ever since I strained it a few years ago. Better to lie back and take it slowly. Sometimes I ignore my own advice, but this morning I don't. The funny thing about this illness is that I don't usually notice it until later in the day when the pain in the thyroid - the butterfly at the base of my neck - starts spreading its wings over the left part of my head. The lump on the right wing has shrunk now to the size of a shrivelled olive. I had thought when it shrunk I was over the worst of it, but no, as relentless as the rain, the left side rose up like suffering Christ. Having its turn. An enigma; all my blood tests normal until the last one. Doctors are supposed to listen to signs of bodily distress aren't they? That's one of the maxims of medical training - always listen to the patient, but they don't, they just don't. There seem very few good listeners in my world. The lump stares them in the face; it glowers at me from the mirror. An accurate diagnosis is in order first, said the specialist, who, clearly baffled, was waffling. "First do no harm," he quoted. Tell that to Joey. The lump in my throat makes it hard to swallow. Surely he could see my once tight jeans have no curves to fit around.

It seems to be growing darker rather than lighter. The elements are hammering the hut like furies in full force; the rain is making a din on the tin roof and the wind is wailing in a frenzy, drowning out the river. Why does fury follow me here? This place is no longer hidden, no longer a sanctuary from the human tides that come flouting nature's laws. This hut could tell many stories, but the tellers are gone now except in spirit and it's that spirit I feel in everything I touch, in everything I see. There are malignant presences here too now, signs of despoilers droppings everywhere, sullyng the living land.

The jet boat won't come today with this rain. On the plus side, there's plenty of dry wood under the hut, nothing to do but keep warm and wait it out. How is my companion below doing? I begin to move, freezing, as the door opens and a load of wood drops to the floor. I stiffen and go rigid as a plank. I don't want to deal with yesterday. Did he see me sailing down the river? Did he hear my crazy rendition? I lean over the side of the bunk. He is bent over the stove, silver hair strands trickling over the collar of a khaki shirt.

"Hi," I say.

He looks up at me. He has blood on his face. We have being bloodied in common. I squint to get a clear vision of him, not caring about the crinkled expression I am presenting. He has a nasty cut down the left side of his cheek, about two inches long, plus swollen eye tissue that is blackening. A frown is frozen on his face and he is looking at me like a killer is moving through his mind.

"Are you alright? You've hurt yourself," I say.

"I've hurt myself, yes."

"Looks like you might need stitches."

"That's my problem. What's yours?"

"Excuse me?"

“No, I will not. Having spent some effort watching over you I’m entitled to ask what is going on with you.”

I can feel my back going up, hackles rising, but I just say quietly, “I got caught up in the current; it was too strong.”

“What drugs are you on?”

“Panadol. I haven’t been myself for the last few months. I have a thyroid problem.” I pull back my hair to show him the boiled egg-sized lump on the side of my neck. “I’ve been to specialists but they haven’t diagnosed it fully yet; they are stabbing in the dark with treatment. It’s painful, my temperature rises, I get agitated, go ninety miles an hour, can’t sleep, sometimes I hallucinate. It’s affecting my judgement.”

“You need to be in hospital, not here.”

I hear my response sounding clipped, perfectly enunciated: “The jet boat driver is coming to take me away today.”

“It’s been raining for over a day. They won’t come now, its late afternoon, you’ve been sleeping since yesterday.”

This sets me back a little, but not enough to keep me quiet.

“Did you cut yourself yesterday getting out of the river?”

“I slipped coming up the hill today.”

The congealed blood down his cheek looks a sticky mess. I slide over the side of the bunk, gingerly by-passing the River Lord who has turned his back on me and is filling the firebox. I grab my parka off a nail behind the door, place it over my shoulders like a cape. Outside waterfalls are appearing in the bush. The voice of a milky tea river is rising to a low roar. A realisation that I am due back home tonight and it isn’t going to happen.

No responsibility except to myself here; a strange new feeling. I walk down the path and over to the creek and stand there with the rain wetting my hair. It drips down my neck. I

listen, as I did as a child, for the voices that speak to me in the bush, in the hills, in the mountains - the voice of water, the voice of the earth and those voices reverberating deep within myself. I want to strip off all my clothes and dance. I don't of course, there is this brooding silver grey in the hut to consider.

The rain doesn't let up. Back inside I cook lentils, dried peas and rice for dinner as a peace offering. The stranger eats sparingly, in silence. The skin of his face is like white marble. The cut looks nasty and it strikes me that he doesn't look so good. Something I can't fathom is swirling about underwater, wanting to float up in my mind but being held under by some force. I am filled to overflowing and he is sitting there drinking gumboot tea, being opaque. I boil up some water and put salt in it. I unhook the mirror from the wall, intent on providing him with a clear image of himself.

“What are you doing?” he says.

“You need to clean up that cut.”

His face becomes momentarily transfigured. Yellow eyes with red flecks blaze at me. He hasn't shaved since he arrived so his growth is well past a fashionable five o'clock shadow, reminding me of an on-the-road beatnik. The bowl of boiling water and salt lies steaming on the table between us, cooling down. I put the mirror back on the wall. He can figure out how to use it. He is whittling away at a piece of wood, carving something with deft quick strokes of the pounamu adze - using it as a chisel. I've lent it to him as a friendly overture. Too many friendly overtures. Guilt is driving me to reparative acts, except there isn't any relationship to repair in the first place. That being the case he's reached my limit of generous gestures.

He speaks quietly as though to himself. “It's all she ever cared about too, having her own way, going her own way.”

He's going all maudlin on me, raining self-pity. Does he want me to feel sorry for him? I know this trick like the back of my hand, which is twitching, wanting to slap him hard. I'm not feeling very patient these days. There are flat brass buttons on the pockets and lapels of his khaki shirt. I want to reach over and rip them off. A silent attack is taking place. The battle he doesn't even know he's lost is over.

I push my chair back, take my cup over to the sink, rinse it quickly. I usually wash my face and clean my teeth before bedtime but tonight I don't bother. I just go to the end of my bunk so he isn't faced with my jiggling rear as I clamber up into it. Another night. Mickey the Rat is back; the rain has driven him in. It sounds like he has a few companions. I bang on the soft-board ceiling above me but all it does is make a few dents and cause the now unsociable River Lord to grunt.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm banging on the ceiling to frighten the rats."

"It's not doing anything to help."

So I stop banging. Listening intently, I hear scurrying across the floor below. Sometime later I hear a rustling of paper. Mickey is inside, but he will get the River Lord down below before he comes for me.

Rain is pelting relentlessly on the corrugated iron when I wake in darkness. A damp wet cold has seeped into my bones. *What time is it?* My fumbling fingers feel for the torch on the shelf so I can light up the face of my watch. Six o'clock. I lie there for a while. My head feels heavy, morning breath thick and sour.

"Do you want a coffee?" I lean over the side of the bunk, raising my voice above the rain.

"Nice idea."

Light flickers across the ceiling from a lit candle. I crush up newspaper and stuff it in the firebox with pieces of cardboard for good measure. With the hatchet I chip wood into blunt slivers, doing it inside because of the rain. Branches scratch the west side of the hut. The roar of the river has a deep timbre. The volume is not a soothing shhh sound, but loud, and close, like water might burst at any moment through the door. Thunder and lightning flash across the picture window. I nurse flames in a small fire-box that is meant for coal, not wood. The grind of metal against metal as I pull out the draught control lever. The soft roar of the fire as it breathes into life, sends out an illusion of warmth. I go through the motions: turning on the tap and filling the flat-topped copper kettle through its spout, removing the stove lid, and dumping the kettle's fat bottom directly on the flame, rinsing the cups with brown rusty water from the tap, just in case Mickey has run over them during the night, listening to the click as I set them down on the table, ladling out a raised teaspoon of hazelnut flavoured coffee powder into each cup. Pouring boiling water into the cups and then stirring in heaped teaspoons of sweetened condensed milk, bringing a filled cup over to the River Lord. Light flickers around the hut creating moving shadows; dark ghosts are rising.

"Here's your coffee."

He struggles up, reaching out a big hand. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." I take up position in the wooden chair by the table: "I think it's getting a bit lighter outside. Soon we can see how high the river is. It sounds like it wants to come inside."

"My name's Roman."

"I'm Grace."

"Pleased to meet you, Grace."

"Likewise, Roman."

We continue drinking our coffee. He slurps loudly when he drinks. I don't mind, I'm actually pleased he is here now. It is as though we've put the past few days behind us and we are meeting for the first time; a clean slate.

Dawn breaks to reveal the river has risen; up as high as the path on the edge of the riverbed. There is no way we are getting out for a few days at least. We read. He has also brought along a couple of books, one of which he lends me. It is about a woman doing a job for the forestry, living alone in a hut in the bush. A handsome younger man just happens along. You can guess the rest. I make it to the page where they are coiling around each other and then toss a comment to him.

"Too contrived, there's something about this book that screams self-conscious, sexual indulgence by its American author."

He says, "I've heard all about Lady Chatterley for years and now that I'm reading it I can't see what all the fuss was about. Banned until 1960, Unbelievable."

"The sensuous, spiritual quality of sex."

"Sex a hundred years ago in an English forest."

"Yeah, wouldn't translate to the New Zealand bush today."

The conversation dies. We refocus our attention back on our books.

We take turns making ourselves cups of tea, talk sparingly, read and watch the river. Although it hasn't risen any higher since the rain eased off, I don't like its brown, brooding quality, the voice teetering on a roar. The cut on Roman's cheek has dried out so he bathes it again with cold boiled water to which I add a large amount of salt. His eye is still purple but the yellow bits blending in, indicate it is on the mend.

When evening comes we work together on the menu: fried bread, tinned tomatoes and

tinned mussels with reconstituted peas. I light a candelabra of sorts and set it in the middle of the table. He opens the red wine I've brought and produces another bottle. "I'll save this other one for dinner tomorrow. We can then fine dine for another day, at least."

"This place is now quite shut off from the civilised world, I'll have you know."

"That's the beauty of it."

He lights the kerosene lamp while I rummage around in the dresser drawers searching for a crib board I've seen, thinking we can play a game of cards. In the bottom drawer I find a rat trap. Over the candle I slow burn a piece of cheese, melting it onto the small metal trigger. Placing a box on one of the chairs I climb up, wobbling as I slide the trap into the attic alcove.

"Do you think that trap'll be big enough to catch him? He sounds like a sizeable bastard."

"He'll find it hard to run with this on his nose."

We sip the wine as we play our hands into the evening. Luck is with me for a change and I am winning. He starts to talk about his losing streak in the relationship stakes.

"It ended a few months ago, but it doesn't hit you for a while, does it?"

"It's different for everyone."

"My ex left me for another woman."

I am scurrying around trying to find some empathy, finding it difficult. I don't really care to hear about his lost relationship; my experience of relationships generally leaving me on her side. He finishes his wine and reaches for the second bottle. I begin to superimpose my alcoholic ex, onto him. I am starting to wonder if he really lost his fishing line in the river; I don't want a blubbering mess on my hands. I have enough trouble handling myself. "I think we need clear heads to deal with that thunderous river god out there."

"Fair enough." He dutifully replaces the wine back on the table.

“No venue for a Dionysian orgy,” I say. It isn’t really funny but I want to lighten the mood.

He laughs ruefully. “How about I make us hot chocolate with marshmallows before we turn in?”

I smile. “Just the thing.”

I drift in and out of sleep. The roaring of the river is beginning to override all other sounds. I feel bunk vibrations from Roman tossing and turning below me. I wake just as dawn casts its faint light through the picture window. It is cold and damp as I clamber over the edge of the bunk; my feet touch a wet sticky floor. Has water reached under the floor boards? Immediately alert I fumble around on the ledge above the sink bench until I find a box of matches - the long thick kind with pink ends, so you only have to light one to do the job. I hold up the match and scan over the floor, it doesn’t seem to be wet anywhere else. I raise the match higher. Then I see him, hanging over the end of the attic ceiling, blood dripping down into a congealing pool. That’s when I scream.

The lower bunk comes alive.

“What the fuck’s going on?”

The match peters out and I fumble to strike another, holding it up in response.

The man’s eyes glisten in the light. I want to be sick; waves of nausea are flowing over me. Any minute now I’ll throw up and puke all over him. I rush out into the rain intent on cleaning my foot. It is just light enough outside to see a gigantic roil of water, a raging Goliath, churning into the bank just a few metres from the hut. I wipe my foot on the ground, cleaning off the blood. Mickey the Rat has met his demise, and we are probably close to our own. Firing alive, I race back into the hut.

“The water will take us if we don’t get out!”

“A big sod, around thirty or more centimetres not including the tail.”

I look up to see Mickey gone. There is a bundle on the floor wrapped in newspaper.

“Look, I’ll get the fire going,” Roman said.

“We need to get out now, straight up to the top!”

“We’ll need some porridge first. Coming up.”

“There’s no fucking time. Get our gear and clear out!”

In its rampage through the gorge the bellowing voice of the swollen river deafens all other sound. In an effort to be heard, my voice becomes as grating as corrugated iron being dragged over gravel. We put our gear on: socks, boots, hats and coats, shuffle into our packs and race out the door. The bloody door knob falls off yet again. I don’t know why I stop and pick it up, habit I guess, but I put it in my pack before I charge straight up the bank behind the hut, after my companion. I glance back to see the outhouse toppling into the surging water, splintering apart.

Flailing through the brush, we stumble up onto the ridge line. I’m wet through. The heavy curtain of rain cuts out the light. My specs are a bleary windscreen with no wipers, so I take them off and just follow on the heels of the man, trusting he’ll at least get us up to the top. I still haven’t figured how he got to the hut in the first place. I could ask him but there are other things to think about. I turn once more to see water swirling around the hut’s foundations, before the trees hide it from view.

The raging water is erasing all human trace from the landscape. Memories remain, of course, but if I die they will be gone too. You will have secrets of your own. Perhaps you will agree that it’s the dark one’s that grow, take root, like invasive ivy spreading all over the cerebral landscape, so deep they become part of the mind’s structure, colouring all perception.

I don’t feel alone in this flood, not like last time. We are in this together, this man and me, bent forward against the driving rain, close to the ground, limping upward, waterfalls

erupting down the hillside. We make the top in half an hour, to cast our eyes below, upon the blind, snaking river we have fled from, and the terrible cosmos spread before us.

Unrelenting sheets of icy rain bear down as we tread the path around the contour of the hill. It angles upwards, towards the four-wheel drive track I know is gouged out of the mountain. White hail stones sting our cheeks as we crawl at snail's pace along tyre tracks that take us up into mist, on and on blindly through the hours, into the afternoon. My automatic tractor is taking over; its engine can go for miles. It is a state of mind that happened after Maurice Winter, where you unhook connections. Perhaps that's when I first learnt to do it.

The wind drives us into the mountain side; we link arms to steady ourselves. At the highest point we curve around and begin to descend, each step taking us away from the furies inhabiting the heights. I want to taunt them, shake my fist, howl a victory cry from the cover of the bush. The vegetation thickens as the path winds down over moss-covered tree roots. The heavy rain washes the emerald, jade, peridot greens of the bush. We are in single file, Roman in front of me. It makes a nice change. I've been leading so long I've forgotten what it feels like to follow. As we walk I braid fragments of the past that won't die, refuse to die...clamouring voices... Felicia's operatic sounds ring in my ears. Other voices too, commanding, willing me to their world, but such discordant tones sound a death knell. If I follow their path it will take me the wrong way.

We edge around the side of a rock face. Roman stops; I run straight into him. I look up and over his shoulder. A white wall of water is crashing past us, pouring down a chasm - we are dead-ended before an abyss.

Some wit has named the creek, at the height of summer probably, when it was dry: 'Ought To Have a Wee Creek.' It is written on a sign above another - Warning: Only one person to cross at any one time.

The water is casting misty spray over a thick wire rope that has been strung across the divide; a bridge of sorts, a tight-rope walkway. Higher up is a smaller parallel rope, a hand grip to balance the body shuffling across. I am cooling rapidly, unsure if it is the cold or performance anxiety at what is to come. It is beginning to feel like I am at the circus. All the noise, rainbow colours crowding in, overloading the stage, but no audience, no applause.

I feel an ache from the old injury in my lower back spreading down into the groin and sending spasms into my legs. The drumming on my shoulder isn't another body tic; it comes from outside myself. I wrench my gaze away from the white water and peer into Roman's dripping face. He pulls at my pack straps, then, shrugs his water-laden pack to the ground. Following suit, mine falls next to his in an act of togetherness. He bends down, ripping his pack wide open. Did he want me to get into his pack? I could crawl into that hole, I think stupidly. He reaches in and takes out some cheese and fruit juice. A lonely last supper. Where are the apostles? The white water, an angel of death beyond, could well make a heavenly meeting possible.

As I ponder on the afterlife, the man pulls out a length of rope from a side pocket. I can't revert to calling him 'the man,' can I? We are fast becoming intimate, we may well be whitewashed together. It is just a matter of adding a couple of letters to the front of the word 'man' anyhow. Ro - man. Am I going to be lucky enough to rue the day a Roman came into my life? I stand still, letting him tie the rope around my waist. I don't know what his reasoning is, I don't care. I have bigger questions going on. He takes out a knife, from a sheath on his belt, to cut the rope. Is drowning, a better death than hanging or a cut windpipe? It strikes me that we have choices.

Roman ties a length of rope around himself too, and throws both ends over the upper wire, making a form of safety harness for us both. I am not taking much notice of the

intricacies of design. I am letting go, letting him lead, being a dark fatalist, resigning myself to an ignominious end - exhibiting what Felicia terms my 'negative thinker.'

Roman comes closer, shouting in my ear. "Follow me." He hurts my ear with his shout. I want to hit him. I don't, as I recognise his shouting to be a good thing; it fires me out of my frozen state. I am as taut as the tightrope we are about to cross. The wire rope isn't exactly taut though, it is curved down in the middle - less distance to fall from there. The strains of a sixties' song by Crispian St Peters bursts into my mind. I start singing, what I remember of the words, quietly to myself: *Hey, c'mon babe, follow me, I'm the Piped Piper, follow me, I'm the Pied Piper, and I'll show you where it's at...*

A swansong. I wonder where Crispian St Peters is now, if he made it out of the last century. Roman's face looms into my line of vision. Practical things; he wants to leave both our packs behind on the bank. I want to take mine. I chuck everything out except my old patchwork quilt and the doorknob. There is no tug of war. As we are both at the end of a rope he doesn't argue, just shrugs and steps onto the wire.

"Don't look down," I mouth, just to let him know I can still exert some authority. Everything below my feet is a blur. Thank God for my myopia! We shuffle across, inching along, in such a way the safety harness moves with us. The roar of the water at halfway is ferocious but I am beyond fear now. I am in the stratosphere looking down on myself; an out of body experience. That's alright with me, until I feel myself being drawn back in by a force, probably not unlike that of dust being sucked in by a vacuum cleaner. I brace myself for the jolt of re-entry, stepping onto solid ground on the other bank. Roman unties the safety line. I don't look back. We just keep moving, walking down, forever down. One foot in front of the other until he staggers and falls. He lies there not moving.

"Get up, get up."

I bend down and turn his face toward me, but his eyes are closed and he is muttering. Something rises inside me at his just lying there. I want to beat some sense into him. I don't want to waste more energy straining to lift him. He isn't Joey, he can do it himself. So I scream in his ear - his turn to be on the receiving end.

“Give up and I'll bloody kill you!”

It revves him up, and me too. He drags himself off the ground and with me hauling and bawling at him we get going again. Arms around each other, the warmth and pressure of his body keeps me going. He is leaning on me, holding on, or is it the other way round? I can barely remember. I just know we have rhythm together, a synchronism. We go for hours until the land levels out and the bush gives way to pasture. I see distant buildings that I know to be Woodvale station homestead. During those last miles the rain stops and the sun comes out. Just like that, back in in the land of the living, as Mother was wont to say.

The river has no braids anymore, just thick, brown coils fanning out beyond the riverbed banks. There are vehicles moving around the homestead, coming up the road towards us. Ants, becoming beetles, a big red Mazda leading the charge. It stops in front of us with men swarming out like angry wasps.

What I tell you next is what I remember, but you can't expect it to come out as a reliable record - there were times when my tractor-self drove on without me. They checked vitals, wrapped me in silver and bundled me into a helicopter down at the homestead. I was in hospital for seven days. The medics were afraid my whole body was becoming toxic with infection. They put needles into my egg sized neck lump to take samples. The results were negative for infection and so the antibiotics didn't work. They finally gave up trying to diagnose and just stuffed me full of heavy-duty steroids. That did the trick.

I'm nearing the end, it seems, of an extended “bad patch,” so Felicia says. She visits me in hospital every day. She is not going to Nelson after all but buying the house that was

for sale opposite 'Sunbath.' I wonder if she is trying to 'get over the past' but I don't say anything to her. "I'm going to retire," she says, "devote my life to painting." She brings me another painting; no more circles, but squares now - the colours and shapes of New Mexico. I don't know whether she's moving forward or stepping back into another age. I quite like the idea of visiting her at some point when I'm more settled. Something is bothering me though. What has become of my pack, the old quilt and the brass doorknob? I suddenly want their tangibility to make all that has happened seem real.

"I wonder what happened to Roman, the guy I met at the hut. I'd never have got through without him."

"What guy? You were with some guy? Where's he gone? You were in a terrible state. Sure it wasn't your imagination? You don't want to start another relationship now, for God's sake."

I can't pretend he wasn't real. I remember the warmth of his body against mine during the long journey back. The lost mementoes cease to matter as I feel myself settle inside. A door has closed. I have the power to open it, if and when I want to. No-one can come through unless I let them.

Joey is still in respite care when we arrive home. I don't go fetch him immediately. I need another few days rest before I do that. Felicia leaves early the next morning. After she's gone I walk up the hill behind the house. The goats are following me, leaping all over the place. From my crow's nest perch atop the hill I have a bird's eye view of the whole valley; cars are as usual crawling up and down North Road. The stand of pine trees next to my carshed about a hundred metres below is swaying and swishing in the wind. The two ostriches I bought last spring to keep the grass down are on the other side of the shed, filtering wind through their spread wings. Silhouettes against the sky, they remind me of vultures perching

atop the battlements of some ancient castle. Mabel, the lead ostrich, pecks at the gate latch. The gate swings open and the birds begin to move slowly down the driveway on legs longer than Dad's favourite movie star. The driveway exits onto a street that connects to North Road. I don't want another drama on my hands, so I start fast down the hill with the voices of the goats chorusing somewhere in the background. Beating the ruminants to the bottom I slip through their paddock gate slamming it shut.

As I saunter down the drive towards Mabel, she lowers herself to the ground and starts bobbing her head making bop-bop-she-bop-bop noises. Ordinarily I'd stroke her long neck and talk with her, but today I feel strangely confident she won't mind me sitting astride her. I put my leg over her broad back, and as I sit there she rises, like some great primordial being. Not minding me at all, she turns and walks majestically back up to the shed. I'm not particularly religious, but something apocalyptic is welling up inside me. "Mabel," I say, "Mabel thou art God."