A rat by any other name – an examination of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from an animal studies perspective

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Nick Kyrke-Smith

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Abstract

There are differing views about animality, the nonhuman and the natural world in the works of George Orwell. This critical/creative master's thesis takes an animal studies perspective on Orwell's fiction, focusing primarily on the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* with substantial reference to the short story "Shooting an Elephant", and the novels *Animal Farm*, and *Coming up for Air*. The thesis concludes that the nonhuman is fundamental to Orwell's political vision, using the insights and perspectives of scholars including Susan McHugh, Piers G. Stephens, Rita Felski and Loraine Saunders.

The creative component explores aspects of the human/nonhuman interface in a collection of fiction comprised of seven short stories, engaging with a range of themes. The longest is a speculative story, *A rat by any other name*, inspired by the function and fictional presence of rats in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The stories explore aspects of human identity; masculinity in Aotearoa New Zealand; linkages with the natural world and its inhabitants, fictional and real; and shifting perceptions of the nonhuman.

Table of Contents

Introduction

For a student in the New Zealand education system during the nineteen-sixties and seventies, as I was, George Orwell was a writer of central importance. *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* was a compulsory text in the sixth-form English curriculum, the gateway year to university study. Orwell's frightening dystopia seemed universally accepted as a great work of literature, with all the mystique that description entails. The vitality and currency of the novel's warning endures remarkably, with readership surging in the current political environment.

Since then, writers within the "Western" canon have been examined within new critical disciplines and perspectives, and mainstream opinion has accepted that once revered literary and historical figures need to be seen from diverse points of view. One of the newer disciplines, animal studies, seeks to understand the nonhuman in new and different ways, including its representation in works of art.

The central research question that the critical portion of my thesis seeks to address is whether animality and the nonhuman in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is essentially irrelevant to his political vision, or is merely instrumental and serves for example to illustrate intra-human issues rather than being concerned with the nonhuman in its own right; or is fundamental to Orwell's political vision.

This critical conversation arguably began in 1971 when Raymond Williams noted that a purely allegorical reading of *Animal Farm* was not supported by close reading. In 1980, the political philosopher Bernard Crick published his authoritative biography of Orwell, in which he acknowledged Orwell's love of nature, but gave it no further consideration in his

discussion of Orwell's work and political thought. Rebecca Solnit's 2021 *Orwell's Roses* is a refreshing, erudite and sympathetic treatment of Orwell's love of botany, and brings Orwell's relationship to the natural world to the fore. In contrast, some writing about Orwell, even by a sympathetic writer like Margaret Drabble, seems content to link animality in his writing to neuroticism on the author's part, as if his marvellous descriptive writing about nature, and important components of major works, in particular the Golden Country in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, do not exist. Other than to note the contrarian and inspirational view of psychoanalyst turned animal rights author and advocate Geoffrey Masson, this thesis does not attempt to step into questions of neuroticism in Orwell. The conversation about the nonhuman *per se* in Orwell, which is the focus of my thesis, is located primarily in journals within the field of animal studies, and is relatively limited given his reputation overall, and the extent to which he includes the nonhuman in his writing. For this reason it is a field ripe for further investigation.

Orwell's works themselves are the primary source for my critical essay. The critical analysis that follows focuses on the documentary short story, "Shooting an Elephant", the novels *Animal Farm*, *Coming up for air*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the most relevant, to me, of Orwell's essays – "Such, Such were the Joys", "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad", and "Why I write".

Susan McHugh's research and writing has been the primary source of critical inspiration and provides the broad analytical framework within which I have worked. I am indebted to Piers G. Stephen's philosophical work on connections between the natural in Orwell's work and human liberty. Loraine Saunders' 2008 book *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell: the Novels from Burmese Days to 1984* discusses and challenges a critical view that Orwell's earlier novels were unsuccessful. Saunders does so by drawing attention

to Orwell's techniques for showing change and development in his human characters over the course of those novels. Saunders draws attention to Orwell's narrative techniques, seeking to challenge critical perspectives which read Orwell's characters, particularly in his early novels, as lacking in depth and failing to develop. Saunders' insights are also central to my reading of Orwell, particularly *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, because they lead me to focus upon shifts in perspective in the novel, between Orwell and his characters. Stewart Cole's critical article " 'The True Struggle': Orwell and the Specter of the Animal" is a comprehensive articulation of an instrumental perspective, seeing the nonhuman in the writing as secondary to Orwell's humanism, that I refer to extensively in my critical essay.

It is necessary to address this question in both a critical and creative fashion because, among well-recognised literary figures, social critics and political journalists and thinkers Orwell writes about the nonhuman to an unusual extent. This fact lends itself to both critical analysis and further creative exploration of the territory Orwell inhabits in his fiction. A solely creative thesis would not have addressed the existing critical perspectives on this writer or placed his work within existing debates. A solely critical thesis would not sufficiently recognise Orwell as a pre-eminent imaginative writer, whose work stimulates and provokes imaginative and affective, as well as intellectual, responses.

My identity as a New Zealander of Anglo-Irish heritage, and as older, white and male, in large measure drew me to this project. I identify strongly with a heritage that is physically distant, and which has been defined and described for me, in works of art and elsewhere, rather than experienced directly. That heritage is increasingly challenged in cultural forums and literature. It is conflicted, both because I'm part of a colonial enterprise, and inherently – I've always identified more with England than Ireland, for example. Part of that is that while my father was born in Ireland, both my parents grew up in England, and the other part

is the relative abundance of cultural influence coming from England rather than Ireland. It is also distant from the increasingly assertive culture of Aotearoa New Zealand. I found my recollections of my own childhood in New Zealand focussed upon direct and indirect relationships with nature and with a particular type of masculinity, well described in Jock Phillips' *A Man's Country*, that was narrow and often brutal. I needed to engage again with aspects of my identity, and this thesis is part of that project.

I have always loved the natural world, experiencing it through hiking and walking, fishing, diving and snorkelling, and inevitably, through the media, broadly defined. Much of my own creative writing before I embarked on this thesis was concerned with nature. There is so much outstanding documentary on the subject, David Attenborough's life work being the obvious example, that for many people nature is beautiful but almost, ironically, part of another world.

My critical research process involved reading and re-reading a broad selection of Orwell's fiction and essays to enhance my understanding and appreciation of his work directly. I used the Massey library service to search for relevant critical material about Orwell and animal studies and cultural animal studies, the function of animality in modernist and humanist literature, and look for relevant material in any media. A primary concern was to locate and understand existing work on the relationship between the nonhuman and human in Orwell's writing.

My learning was stretched in particular by coming to read and appreciate current critical thinking on humanist and modernist writing, and to increase my understanding of what is generally referred to as postmodernist thought, and animal studies. I found some of this reading profoundly challenging, given my own particular investment in the received

past, while ultimately broadening my perspective. I was surprised by the very wide influence of Foucault in literary studies, and again, found this emphasis both challenging and stimulating. I was also surprised by the relative lack of commentary about the nonhuman in Orwell.

In writing my creative component, engaging with a rat as the main character and narrator in my longest story was a substantial challenge. The resulting story, "A rat by any other name", the most substantial story in my creative portfolio, was the most rewarding to grapple with and write. Laura Jean McKay's novel *The Animals in that Country* was a fantastic read and inspirational model in terms of getting inside animal character and voice, as was Catherine Chidgey's *The Axeman's Carnival* in terms of nonhuman narration. In writing "A rat by any other name", I was also, following Orwell, attempting to engage with the human political moment, and found myself reflecting on each of my stories in that light, as well as their engagement with the nonhuman.

My contribution I think is to support a more nuanced reading of the nonhuman in Orwell's fiction, promoting a perspective that sees his work as profoundly engaged with the natural world as an essential and fundamental part of human politics. My understanding is that the application of the principles suggested by Susan MacHugh to re-assess the nonhuman in literature is in its early stages. This is a relatively obvious area for further work, as is further exploration of the connections of Orwell's work to earlier traditions of writing about nature in English, including the Romantic and related schools, and ecocriticism. Janet Newman's 2015 master's thesis at Massey University "Ecopoetry and the Creative Impulse", focused on Dinah Hawken's poetry, is an example of employing contrasting perspectives, the Romantic and ecopoetic, in critical/creative work. A sustained and deeper focus on our relationships, real, represented, and imaginative, with our fellow creatures is critical in my

view to our collective future.

A rat by any other name – an examination of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from an animal studies perspective

In the essay that follows I examine *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from an animal studies perspective. I argue that animality functions in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to illuminate shared agency, vulnerability and resilience in human and nonhuman animals, in the face of human exceptionalism. Orwell was sensitive and attuned to the natural world, and his journalistic and descriptive skills are particularly evident in his writing about the nonhuman. I argue that he began an exploration of animal agency with the journalistic short story "Shooting an Elephant", in which inter-species agency is foregrounded through an equivalence in agency between the nonhuman and the human. The novella *Animal Farm* is explicitly an emotionally engaging manifesto and fable on behalf of animals as well as one of the most successful pieces of political satire ever written. The novel *Coming up for Air* anticipates the Golden Country, the utopian counterpoint to the dystopia of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four. Nineteen Eighty-Four,* to which the majority of my analysis is devoted, employs symbolism, varying points of view, and naturalistic description of the nonhuman extensively. It is Orwell's culminating achievement and intertwines the human and the nonhuman inextricably, demanding that we view human exceptionalism as profoundly damaging to the wider community of beings, human and nonhuman, and look at that wider community afresh.

There are differing views on the importance of animals in Orwell's work – including that it is irrelevant and coincidental rather than central; that it is instrumental and illustrates points relevant to the human situation rather than the nonhuman; or that it is central and foundational, without which his political vision would be different and diminished.

Traditional scholarship regarded his writing about animals as indicative of a personal passion and interest of Orwell's, which was irrelevant to his political writing. Bernard Crick, long regarded by many as the authoritative Orwell biographer, wrote: "…he (Orwell) wrote about many positive values that have nothing to do with politics, love of nature above all…" (Crick xvi). A number of scholars now agree that animality is an essential and substantial aspect of Orwell's political writing but disagree about the nature of its significance.

Orwell's writing is infused with the nonhuman and the natural world. He wrote that "Most of the good memories of my childhood, and up until the age of about twenty, are in some way connected with animals" (Orwell, Collection, *Such were the joys* 2826). As a child he was absorbed by nature; he raised plants and animals throughout much of his adult life, and he retreated to the remote and primitive island of Jura to write *Ninety-Eighty-Four,* his most famous work of fiction, just before his early death from tuberculosis. In his unusual and eventful life, the countryside and natural world were a constant reference point, which is evident in his diverse writings.

Orwell's deep curiosity about, and affection for, a small amphibian that has just emerged from the mud of winter is described with journalistic attention and care in his 1946 essay "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad" . Orwell writes,

> At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent. His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large. This allows one to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly it is like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl. (Collection 2753-2754)

The description draws the attention of one living creature, the human reader, to another, the toad, and juxtaposes the hyper-valued (jewellery) and the devalued (the toad). Orwell invites his reader to imagine, anew, a beautiful aspect of a living creature which is not typically associated with beauty, in terms which also invoke the explicitly "human" characteristics of spirituality and purpose.

In her 2021 work *Orwell's Roses*, which is about Orwell's deep and ongoing connections with the natural world, particularly his interest in botany, Rebecca Solnit writes: "The novelist Anthony Powell complained 'If you went on a country walk with Orwell…he would draw attention, almost with anxiety, to this shrub budding early for the time of year, that plant growing early in the south of England'" (Solnit 31). This speaks to the centrality of the nonhuman to Orwell's sensibility.

Traditional or popular views on the importance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Orwell's oeuvre have been challenged by recent politically-focused scholarship. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been described as "the most important political novel of the twentieth century" (Claeys, qtd. in Cole 336). This assessment is understandable in view of Orwell's continuing popular reputation and wide influence, but less meaningful and more contentious among scholarly commentators. Orwell's position within the humanist tradition is at the centre of this re-evaluation. The book that became *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was at one point called *The Last Man in Europe*, which for some is an unwitting pointer that Orwell's work, despite his commitment to egalitarianism, is inherently anthropocentric, gendered and racialized, because its ideals are based upon white, masculine, heterosexual European civilisation (Braidotti, qtd. in Cole 340). Robert Paul Resch, in a class-based analysis, suggests that Orwell valorises "superior individuals" at the expense of the inferior "masses", (qtd. in Cole

347) and Daphne Patai's feminist analysis finds that Orwell inferiorises women and valorises men (qtd. in Cole 347).

The place of Orwell's "love of nature" within the sphere of politics is also being re-assessed within animal studies scholarship, with differing views emerging. In the 2017 article ""The True Struggle": Orwell and the Specter of the Animal", Stewart Cole takes the view that animality functions for Orwell "as a means of gauging the relative humanity of those whose otherness presents a challenge to the white Eurocentric imperialist bourgeois humanism with which he is inculcated" (Cole 341). Cole writes he is interested in "most fundamentally, how the human/animal distinction functions in his (Orwell's) political vision" (Cole 335). Animal studies is a relatively recently recognised field in which animals are studied across a range of disciplines in order to re-evaluate received understandings and generate knowledge across disciplines. In introducing cultural and literary animal studies, Roland Borgards describes a move away from a categorical distinction between real and literary animals in favour of an intentional questioning of what has previously been taken for granted. (Borgards 156) Referring to Harriet Ritvo's 2007 article "The Animal Turn", Borgards comments:

> The animal turn in literary criticism, …has resulted not only in a quantitative increase of scholarly articles, but also in a qualitative revision of the established concepts and terminology, especially with respect to traditional dichotomies such as human and animal, subject and object, action and behaviour, or culture and nature. It is the overarching aim of cultural animal studies to revise and re-conceptualise the scholarship built around this oppositional framework; important reference theories range from Michel Foucault's analysis of power structures and Jacques Derrida's

> theory of deconstruction to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Donna Haraway's model of companion species. (Borgards 156)

Actor-network theory (ANT), in which Latour has played a foundational role, conceives of nonhuman actors participating in networks and systems, without attributing intentionality to nonhuman actors. Agency is located neither in human subjects nor nonhuman objects, but in heterogenous associations of humans and nonhumans. Edwin Sayes suggests that

> ANT adopts a complicated but nonetheless minimal conception of agency. It is minimal because it catches every entity that makes or promotes a difference in another entity or network. Latour (2005:71) maintains that one need only ask of an entity "does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference? If we can answer yes to these two questions, then we have an actor that is exercising agency – whether this actor is nonhuman or otherwise (Sayes 141).

This way of perceiving is particularly useful in reading Orwell, because of the extent to which the nonhuman, particularly the animal, features in his writing, and the extent to which animals affect the actions of human characters.

Latour's actor-network theory is endorsed by Rita Felski, whose work *The Limits of Critique* examines the role of critique. She writes:

> Rather, it's [critique's] role in the formation of new fields of knowledge from feminism to postcolonial studies to queer theory strikes me as crucial…That critique has made certain things possible is not in doubt. What is also increasingly evident, however, is that it has sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic possibilities

> – ones that are just as vital to the flourishing of new fields of knowledge as older ones. (Felski 190)

Felski argues against a tendency for critique to be overly suspicious of literature, and therefore limiting our range of possible interpretation, experience and enjoyment. I argue that Orwell's writing about the human/nonhuman interface needs to be considered in its own right, as well as within scholarship exploring the effects and implications of humanism.

Helen Tiffin affirms the importance of rethinking our epistemologies and, crucially, habits of interpretation, if our understandings of the *representation* of animals are to keep pace with wider developments in the epistemological and ontological investigations into the category of the animal across a variety of disciplines. Citing Baker, she notes that the majority of humanity is now more familiar with representations of animals than with live animals. She writes: "In bringing animals as co-sharers of the planet to our attention again, representation plays a key role" (Tiffin 254). Orwell continuously brings animals to his readers' attention, representing them in a variety of ways – as individual agents affecting humans individually and collectively, through the elephant as a central character in "Shooting an Elephant", as a collective with a political agenda and capacity, in the animal revolt of *Animal Farm*, and as inextricably entwined with the human, in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*.

If readers are not alert for, and attentive to, alternative readings for "humanist" texts, a collective blindness to genuinely new perspectives and/or a loss of nuance are potentially the undesirable results. Susan McHugh discusses the tendency of deconstructive criticism in literature to work against animal studies more broadly in the important essay "Animal Farm's Lessons for Literary (and) Animal Studies" (McHugh 2009 a). Rather than supporting John Berger's claim that "animals are disappearing" in modernity, through analysing literature for

ways in which animality in literature only ever serves to elaborate human subjectivity, for McHugh animal studies "starts from the quite different assumption that the presence of nonhumans is a cultural constant" (McHugh, 2009a 24). The potential for the representation of the nonhuman in literary texts to introduce "impurities, start spits, fires that break the moulds (or at least require refashioning) of humanist discourses" is central to McHugh's analysis, "arguably most effective in addressing the problems of species" (McHugh 2009a 32). Like Felski, McHugh draws attention to the risks presented by an unrelenting focus upon recognising and underscoring traditional humanist models, particularly in continuing to distinguish and elevate the human over the nonhuman.

I share the concerns of Felski, Tiffin and McHugh about the risks of overly narrow readings of works of literature limiting our openness to the works, and therefore limiting possibilities, including political possibilities. I agree with their arguments towards more complete, generous and enabling reading, which does not imply any reduction in rigour. This is particularly important generally because the nonhuman world needs and deserves sustained and creative attention, in literature as elsewhere, if its decimation is to be ameliorated. However, seeing and affirming the nonhuman world is, in my view, a fundamental and critical part of Orwell's work. Orwell's writing has been, rightly, valued across the political spectrum, in part because people have recognised the willingness in his political writing to actively acknowledge and address the flaws and risks arising from his own personal and political views and biases as well as those of political opponents. It is consistent with this aim in his writing that he would extend that willingness to species boundaries. In examining his work from diverse perspectives, we must be alert to the reductionist risk of throwing a courageous baby out with ideological bathwater. Further, differing readings of already highly influential authors, like Orwell, are likely to reach a wide

readership, and are therefore valuable in terms of their potential political “weight”. To limit possibilities in the representation of animals in Orwell seems decidedly counter-productive in that light.

McHugh’s article “Literary Animal Agents” (McHugh, 2009 b 489) delineates three interrelated imperatives for animal studies to better engage with the textual significance of animality: the first is to conceptualise agency as more than simply a property of the human subject form; the second is to recover the spectrum of agency forms across cultural traditions, noting that the emphasis on canon formation within humanism has tended to subordinate this within the Western tradition; the third is to connect the representational forms and material conditions of species life to explain the agency of literary animals. The following critique focuses primarily on the conceptualisation of animal agency in Orwell’s works “Shooting an Elephant”, *Animal Farm, Coming up for Air,* and *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* to demonstrate the extent to which the representation of animals functions in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to illuminate shared agency, vulnerability and resilience in human and nonhuman animals, in the face of human exceptionalism.

Orwell’s autobiographical documentary short story “Shooting an Elephant", written in 1936, engages with human/nonhuman intersections to highlight and challenge speciesism across human cultures. The story is about a British colonial policeman in Burma, who is called upon to shoot a rogue elephant which has, initially, become destructive and subsequently kills a human worker. The policeman narrator, observed and encouraged by a very large crowd of Burmese, eventually shoots the elephant, which takes some time to die. While the story is usually seen as a meditation on the corrupting influence of empire on both the subjugator and the subjugated, my focus is on the elephant character as an agent in the narrative.

"Shooting an Elephant" is written from the perspective of a fallible first-person narrator. The narrator's self-confessed fallibility as an observer and participant draws attention to the narrator's observations of his own shifting perspective, and reflections on his inner dilemma, relative to the elephant. By explicitly having the narrator reflect upon his own unreliability, Orwell underscores the need for the reader to continue to question any conclusions the narrator reaches about his actions, and consequently his agency. Early in the story, after declaring his secret hatred of imperialism and affiliation with the oppressed Burmese, and against their oppressors, the British, the narrator acknowledges: "But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated, and I had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishmen in the East" (Orwell, *Collection* 2143, 2144). This is not a literal silence of course, because the narrator communicates with both European and Burmese, but silence about the narrator's unguarded thoughts. In that respect, he is silent about his preference not to shoot the elephant, and his loathing for both British and Burmese, for tyranny and racism on the one hand, and relentless hatred towards him on the other, which recognises him only as a sahib, rather than another human being (or fellow creature).

In this story Orwell conceptualises agency as more than simply a property of the human subject form by granting *an equivalence in agency* to the most completely realised character in the story, the elephant, with the humanity that it lives alongside. If the elephant character has no option but to act on instinct, then the human narrator has no option but to act in accordance with societal pressures. The essential differences evident here are human technological superiority and the willingness and power of humans in groups to act against the nonhuman, not the exercise of human free will or a superior morality. This questions rather than affirms notions of human moral and epistemological superiority, and raises the

profile of the elephant character as an actor in the story. Throughout the story Orwell describes the elephant in empathetic and ennobling terms, further establishing an equivalence between the human and the animal and fraying the boundaries of humanist exceptionalism.

Animal agency, specifically the elephant's actions in the "must", triggers the narrative. Orwell writes

> It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone "must." It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of "must' is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violences upon it. (Orwell, *Collection* 2144)

Individually and collectively, unarmed humans are helpless against an elephant in the "must". Only sufficiently powerful weapons, or, in the case of a tame elephant, the mahout's individual and specialist relationship of control over the elephant are effective in that circumstance. Orwell establishes the elephant character as a very powerful agent, initially a destructive one, driving the story.

In emphasising the absence of individual human agency by repeatedly contrasting the narrator's own conflicted and ultimately frustrated agency in relation to the animal (as a

threat, as property, as a sentient and suffering fellow creature with its own unique behaviours, as a potentially spiritual being), Orwell explicitly draws attention to the animal's place as an actor/agent in the story, through close and empathetic description. The narrator conveys his intention not to shoot the elephant as he travels, armed, towards the elephant's location with a crowd gathering behind him: "I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you" (Orwell, Collection 2146). The crowd is described as "an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels" (Orwell, Collection 2146). However, when the narrator and the reader are confronted with the hitherto fearsome creature, its character has changed: "The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth" (Orwell, Collection 2147). The elephant is individuated by gender, and engaged in the different, unaggressive, and purposive, behaviour of cleaning his food before eating it. As soon as the narrator actually sees the elephant, he knows "with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him" (Orwell, Collection 2147). The nonhuman is therefore explicitly a part of a sentient and purposive universe requiring consideration in the narrator/Orwell's moral schema. However, the narrator creates ambiguity by elucidating economic reasons for not shooting the animal, as akin to "a huge and costly piece of machinery – and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be averted" (Orwell, Collection 2147). The narrator also assesses that the danger from the animal has probably now passed based on his observation of its behaviour, and that the elephant would be most likely to wander harmlessly about until its mahout came to retrieve him. The narrator then repeats his extreme reluctance to shoot – "Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him" (Orwell, Collection 2147). Having

already said he did not want to shoot the elephant, and saying that he ought not, shoot it, the repetition of the narrator's preference that he did not in the least want to shoot confirms and emphasises the narrator's inner struggle and the elephant as an actor/agent in the story, having changed from a powerful and terrifying character into docility, which is closely observed and related by the narrator.

Orwell removes any ambiguity about the moral status of the elephant character in the story by creating an equivalence between shooting it and a murder. The narrator concludes he will have to shoot, pressed on by the will of the crowd and the performative expectations on him as a "sahib". Yet he repeats, for a third time, "But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him" (Orwell, Collection 2148). Orwell's narrator uses the word "murder", which is almost exclusively used to denote the killing of a human by another human, strongly suggestive of an equivalence for the elephant with the human. He then comments that he was not squeamish about killing animals, and that it always seems worse to kill a large animal. The use of the word "worse" creates unease about the killing of any animal, implying that is also murder. Orwell's observational skills as a naturalist and a journalist are evident, as they are in *Animal Farm, Coming up for Air* and *Ninety-Eighty-Four*. He describes the now calm elephant in humanised, almost sentimental, terms ("a preoccupied, grandmotherly air"). Orwell was aware of the power of description to convey empathy and utilises it in this story and elsewhere in his writing about animals. His use of close, sympathetic and humanising description of the elephant character, in an otherwise harrowing story about both human and animal brutality, is striking in emphasising an equivalence for, and inviting empathetic consideration of, the animal character.

In describing the elephant character's agency, Orwell positions the elephant as noble, creating an equivalence with the *potentiality* for the human to also be "noble", in humanist terms. The human actors, including the narrator, are debased by the performative expectations on them. The repetition throughout the story of the narrator's feelings and moral reflections against shooting the animal work against the pressures to do so generated by the large, hostile crowd and the internalised duties of an imperial policeman. Orwell reinforces and amplifies the narrator's feelings and moral reflections, giving the dying elephant a transcendent existence: "An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old" (Orwell, Collection 2150). He goes on to describe the death in transcendental or at least spiritual terms: "He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further" (Orwell, Collection 2150). The very detailed and empathetic description of the animal before and during its death positions the narrator, and the author-narrator, and the reader, in empathy with the elephant. Orwell's close, journalistic observation and description of the animal's behaviour give the animal a clear, agential existence beyond the symbolic. The animal's behaviour in settling down, making shooting it no longer necessary, its massive substance as a living being, the clarity of its agony, the recording of an existential distance from its tormentors in dying, cannot be simply extracted from the story in favour of an entirely symbolic and humanist reading. The elephant attains a certain nobility in the story, through Orwell's craft, clearly not available to the human characters. Just as humans have the potential to exhibit "nobility", so do animals; this questions, rather than consolidates, speciesist categorisation, and contradicts the humanist notion of the human as the (only) noble animal. In doing so, Orwell draws out and

emphasises similarities between man and animal, implying that notions of unequivocal difference need to be re-thought.

Positioning the elephant as a noble character answers a potential counter argument to the idea of an equivalent agency between human and animal in the story to the effect that the narrator is a diminished human, whose equivalence to the elephant is conditional on his inability to act upon his preference not to shoot. If he were able to act upon his "real" preference, he would, by this counter argument, be more "fully" human – elevated from powerlessness to humanist nobility by the exercise of free will, leaving the elephant the slave of instinct, and inferior to the human. However, Orwell describes the elephant in terms appropriate to a noble character, which in humanism is usually regarded as a distinguishing trait of the human rather than the animal.

Cole's essay "The True Struggle": Orwell and the Specter of the Animal" argues for explaining Orwell's extensive writing about animals as a means of examining intra-human differences. Cole links Orwell's references to humanism in relation to socialism back four hundred years, to Erasmus. Cole does so in relation to statements by Orwell that "man is a noble animal", contained within essays by Orwell discussing Swift and Tolstoy (Cole 339-339). In the context of those essays, it seems clear that Orwell is reflecting upon defeatist and misanthropic tendencies in Swift's and Tolstoy's writings, rather than placing the human in relation to the nonhuman. Nowhere does Orwell state or imply that the human is *the only* species that could bear the description "noble". I have argued that Orwell explicitly invokes the concept of nobility in the story "Shooting an Elephant" and finds animals equally deserving of its application, deliberately undermining, rather than reinforcing, speciesist differences. This coheres with subsequent works by Orwell further exploring inter-species similarities, commonality and the nature of species boundaries.

With *Animal Farm*, Orwell extends his exploration of animal agency further into an explicitly political setting, further into the merging of human and animal bodies and characteristics, and towards the representational boundaries of human and animal.

The banding together of humans, subjugator and subjugated, against the nonhuman is an essential element of "Shooting an Elephant". In this it anticipates the revolt by farm animals, collectively, of *Animal Farm,* which was published in 1945. While the story is one of animal agency, that agency is necessarily anthropomorphic – unless the animals operate within a human structure (the farm), exhibit "human" characteristics (a shared and written language, loyalty, acting for a common interest, treachery, greed etc) the allegory would not succeed. On the other hand, this anthropomorphism creates the parallel story – if the reader experiences empathy with the oppressed animals because they exhibit "human" characteristics, then they must also think about the implications of that similarity for the conceptualisation and treatment of animals, and about the extent to which they agree with Orwell's representation of animals in the fable. *Animal Farm* tells the story of a barnyard revolt, which eventually fails, in which the animals of Manor Farm expel their human owner and attempt to live independent and full lives. The animals exhibit various characteristics associated with humans and animals in their working and social roles, and human lore about animals. The revolt is initiated by a pig and led by two of the pigs (Snowball and Napoleon), who are described as the most intelligent animals on the farm, and who prove also to be the most hypocritical, manipulative, treacherous and vicious, mirroring Orwell's view of the leaders of the Soviet revolution. The horse Boxer, an important character in the story, exhibits qualities typically associated with horses when humankind was dependent on them and other large animals for much physical work before the mechanisation of transport and agriculture – strength, obedience and industriousness, and loyalty. These qualities were also

prized among contemporaneous human workers, particularly in occupations such as agriculture, mining and iron and steel production. These shared inter-species characteristics were especially prominent prior to the widespread mechanisation of agriculture, transport and industry. Orwell was very familiar with the elements of this transition, both in its political consequences in human societies, and in seeing animals, particularly horses, at work with people, leading to a political fable with farm animals as its principal actor/agents.

To ignore the presence of the animals as sentient and purposeful characters in *Animal Farm* is to miss a very substantial part of the story. Traditionally scholarship has focussed almost exclusively upon *Animal Farm* as an allegory satirising the Stalinist Soviet Union. In "Pigs, People and Pigoons", Helen Tiffin comments, "virtually all interpretations of the text read through the "animal" characters to derive a political and satirical message about the inability of humans to form functioning societies without the rapid evolution of pernicious hierarchies" (Tiffin 254). The parallel reading, set out by Orwell in the preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm,* is about the story as written, a fable illustrating the enactment of an alternative political manifesto written on behalf of domestic animals. The author's intent is obviously of interest, specifically whether Orwell intended to draw a parallel with the situation of animals and make that situation evident on behalf of those animals or intended solely to make an allegory for the human.

It is clear that Orwell intended at the very least to draw attention to the lives of barnyard animals in terms of a socialist framework – the preface to the Ukrainian edition of the book is evidence of that. That preface describes Orwell witnessing a boy beating a carthorse, and continues:

> It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat. I proceeded to analyse Marx's theory from the animals' point of view. To them it was clear that the concept of a class struggle between humans was pure illusion, since whenever it was necessary to exploit animals, all humans united against them: the true struggle is between animals and humans. (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 88)

It is unusual that only one version of the preface should have the reference – unusual, but in my view understandable.

Orwell's very strong focus in his political writings was seeking to engage people more widely in a socialist revolution. His novel *Coming up for Air* is in large measure an attempt to engage the "person on the street" in the socialist cause. He was conscious of the potentially negative effects on widening membership of strongly associating socialism with what might be regarded as fringe interests. He may have avoided bringing the animal story to the fore in the English language version for that reason. For Jeffrey Moussaief Masson, the psychoanalyst who renounced Freudianism and wrote the foundational animal studies text *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon,* Orwell's explanation of an alternative motivation for writing *Animal Farm,* the revelations that "men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat", and "the true struggle is between animals and humans" was proof of his intent. Masson wrote "There is every reason to suggest that Orwell truly believed this" (Masson 9). On the face of it, why would Orwell proffer a motivation that he did not have, given the evidential, logical and emotional resonance of his preface?

Masson notes that, despite Crick specifically mentioning that the preface to the Ukrainian edition refers to Orwell's analysing Marx's theory from the animals' point of view,

Crick omits Orwell's crucial reference to the exploitation of animals by humans. Masson comments that it is astonishing that Orwell's revolutionary comment about humans and animals has been omitted, given that *Animal Farm* "is considered the greatest statement ever written about revolution" (Masson 239). Cole's position is that Orwell was "too committed a humanist to extend his political compassion beyond the species line" (Cole 336). My view is that to take that position is to deny both the author's explicit intention, and any merits the story has other than as satire. Given the clear evidence that Orwell intended *Animal Farm* to speak to the actual situation of animals, the next questions to be asked are whether, and how, the fable succeeds in that intention, as well as succeeding as political satire.

The ability of *Animal Farm* to move readers emotionally, the affective power of the story, is central to its ongoing vitality and success both as an allegory and as a story about animal agency. It is evident that readers from the time the book was first submitted for publication to the current day, including highly knowledgeable and sophisticated readers, have been taken with the affective power of the book. Orwell's happiness with or because of animals in his early years seems to have resulted in an unusual capacity to write about them effectively. Acknowledging the ongoing standing and skill of Orwell's engagement with its political moment for humans, McHugh emphasises the novella's ability to continue to move readers, "so many of whom agree that the pigs' betrayal of the loyalty of the plow-horse Boxer, selling him to the knackers and drinking away this blood money, always makes us cry" (McHugh, 2009a 32). Orwell was a literary influence for Rebecca Solnit, who says of the impact for her as a young reader of *Animal Farm*, "I had first come across his 1945 fable *Animal Farm* as a child, so that I first read it as a story about animals and mourned the

faithful horse Boxer's death and not known it was an allegory for the corruption of the Russian revolution into Stalinism" (Solnit 9).

Animal Farm was first published on 17 August 1945, just weeks before the end of the Second World War. It was rejected by several publishers, and T.S Eliot's rejection letter on behalf of Faber and Faber states "we have no conviction (and I am sure none of the other directors would have) that this is the right point of view from which to criticise the political situation at the present time" (qtd in Crick, 315). However, the letter also says, "We agree that it is a distinguished piece of writing; that the fable is very skilfully handled, and that the narrative keeps one's interest on its own plane – and that is something very few authors have achieved since Gulliver" (qtd. in Crick, 315). This praise from Eliot about the story as of genuine interest "on its own plane", in other words a successful work of fiction whose characters are talking, feeling and self-determinative farm animals, is telling. It affirms the fictional representation of animal agency in the story, while the letter describes quite different reasons for non-publication by Faber and Faber; specifically, that the allegorical intent and content was unpalatable. Susan McHugh suggests that *Animal Farm* is increasingly read as "a straightforward animal narrative" (McHugh 2009a, 28 and McHugh 2011, 23/67), and points to film versions of the story and connections with subsequent films, for example the film *Babe*, as indicative of the extent to which the novel is "about" the nonhuman, as well as the human.

Animal Farm illustrates similarities and parallels, flexibility and ambiguity, and uncertainty within and across species categories. Pigs become indistinguishable from humans; inter and intra-species differences in intelligence and ability to learn are foregrounded; there are similarities in "character" between domesticated animals and working people; some aspects of species difference (such as the dogs remaining dogs, that

is, unrestrained in their need to kill other animals) and similarity (the more intelligent tend to exploit the less intelligent) are troublingly essentialist; and liminality, evidenced by the positioning of rats in the fable, seems inherent in any system of categorisation, intra and inter-species. In *Animal Farm* Orwell again questions, rather than affirms, an ontological difference between the human and the animal. McHugh's analysis of a literature of barnyard revolts, including *Animal Farm,* in the context of ongoing artistic traditions and developments, is to position farm animals as "irreducibly social creatures", in works typically seen as giving real voice only to the human. (McHugh, 2009a 32) McHugh goes further and notes that "meat itself can serve as an agent of protest, and in the few (literary narratives) described above [which include *Animal Farm*] more precisely incorporate living meat animals as agents to sketch community formation, reformation and revolt." (McHugh, 2009a 32) McHugh notes in this essay that Raymond Williams had in 1971 revised his own view that *Animal Farm* should be read strictly in terms of human allegory. Williams pointed to a breakdown in the human/nonhuman metaphor in the allegorical story because the pigs become both collective exploiters and exploited, highlighting the flexibility and uncertainty of species differences. McHugh comments that there is never any attempt made or implied of liberating the dogs of Animal Farm. A stolen litter is raised by one of the pigs, and at a critical moment in the story unleashed against the other animals at the pig's command. Of this moment, Williams writes "more than simply contradictory, this aspect of the story resists both metaphorical and anthropomorphic projection. These dogs remain dogs, serving not as extensions of anyone's ego or symbols of any people but rather as an irreducible (in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's terms) "demonic" or menacing figures [of] nonhuman multiplicity" (McHugh, 2009a, 29 and McHugh, 2011, 25/67). The dogs remain irreducibly themselves, in that they cannot obey the edict *No animal shall ever kill any other animal* and

are unrestrained in their behaviour throughout the book. There are literal truths here: dogs are carnivorous and have often been encouraged by their human masters to act aggressively towards, and attack, human dissenters, just as the dogs on Animal Farm were encouraged to kill dissenting animals. While dogs do not typically rely on rats as a source of food, they have often been encouraged by their masters to kill them – there were competitions which rewarded dogs for the most rats killed in a pit in a given time, and ratting with dogs is still practised in rural areas. Orwell has the dogs of Animal Farm behave towards the rats instinctually, and as their human masters would have expected them to behave before the animal revolt, that is, to try to kill them. Subsequently, the pigs exclude the dogs from any socialisation that would lead them to follow the Animal Farm edict against killing, because they wanted the capacity to kill and terrorise, just as the KGB and networks of informants provided the Soviet leadership with the ability to kill and terrorise its population. The intellectual advantages enjoyed by the pigs over the other species mirror the intellectual differences between human beings.

However, Orwell is not painting what some might describe as “superior individuals” in a remotely attractive light. Far from the self-congratulatory triumphalism of the worst of humanism, Orwell’s elites, human and animal, are amoral, manipulative, destructive and repellent, creating a damning commentary on exceptionalism within species, and on human exceptionalism. Orwell therefore foregrounded the representation of animality, rather than being restricted to questions of oppression, either intra-human or inter-species. He goes further by drawing attention to the position of non-productive, undomesticated animals living on Animal Farm, and by having the question explicitly put to the collective of farm animals. He identifies the liminal position of the rat, which is accepted in principle into the community by the animals collectively but continues to be rejected as such by the dogs, who

attack them, and is both accepted and rejected as such by the cat. Jonathan Burt writes: "This idea of human/rat mirroring is very common. A recent writer on rats has said, 'rats live in man's parallel universe, surviving on the effluvia of human society…I think of rats as our mirror species, reversed but similar'" (Burt, Loc 145). Rats have historically thrived where humans thrive and been vilified and stigmatised as parasitical and vicious bearers of disease. Rats, along with rabbits and other undomesticated animals, are admitted into the Beasts of England, the community of species in *Animal Farm,* because they have four legs rather than two.

In terms of the animal manifesto presented in *Animal Farm*, Orwell is inviting the reader to see subtleties across and between species – for example, rabbits and rats, which often fall into the category "vermin", are typically regarded as of little or no value. While rabbits are often hunted and eaten by humans, they also compete with domesticated herbivores for pasture. Rats are typically not eaten in Europe, and compete with humans directly for food, particularly grain. Of all the animal species present on the farm, only of rats is the question asked, "Are rats comrades?" (*Animal Farm* 13). Robert Savage answers that it was inevitable that the answer needed to be yes in order for the premise of the story to be consistent: "It forces the self-contained community of animals assembled in the barn to constitute itself, in the very act with which it flings open its doors to new- and latecomers, as a single political agent" (Savage 85). In order for four legs to be good, rats had to be admitted into the fold. The rats fall into the category to which humans fall in the eyes of the animals, that is, creatures that consume without producing. There is a parallel with unproductive members of human society, the "down and outs" with whom Orwell associated earlier in his life. However, in respect of *Animal Farm*, Savage concludes that they are only admitted to the extent they have the capacity not to behave like rats. In other

words, Savage suggests that Orwell successfully challenged his own bias against the down and out in human society from regarding them as rats in human guise, to regarding them as humans forced to live in a rat-like state through circumstance (Savage 86-87). The analogy with "down and out" humans demands that, once the rats are admitted into the Community of Beasts, they too can be re-educated into being contributing members of the new community, and the rats are duly sent for re-education, after which nothing more is heard of them in the story. Savage concludes that the fictional rats of *Animal Farm* represent the abject, to the extent that they continue to behave like rats. In other words, in any society there will be members whose position seems irredeemable. In closing *Animal Farm* with rats so stigmatised, Orwell left the door open for an alternative fictional treatment of the species, which takes place in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is Orwell's best-known work. Its dystopian world, divided between three geographic powers corresponding broadly with the world powers at the time of its publication in 1949, which are constantly at war, and in which social surveillance and control are almost absolute, is widely recognised. Various words, terms, sentences, and the images they either created or increased in power, which were used by Orwell in the novel, are part of the contemporary political discourse: "Doublethink", "newspeak", "Big Brother", "War is Peace," and "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever" are either directly recognised by people as Orwell's work, or are now part of a collective imaginative architecture.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is also the novel in which an imaginative "paradise" was affirmed, a utopian counterpoint to the potentially dystopian reality warned about in the novel. Rebecca Solnit observes: "Like William Morris, Orwell believed that paradise was

behind us, rather than ahead of us, in the old ways of life, and in the organic world, rather than ahead of us in an urbanised and industrialised future" (Solnit 40). I suggest that paradise was also behind us for Orwell in another sense – the sense in which the openness to wonder in childhood is our first and best opportunity to experience a wholeness, a completeness in existence, which is foundational within his political vision. The Golden Country, the imaginative "paradise" to which I refer, is largely disregarded in most commentary about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and relatively unknown in the public discourse about the book. It does not form part of what I have called a collective imaginative architecture associated with it.

The Golden Country was anticipated, but not named, in Orwell's earlier novel *Coming up for Air*. *Coming up for Air* was published in 1939, and the impending war, the advance of totalitarianism and the disappearance of the countryside are its themes. The world of *Coming up for Air* is one in which the pleasures of the natural world are being lost through industrialisation. The countryside described by George Bowling, *Coming up for Air's* narrator, was the basis for the Golden Country. In it he learned to love fishing as a boy, which for him was "not a thing that you can explain or rationalize, it's merely magic" (*Coming up for Air* 65).

The following sequence from *Coming up for Air* is important because it illustrates Orwell's clear-sightedness about the difference between actual and culturally-generated fears about animals and animality, an acute awareness of the depth and nature of the processes involved in generating and sustaining those fears, and the countervailing power of knowledge in seeing through misinformation. The narrator's reflections on the attitude and explicit views of his mother about animals anticipate an important development in Orwell's representation of animals in *Nineteen Eighty-four*:

> Practically everything worth doing was forbidden, in theory anyway. According to Mother, virtually everything that a boy wants to do is dangerous. Swimming was dangerous, climbing trees was dangerous, and so were sliding, snowballing, hanging on behind carts, using catapults and squailers, and even fishing. All animals were dangerous, except Nailer, the two cats, and Jackie the bullfinch. Every animal had its special recognised method of attacking you. Horses bit, bats got into your hair, swans broke your leg with a blow of their wings, bulls tossed you, and snakes "stung". All snakes stung, according to Mother, and when I quoted the penny encyclopedia to the effect that they didn't sting but bit, she only told me not to answer back. Lizards, slow-worms, toads, frogs, and newts also stung. All insects stung, except flies and blackbeetles. (*Coming up for Air* 59)

As an illustration of parental prohibition utilising fear and instrumental ignorance to inhibit the range of activities that a child may be interested in, this is an incisive piece of writing. It is structured to move from physical activities that clearly do carry a measure of danger that must be safeguarded against, through credible dangers presented by animals, on to risks presented by the nonhuman that are clearly false. Orwell is extending his treatment of animals from the manifesto on their behalf of *Animal Farm* into a consideration of acculturated ignorance and fear, the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; a dystopia of brutal and relentless social control, which extends to the recasting and manipulation of thought and language, in a state of perpetual warfare.

In his article *NATURE AND HUMAN LIBERTY: The Golden Country in George Orwell's 1984 and an Alternative Conception of Human Freedom*, environmental philosopher Piers H. G. Stephens contends that Orwell does not place the human above the nonhuman in the *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Instead, Stephen writes, Orwell recognises that the human without

the nonhuman is diminished, and that hope lies in the possibilities granted by that, rather than, as his character Winston Smith contends, (solely) with the proles. Stephens writes "Orwell originally entitled the book *The Last Man in Europe*, and as a careful textual examination reveals, by this he meant the last whole man, one who is politically aware but also capable of normal and authentic human feeling" (Stephens 89). Stephens emphasises the nonhuman is essential to Orwell's political vision. He continues "The significance of Orwell's Golden Country and the thrush's song thus lies both in their retrieval of the deep association of nature with liberty…*and in the future possibilities they grant*" (Stephens 95, my italics). He concludes, "for the message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is partly that, contra Sartre, hell is not other people. Rather, as we face the real possibility of a planet bereft of the nonartificial and the dynamics of any more-than-human nature, we should consider the possibility that hell might be a world containing *only* other *people*" (Stephens, 95, italics in the original). As a rejection of the logical consequence of human exceptionalism, Stephen's statement is hard to better.

The thrush in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appears relatively briefly, before Winston and Julia's first sexual encounter midway through the novel. Its song carries with it, for the character Winston, the following resonance: "it was as though it were a kind of liquid stuff that poured all over him and got mixed up with the sunlight that filtered through the leaves. He stopped thinking and merely felt" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 118). Immediately before this description of the effect upon Winston, Orwell offers a description that suggests he is someone deeply attuned to the natural world through observation:

> It spread out its wings, fitted them carefully into place again, ducked its head for a moment, as though making a sort of obeisance to the sun, and then began to pour forth a torrent of song. In the afternoon hush the volume of sound was startling.

> Winston and Julia clung together, fascinated. The music went on and on, minute after minute, with astonishing variations, never once repeating itself, almost as though the bird were deliberately showing off its virtuosity. Sometimes it stopped for a few seconds, spread out and resettled its wings, then swelled its speckled breast and again burst into song. Winston watched it with a sort of vague reverence. (118)

The body of the paragraph is a wonderfully observed moment of a nonhuman creature exhibiting a capability beyond most, and arguably all, humans. The final sentence conveys the feeling engendered in the character Winston by the thrush and its song, which he is barely able to articulate before he is separated from it, by the possibility that "some small, beetle-like man was listening intently – listening to *that*" (118, italics in the original).

Aside from the thrush and its song's symbolic role in the narrative, the depth and nature of the physical description are remarkable, as is the dissonance created for Winston by the prospect of the beetle-like man listening to the song. Winston and Julia have the visual experience as well as the birdsong; the bird's virtuosity is not in doubt to them, only curiosity about why and for whom, if anyone, the bird is singing. The beetle-like man cannot see the bird, and is likely to be listening for people to betray, rather than experiencing the bird and birdsong as Orwell, his characters, and his readers do. This scene conveys markedly different experiences of the bird and its song, and Orwell's invitation to the reader is to imagine it fully; like his extensive description of the elephant in "Shooting an Elephant", his description of the thrush as a living, sentient creature possessed of a remarkable musicality, is as important as its symbolic function in the story. As with "Shooting an Elephant" and *Animal Farm*, Orwell is juxtaposing images of the human and nonhuman in vivid and surprising ways, and placing the shared existence of the human and the nonhuman within

the imagined “paradise”. Orwell positions human exceptionalism, evidenced in the vast apparatus of which the beetle-like man is a part, within his dystopia.

Orwell extends his exploration of the nonhuman beyond the resonances of the thrush’s song and into the liminal territory occupied by the rat, a stigmatised species, emphasising cross-species similarities and commonalities and breaking down inter-species boundaries. He does so by describing the rats in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a naturalistic way, as he did with the elephant in “Shooting an Elephant” and does with the thrush in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell draws attention to similarities between the rats in the story and humans, in parallel with descriptions of ‘the rat’ as a threat. These threats are clearly actual in some circumstances, for example to vulnerable infants, and subject to cultural interpretation and manipulation in others, most notably in the novel by O’Brien towards Winston. This human capacity for the interpretation and manipulation of nonhuman creatures was prefigured in *Coming up for Air*. Winston’s vulnerability to the manipulation of the acculturated stereotype of the rat as threat is key to his eventual inability to realise his revolt. Orwell’s shifting of perspectives in sequences involving the actual rats in the novel, between author and characters, re-conceives the nonhuman relative to the human. Within *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, characteristics which are uniquely “human”, such as technological ingenuity, are evidently highly dangerous and destructive. In parallel, qualities which are evident across species, can be life-sustaining, neutral, or potentially dangerous. Sentience and musicality across the human and thrush are life-sustaining: “The birds sang, the proles sang, the Party did not sing” (210); as is the life cycle across species – both human and rat (79, 272). Organisational abilities (humans, bees, ants) are either life-sustaining, neutral, or dangerous. High levels of organisational ability are clearly potentially dangerous as practised by humans in the novel, and life-sustaining in bees and ants. O’Brien professes an admiration for the

intelligence of rats, and their ability to detect human weakness, which are also strengths of his own. There is a co-mingling of characteristics across species, rather than a divide between the two. Indeed, on the question of whether the uniquely human is to be praised, Orwell's position in the negative is closer to that of Swift and Tolstoy than the humanism of Erasmus, contrary to Cole's view.

Rats are substantial actors in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, possessed of both literal and symbolic agency. Orwell greatly expands the canvas begun with *Animal Farm*, in which rats, as actors, do not surmount the abjection which is their lot in the hierarchy of species arising from humanist instrumentalism. Despite their conceptual acceptance in the Community of Beasts, they remain in a liminal state – physically present, but banished as actors, acceptable only if they change their nature through re-education. At the end of *Ninety-Eighty-Four*, rats retain their essential vitality and agency, the two caged individual actors removed from the final scenes as captives, to an unknown fate, but with an individuated existence. Rats are redeemed as a species, with an ongoing vitality and resilience across generations, in parallel with the proles. Winston's tragedy is his inability to face the terror generated within himself by his actions as a child, contributing to his sister's death, and leading to his abandonment and betrayal of Julia – his inability to accept an aspect of himself, his inner "rat", as human stigmatisation has it.

Rats are present throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, through the filters of human experience and story, and as sentient creatures with marked similarities to humans. The first reference to rats is a direct association between human and nonhuman in one of the London districts inhabited by proles: "He was somewhere in the vague, brown coloured slums to the north and east of what had once been St Pancras station. He was walking up a cobbled street of little two-storey houses with battered doorways which gave straight on the

pavement and which were somehow curiously suggestive of rat-holes" (79). Winston is wandering aimlessly, after first writing in his diary, and is lost. The words "If there is hope, … it lies in the proles", that are among the first words in the diary, recur in his mind as he walks (79). Winston here is hopeful, and Orwell positions the rats alongside the source of hope, the proles, and as exciting curiosity rather than repugnance. The passage goes on to describe the human inhabitants of the slums, in their generations; "girls in full bloom…youths who chased the girls…swollen waddling woman… old bent creatures…ragged barefooted children" (79). Human and rat, fellow inhabitants of the surface of the earth, are in unmistakably similar environments, living unmistakably similar lives.

Winston is also similar to, rather than one of, the human inhabitants of the slum: "The strident voices stopped abruptly. The women studied him in hostile silence as he went past. But it was not hostility, exactly; merely a kind of wariness, a momentary stiffening, as at the passing of some unfamiliar animal" (79). Orwell describes an inter-species ability to be alert for and detect difference, also effective in detecting intra-human difference – a shared ability. For Cole, this passage is indicative of an intra-human classification employed by Orwell, for which Orwell uses animals as symbols. That is, Orwell employs his speciesism to illustrate human hierarchy – rats as irredeemably repellent animals, and slum dwellers the human equivalent. Rather than consolidating either species or intra human differences, as Cole suggests, I would argue that Orwell is challenging them.

Both the proles and rats occupy similarly liminal spaces – following on from *Animal Farm* and Savage's analysis—rats are only acceptable to the extent they do not behave like rats. Cole suggests that for Orwell proles are only really acceptable to the extent that they learn to engage their "animal instincts" and join the revolution; in effect they are only

instrumentally important. At this point in the novel, both proles and rats are clearly above all resilient – both are resilient enough to thrive in the meanest surroundings, emphasised by Orwell's description of the generations of proles. In parallel with the species rat at the end of *Animal Farm*, the proles also occupy a liminal space:for the Party, they are not sufficiently human to be taken into full humanity; for the Party, only proles and the animals are "free", that is, free from the (abominable) system under which the human species has organised itself.

The second reference to rats occurs in the room in which Winston and Julia meet after they become lovers. It is the first time Winston has stripped naked in front of Julia, and he is acutely aware of "his pale and meagre body, with the varicose veins standing out on his calves and the discoloured patch over his ankle." Winston is aware of his own abject appearance – abjection is not confined to the animal and the prole, it extends at least to outer Party members. When Julia sees the rat, it is Winston who is more badly affected by mention of its presence. "'Rats!', murmured Winston. 'In this room.'" Winston is reminded of a recurrent nightmare, in which he is standing in front of a wall of darkness, and there is something too dreadful to be faced on the other side (136-137). Julia remarks that some parts of London are swarming with rats, that it is "great huge brown ones" that attack children, and that children cannot be left alone for two minutes (137). Winston stops her from saying what it is that these rats always do to a baby, because he is only too familiar with the anecdote that they always go for the face. Julia then comforts Winston, and with his eyes shut he has a feeling of being back in a recurrent nightmare in which he is both close to the source of his terror and to knowing of his own self-deception, that "with a deadly effort, like wrenching a piece out of his own brain, he could even have dragged the thing out into the open" (137). He always woke without being able to make that effort, but

knew it was somehow connected with what Julia was saying about rats. In other words, the repellent aspect of rats is at least in part generated by an association in the character Winston's mind, rather than any quality inherent to the creature itself.

In this sequence rats are represented as an actual source of danger to humans, at least at their most vulnerable, when babies and children, and as a threat to Winston, which seems disproportionate. There is a sense that Winston wants to know what memory or association magnified fear of the rat to such an extent for him – possibly to do with his mother and his treatment of his younger sister. There is also a sense that in the elation of being with Julia, a sensual elation in which–when Julia is able to reassure him sufficiently, he can enjoy the smell of the coffee she makes "so powerful and exciting that they shut the window lest anybody outside should notice it and become inquisitive" (137)–he actually wants to be able to know the nature of his fear, and not to be incapacitated by self-deception. Even when Winston is experiencing a primal terror, the shared experience with Julia, and the existence of hope within him, makes the existence of the rat in close proximity something Winston is almost ready to experience differently.

Some academic examination of Orwell's fiction, particularly his earlier novels, has focussed upon limitations, suggesting his earlier novels are unsuccessful and lacking in any real value. Loraine Saunders argues, in her 2008 book *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell: the Novels from Burmese Days to 1984*, that the earlier fiction is more subtle, and successful, than these critics, and indeed Orwell, came to suggest. Central to Saunders' position is that Orwell's use of point of view, and in particular his use of free indirect discourse, is not recognised sufficiently in commentary on his fiction. Saunders' argument is that a feature of Orwell's fiction is to make use of the interplay between the perspectives of his characters, and authorial commentary. I argue that Orwell differentiates between

perspectives in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* and that this must be considered when analysing the novel. I comment in particular on the final section involving rats, the shifts in perspective between characters and author, and Orwell's positioning of the rats as actors in this section. This sequence is striking in subtle changes in perspective, shifting between authorial presence, the narrator Winston's point of view psychologically and in terms of his senses, O'Brien's psychology and techniques of manipulation, and the behaviour of the two rats in the situation O'Brien has placed them in. Further examination of Orwell's use of point of view is likely to further clarify Orwell's exploration of human and nonhuman boundaries.

The final sequence involving rats, in which Orwell's own voice is most extensively differentiated from his characters in order to symbolically conjoin species, through Winston and two rats being caged together by O'Brien, occurs in Room 101. Room 101 is a place of mystery and dread throughout the novel. At the beginning of the sequence, in the penultimate chapter of the book, Winston is bound to his chair and cannot move his head to look around. There are two small tables in front of him, and Winston realises that on the further table is a cage containing two rats, each in a separate compartment. O'Brien explains to Winston that the worst thing in the world varies from individual to individual, and identifies rats as Winston's worst thing, and that there are rats behind the wall of darkness in Winston's recurrent dream. Winston's feelings of total isolation, of being in a desert in which sounds come from great distances, where he can hear the blood singing in his ears, finish with a realistic description of the two rats, in a cage not two metres from him: "They were enormous rats. They were at the age when a rat's muzzle grows blunt and fierce and his fur brown instead of grey" (272). Of itself, this description is of physical facts. The word "fierce" is as commonly used as a term of admiration, or a neutral descriptive term, as it is to convey threat. The extent to which these two creatures are frightening rests on the

resonance of the colour change from grey to brown already conveyed in the earlier passage in the context of Julia's lurid description of rat behaviour, upon the word "fierce" – and upon the associations that "rat" has for the reader, which are unlikely to be positive.

It is after this point of authorial commentary, introducing a neutral, realistic description of the rats, that Orwell next situates O'Brien's voice in the sequence. O'Brien offers a highly selective and biased commentary on the species rat. He first says: "The rat, although a rodent, is carnivorous" (272). Orwell, and most readers, are aware that, like humans, rats are omnivores, and eat meat as well as a wide range of other foods. Some species of rat are exclusively herbivorous. The brown and black rats found in London are omnivores, the subject of an extensive legacy in human culture, and, particularly in the case of brown rats, highly stigmatised. O'Brien next repeats, and further exaggerates, the trope, already introduced by Julia, about the ferocity of rats to babies and children, saying rats are certain to attack a child left alone, that children cannot be left alone for five minutes because "[w]ithin quite a small time they will strip it to the bones. They also attack sick or dying people. They show astonishing intelligence in knowing when a human being is helpless" (272). O'Brien's immediate purpose is to terrify Winston further, but O'Brien also seeks to justify his own cruelty to Winston, and the cruelty of the Inner Party's hold over the wider Party. Clearly a species as hateful as a rat, in O'Brien's description, could justifiably be exterminated, and to propagandise on behalf of the party. In the latter, O'Brien addresses "his invisible audience" (272). O'Brien is relying on both Winston's terror at the "rats" that threaten him, and the reader's familiarity with "the rat" as a stigmatised species.

The next short paragraph serves to build tension, but the authorial choice to privilege naturalistic description over either Winston's or O'Brien's perspective again draws attention to the rats as living beings, and to the situation they have been placed in by O'Brien,

specifically being starved in small cages: “There was an outburst of squeals from the cage…The rats were fighting; they were trying to get at each other through the partition” (272). Orwell’s choice of the word “squeals” and the phrase “get at each other” are as commonly used for humans as for animals. It is when Orwell returns to the description of Winston’s reaction to O’Brien’s next actions, picking up the cage and pressing a button, that he becomes melodramatic in his description: “Winston made a frantic effort to tear himself loose from the chair. It was hopeless, every part of him, even his head, was held immovably.” O’Brien next acknowledges Winston’s understanding of basic mechanical things: “You understand the construction of the cage”. He then juxtaposes this commonplace understanding with a melodramatic and clichéd description of the rat’s behaviour when released from the cage: “These starving brutes will shoot out of it like bullets. Have you ever seen a rat leap through the air? They will leap onto your face and bore straight into it. Sometimes they attack the eyes first. Sometimes they burrow through the cheeks and devour the tongue” (273).

O’Brien is winding up the stereotypical behaviour of a stigmatised creature. As reader, I am sure that Orwell is not suggesting that either O’Brien or Winston have actually seen a rat behaving in these ways, but the author (through O’Brien’s point of view) is confident that I can accept the stereotype and invest in Winston’s terror.

The final two paragraphs in the sequence juxtapose Winston’s breakdown from his sensory perspective, and Orwell’s own voice describing the rats. In relation to the rats, Winston “hears a succession of shrill cries”, is struck by “the foul, musty odour of the brutes”, and himself becomes “insane, a screaming animal” (273). In the final paragraph describing the rats Orwell again calls on a neutral, naturalistic tone:

> The circle of the mask was large enough now to shut out the vision of anything else. The wire door was a couple of hand-spans from his face. The rats knew what was coming now. One of them was leaping up and down, the other, an old scaly grandfather of the sewers, stood up, with his pink hands against the bars, and fiercely snuffed the air. Winston could see the whiskers and yellow teeth. Again the black panic took hold of him. He was blind, helpless, mindless. (273)

What is particularly noticeable about this description is its richness – the two rats are sentient, individuated in terms of age, contrasted in terms of behaviour and hence given a unique being. They are given an ongoing existence and a unique history, as propagating beings. The unique life of the non-human is affirmed by the animal "snuffing" the air, a word which describes the use by nonhuman animals of a sense of smell superior to that of humans. The apparently anthropocentric features of the description – one rat standing up, the pinkness of the undersides of his hands, the use of "hands" rather than "paws", illustrate common, rather than differentiating, traits between humans and rats. Its power relies upon its clear-sightedness, and the intermingling of human and nonhuman characteristics serves to diminish, rather than exaggerate, the stigma of species differentiation. The agency of both Winston and the rats is constrained by the cage created for them by O'Brien, and by extension to the metaphorical cages created by the cultures of Oceania and the human respectively.

The presences of Orwell and Winston in this scene are managed using a pronoun initially – "The wire door was a couple of hand-spans from his face" – as well as Winston's name: "Winston could see the whiskers and yellow teeth" later in the paragraph, and after the description of the rats. With the later sentence, Orwell is suggesting that Winston in his terror can only see the threat of the teeth, confirming that the preceding rich description of

the rats is Orwell's voice. In this sequence Orwell has separated the creature, rat, from its stigmatised place in human lore through the use of language to distinguish authorial presence from the perspectives of the characters Winston and O'Brien. In doing so Orwell creates an equivalence between the human, through the proles, and the species rat, as sources of hope – the hope that the character Winston shares for most of the novel, but loses at its end. Orwell did not lose hope, and his political vision included both the human and other species, rather than privileging the human as an exceptional and superior species. It is argued that Orwell's belief in human superiority, rather than power, over other species is evidenced in the character O'Brien. However, I do not agree that view reflects the evidence I've examined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

While for most of the novel the character Winston has a fatally blinkered view of O'Brien, I find it impossible to find a sense in which Orwell valorises O'Brien. Orwell was under no illusions about the evil O'Brien embodied, and the danger presented by the most prized of human attributes: intelligence. Taking a different view, Cole says, quoting Robert Paul Resch, "Orwell's political ideology is riven by a tension between his conscious commitment to both libertarian and egalitarian values and an unconscious impulse to valorise superior individuals as the expense of the inferior masses, with the 'superior individuals' in this case epitomised by O'Brien, a European upper-class Inner Party man" (Cole 347). Orwell explains the attraction of O'Brien for Winston early in the novel:

> He felt deeply drawn to him, and not solely because he was intrigued by the contrast between O'Brien's urbane manner and his prizefighter's physique. Much more it was because of a secretly-held belief, merely a hope – that O'Brien's political orthodoxy was not perfect. Something in his face suggested it irresistibly. And again, perhaps it was not even orthodoxy that was written on his face, but simply intelligence. But at

> any rate he had the appearance of being a person that you could talk to, if somehow you could cheat the telescreen and get him alone. (11)

Winston is intrigued by O'Brien, partly because he is physically robust, whereas Winston dislikes his own body, because he is sophisticated and intelligent, and Winston believes he may not be politically orthodox. O'Brien is also a member of the Inner Party, and immensely powerful. While there is undoubtedly a lot of Orwell in Winston, the two are very different. O'Brien is powerful and intelligent but is not a superior individual in any meaningful sense. It is ironic that, for Winston, hope lies in O'Brien as well as the proles, because O'Brien represents for Orwell what he detests: the grossest abuse of human power. When the life-defeating characteristics of O'Brien, including his use of intelligence, are placed alongside the uncomplicated resilience of the proles and rats, it is clear that Orwell was not in favour of the human exceptionalism that O'Brien represents in the novel. Instead, I argue that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the culmination of an exploration by Orwell of animality that began with "Shooting an Elephant". Using close and empathetic journalistic description of the nonhuman, Orwell entwines human and nonhuman to demonstrate that, rather than being ontologically separate, they must be experienced holistically. Winston's tragedy is that he cannot finally accept "the rat within". However, his tragic experience, his loss of hope, is a powerful argument against human exceptionalism and for a genuine co-sharing of the surface of the earth.

Epilogue: Stewart Cole's argument

Cole takes the view that for Orwell "the conviction, everywhere evident in Orwell's writings, that human and nonhuman animals exist at different ontological strata is not just another exclusionary shortcoming in his politics, but can in fact be seen as a foundational

shortcoming, a kind of ur-division that itself works to enable and perpetuate the array of other exclusions that riddle his socialist commitments" (Cole 340). He continues: "On the other hand, cast as a potentially revolutionary 'force' internal to the human, 'animal instinct' serves to invest our bodily animality with a kind of utopian hope that works to mitigate the figures of abjection that proliferate elsewhere" (Cole 343). While Cole's analysis cites Orwell's writings and relevant criticism quite widely, it is based primarily upon the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for direct textual commentary. The most Cole allows *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is "a pregnant paradox at work in the novel's political consciousness: animality is both that with which tyranny threatens us and that within us with which we might threaten tyranny" (Cole 344).

Cole's position is only arguable in my view if four conditions are allowed: that we have no regard for the function of the Golden Country in the novel; that we assume everything in the novel represents the view of the author, rather than allowing for Orwell's use of point of view; that we take no account of Orwell's use of naturalistic description of the actual animals in the novel, the thrush and the rat; and that we deny the species rat any positive resonance in the novel. If our reading rests on an alternative assumption this allows for a more nuanced, empathetic and hopeful place for the "more than human", (to adopt Stephens' term) in Orwell's presentation of animality. Cole makes no mention of the Golden Country in his analysis of animality in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. To do so omits the contextual importance of the Golden Country as a utopian counterpoint to the otherwise dystopian context and environment. Cole does not differentiate at all between Orwell and his characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in effect conflating them. In my view there are critical differences evident between the narratorial voice of Winston Smith, and Orwell as implied author. These differences in voice suggest different perspectives on the function of animality

and give the liminal identity of the rat a different and potentially positive place in the spectrum of actors and agencies.

Of the two instances of actual, rather than metaphoric, animals appearing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the thrush and the rat, Cole writes that one is "of a positive and the other of a negative resonance, one hopeful and the other wretched" (Cole 344). The rats who appear in the culminating scene of Winston's torture in room 101 are described variously as "slavering" (Cole 335), "repulsive rats" (Cole 341), a "ravenous threat"(Cole 345), "void of all positive resonance"(Cole 345), and as "gnawing vermin" (Cole 346). I contend that, Orwell's well-documented difficulties with rats in everyday life notwithstanding, the rats in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* carry their own positive resonance beyond symbols for human abjection and potential for liberation. Both the thrush and the rat carry positive resonance, but of a different type. Cole's analysis does not differentiate for point of view among Orwell's characters or acknowledge the possibility of a distinct authorial voice in the text. Cole writes as if everything he cites speaks directly of Orwell's personal perspective, rather than having a function within the narrative.

Stephens' conclusion deserves repeating and further reflection because it confirms the foundational place in the nonhuman in Orwell's political vision. Stephens claims, "For the message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is partly that, contra Sartre, hell is not other people. Rather, as we face the real possibility of a planet bereft of the nonartificial and the dynamics of any more-than-human nature, we should consider the possibility that hell might be a world containing *only* other *people*" (Stephens 95, italics in the original). A clearer statement of the risks of unbounded human exceptionalism and blindness to more-than-human nature is hard to imagine. Stephens reaches his conclusion by reflecting on the importance of the

Golden Country in the novel, which provides a utopian counterpoint to the otherwise dystopian world of Oceania.

There are thirteen instances of the use of the word "animal" or its plural in *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* Cole lists eleven of these instances as metaphorical and refers to the two uses of "animal" that are not "strictly metaphorical" (Cole 343). The instances cited by Cole as metaphorical appear below, with Cole's references, which are from *The Complete Works of George Orwell,* vol 20, Ed. Peter Davidson, London, Secker and Warburg, 1997:

> 'Everything had a battered, trampled-on look, as though the place had just been visited by some large violent animal' (9: 23); 'Parsons swallowed it easily, with the stupidity of an animal' (62); 'The party taught that the proles were natural inferiors who must be kept in subjection, like animals' (74); 'But it was not hostility, exactly; merely a kind of wariness, a momentary stiffening, as at the passing of some unfamiliar animal' (86); 'Foreigners, whether from Eurasia or Eastasia, were a kind of strange animal' (122); 'The room was a world, a pocket of the past where extinct animals could walk' (157); 'It is like the battles between certain ruminant animals whose horns are set at such an angle that they are incapable of hurting one another' (207); 'He had set up a wordless howling, like an animal' (249); 'There were times when he rolled about the floor, as shameless as an animal' (252); 'They are helpless, like the animals' (282); 'For an instant he was insane, a screaming animal.' (299)

Within these eleven metaphors, Cole identifies two threads which in his view inform almost all of Orwell's metaphorical use of "animal" The first is that, at a cursory reading, they are in line with the "dominant current of Western thinking about the human/animal distinction, according to which animality is a state to which humans are *reduced* (Cole 343, italics in the original); the second is the animal as "the foreign, the impenetrably strange,

reachable only by joining it in its slough of abjection" (343). However, Cole comments that within Orwell's "foundational ambivalence", "Orwell's deployment of the concept of the animal in the novel remains multivalent enough to resist pigeon-holing" (343). As an example, Cole identifies this instance: "The room was a world, a pocket of the past where extinct animals could walk" being used solely "for its liberatory resonance". In other words, for Cole, Orwell's use of animality within the novel either serves to confirm a humanistic privileging of the human over the animal, or as a parallel to Orwell's view of the proles; as liberatory potential, rather than actuality. The implication is that, to the extent that the proles are incapable of realising their potential as a force for liberation, *for Orwell* they are less than fully human, that is, like animals.

In relation to these metaphoric uses of the word animal and to animal images employed by Orwell (for example, Winston's frail sister clinging to his mother "exactly like a baby monkey"), Cole suggests: "Indeed, one might claim that Oceanic society is dystopian to the extent that animals are absent from it, their presence almost fully reduced to the figurative" (Cole 344). Cole's suggestion is the obverse of Stephens', for whom Orwell's message in *Ninety Eighty-Four* is that the ongoing loss of more-than-human nature is hellish. I support Stephens' view, which is, as I have sought to demonstrate in this essay, evident in Orwell's novel.

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A rat by any other name

I live in two worlds. Mine and yours.

I am whisker and bone, fluid as water in sewers and gutters, in pipes and channels. I seek and conquer space, dark and ignored and reviled, the shameful home of shit and rot.

I feel an exquisite craving in my jaws, an insistent itch as my incisors grow. I am insatiable, not for mere nourishment, but to bite, to gnaw, to worry with chiselling. To find the holes in every thing, to create holes where none have been, to savage straight lines, to make your fabrications imperfect and pervious, to ruin your pipes and designs.

I'm speaking to you. I want you to know I'm here, that we are here, and who we are. We understand your danger more clearly now that so much is ravaged and changed. Where once we ran, now we turn, we listen, we stare back. We hear your voices differently, in understanding and dread.

Every nonhuman being that walks, runs, gallops, scampers, flies, crawls, swims, slithers and breathes on this earth wants your attention. We are speaking to you, now, along with fire, flood, blooms in the waters and disturbances in the sky; storms that bring havoc, that rend your lives asunder.

You have feared that photographs will take away your soul, your essence; we have found the opposite – as we have become tamed, mutated and annihilated, as we increasingly exist in images and relics, rather than as a growing multitude of differences, we are developing a new, shared reality – a single great life – muscle, blood, fur, feathers, fins, teeth, beaks, hooves, claws, venom, toxin, bone and carapace.

We, quite suddenly, glory in each other, in our variety and beauty. At each dawn there is an indeterminate time in which every creature forgets what it must do to survive, what horrors it must inflict upon its fellows, or must withstand; and stands, crouches, hovers, perches, holds still in the water, in wonder. A brief dawn service, if you will.

We gather, we mourn. Gatherings of the living at which the extinct are present – as bone, as skin, as fragments, as memories – a sky darkened by passenger pigeons, in which the shape of a solitary bird is blue; the famous great auk, poised to utter in an eternal silence; the last marsupial wolf inside a concrete cage, an inexpressible sadness in its eyes; a stone moa, solitary inside a crowded railway station; a tea set for chimpanzees, a stool for a circus lion, a post and chain for a dancing bear.

We rats, being vermin, are there in force of course, along with your more favoured companions. Our many guises, vegetarian, omnivore, carnivore, are well represented. There we are, look, scurrying, filthy, depraved in our daily lives; an elaboration of disgust and fear.

We, the nonhuman, now have unpredictable points of connection with you, strange insights, loathings and longings.

Let me tell you about mine.

Frank came into my life when he rescued me from his cat. My rest was disturbed by the removal of an old railway sleeper at the back of Frank's garden. A cat pounced on me and carried me off to play with, and no doubt despatch in due course. I'd likely have ended up a wet and bloodied carcase on the front porch or in the house somewhere if Frank hadn't followed and effected a rescue.

Whatever Frank's troubles were, he was good to me, and I in turn was good to him.

He set to work making me a house to live in, with a sleeping compartment packed with pea-straw, bowls for food and water, and an area enclosed in wire netting to run about in. Prior to moving in, I spent a terrified couple of hours in a shoe box, just me, my urine, a wine biscuit and one by one the small, neat turds I produced while waiting.

Part of Frank's big face appeared just after the whiteness of the shoe box lid shifted to give a glimpse of blue sky and the corner of the house. I leapt for the opening, but the lid closed before I reached the lip of the box and I bounced back off it. I was tipped into a new home, with the wire lid closed fast after me.

If you know anything about rats, particularly wild rats, you will know we are expert at escaping from tight spots, malleable of form and sharp of tooth. I could have chiselled and gnawed my way out of a wooden box easily. But Frank knew what he was doing, converting an old metal container, using a drawer to make the sleeping compartment and metal rails to secure the wire netting of the run. He kept it on the lawn near where the sleeper had been. He provided generous amounts of food, which I shared with other rats beyond the wire.

I came to feel that there was no malice in his imprisonment of me, rather that he wanted to protect me. He watched as I dropped food outside the cage, and the other rats ate, and conveyed what was left to be stored.

I began to spend more time outside the cage and was quite happy to return to it afterwards. I sometimes travelled with him; hidden in the pocket of a greatcoat he often wore. My connection with him grew.

And then something happened, which changed everything.

It was dawn, and I had the sensation of being inside Frank, inside his head. I knew that I was appearing as a character in Frank's dream. I began to understand what Frank was

saying. Frank began to speak to me in the dream, calling me Tony, the name of his cousin who had visited him and stayed in his flat. Frank and I listened to drumming, him clenched and hardened, marching a long march up and down hills and valleys, next to each other. His face was gaunt, so scared he could do nothing but play his whistle tune over and over. We marched among dialects, English and Irish, among thin men, bound by banners and music. Tunes changed, sometimes a new one rolled back or forward along the line of soldiers, held together by the drums. Two or three fused into one, then changed again. Songs, slow hearth songs, rose and fell among the knots of clansmen and countrymen. I looked at Frank again and his face was calm, drawing strength from that long line of men, ragged like a rope, playing and singing into the green and glowing countryside.

He has your marvellous mind, your imagination, your endless networks of illusion, your language; your upright gait, your fiendishly ingenious hands; your marvellous thumbs, your owl-like forward-facing eyes singular in their blindness.

He imagines hundreds of worlds out in space. He is able to go back to an earth when the balance seemed different, when there was a sense that you lived on the edge of something other than you. When you thought you could go out into plenty, could lose yourself in beauty, could feel that new lands were possible.

Now, we all know it is disappearing, inexorably. You are eating the face off the earth like maggots at a carcass. Soon the whole earth will be a seething mass. What will it look like from your space ship, your haven in the sky? Not green and blue; the edges are blurring, your darkness is creeping out over and into the sea, your bile is billowing out over the blue and green, consuming it and covering it.

He dreams he is in a tunnel, so dark that he barely dares to move. His limbs are not his own, there is nothing except fear, foreboding, dread, on a journey with no ending or turn-off, no way back or home, without hope.

He dreams of being a small creature, crawling unnoticed into a forgotten verge, following your highways as a witness that the vast mass of us live in fields, behind fences, inside cages – tamed, mutated, different, distorted; most familiar to you as meals, skinned for clothes, images, likenesses, projections.

He dreams of raising his nose, whiskers twitching, senses alert; of distant hills shining with a dancing blue light, a fantastic depth he has not remembered before. He dreams of the far hills as a boy. Distance beyond measure, colour beyond description, wonder beyond imagination, existence beyond words.

Around the time he began speaking to me, Frank began to have difficulties with his flatmate, Shelley, who was initially quite accepting of me. One evening they argued about housekeeping money. Shelley did not believe that I could eat as much as Frank was paying for my food, and said he needed to contribute more. Shelley had a job and Frank didn't, which made it difficult for him to pay more housekeeping than he already did out of his benefit. Shelley asked Frank why he talked to me, and said she was worried about him. She said she really didn't like me being out of the cage and free inside the house, and that he needed to keep me caged outside. He didn't say anything but took me back outside and gently put me back in the cage. He brought extra food. Soon my family and other rats arrived to eat, and he sat and smiled at the congregation on the lawn, gathering at the edge of the cage where I dropped food out, and coming and going from the overgrown section at the back of the flat.

The next day Frank seemed to have forgotten about what Shelley said because when she got back from work, I was in the house as usual. It was already dark outside. Shelley looked tired. She sat down and started crying. It was as if Frank didn't see her; he just kept putting me on one corner of the back of the couch for me to run along it for the small pieces of food he was putting on the other corner.

Later that night I saw a blue light outside, coming and going, ebbing and flowing, light, dark, light, dark, light, dark. There were three knocks on the door. As Shelley went to open it I dropped down off the back of the couch and hid under it.

"Hello," a woman's voice asked, "is Shelley James at home?"

"I'm Shelley James," Shelley answered, and I heard footsteps going back outside. I heard someone say "and you will need to make a statement". I saw four pairs of shoes walk back into the room, three of them black, and the other Shelley's sandals.

"We'd like you to come with us, please, sir." A man's voice said. "We have some questions after a phone call from your flatmate."

"No worries," said Frank. "I'll get my coat." He lifted his coat from the arm of the couch, and I was in the lining, having got in through one of the large pockets. Then he went with them meekly, like a little lamb, innocent like a lamb. Like a lamb to the slaughter, with me swinging about in the lining of his coat.

"Would you like to contact a family member, friend or lawyer sir?" asked a voice.

"What for?" Frank asked. "What's happened?"

"She is scared, sir. Shelley, your flatmate. She is worried about you."

"Scared?" replied Frank. He started to laugh, then stopped.

"She can't understand some of the things you are saying. She feels frightened."

'We were watching television", Frank said, "and I was talking to Tony."

“Helen says she hasn’t seen Tony for three months, sir. She thinks he may have gone back home to England or have continued his travelling. She says that you are talking to a rat as if he was Tony.”

A different voice, the woman’s voice, said, “We would like you to stay at the station overnight, and see a police doctor in the morning. Do you agree to that? And are you sure there is no-one you want to contact?”

“I’m sure,” replied Frank.

“Unfortunately we don’t have the space to put you into a room on your own, but there is very close oversight of everyone, and you will be perfectly safe. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” replied Frank.

I nipped a small hole in the coat and could see with one eye.

Frank was taken to a cell with two other men in it. One of them was out of his tree and singing.

“In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight…In the village, the quiet village..” then he puked. A wash of stinking vomit, covering the floor in front of him, sat glistening on his knees like soft barnacles on rocks. He dropped sideways to one knee, palms on the floor, and retched some more.

“Fuck” came a voice from outside, then the door opened and one cop came in, while another stood by the door. When the retching finished, the cop guided the puker up, holding his collar at arm’s length as he stood, swaying, one hand against the wall. A third cop came in and cleaned the floor up quickly, scooping puke into a bucket, finishing with a mop.

I could see the third man in the cell staring at Frank, hard. Looking straight into his eyes. Eyes as black as coal, tattoos on his face, with small blue daggers at the edges of the eyes. Frank did not meet the gaze. I felt the weight of the eyes on Frank's forehead, boring into him, making his head as heavy as lead. So heavy he could move it. He might topple forward and split his head open under the weight of the stare, and the hatred in those eyes. Frank could smell shame and fear in the vomit. He was still, wrapped in shame and fear, becoming wooden with the smell of it.

Frank turned sideways on the bench, raising his legs up onto it, lying down facing the wall. I felt him make himself hard as oak, oak in the depths of a Northern sea, a Viking ship sunk hundreds of years ago, and lie there. He looked at the wall, at the depths of its hardness and coldness, harder and colder than the bottom of that Northern sea, with its dark and grey ooze, and worms that pry and slither in those depths.

The small bones in his neck creaked like branches as he turned his head, turned to the wall, and made an oaken statue, clenching tight. Oaken man to be found later by an explorer in that realm.

I slept in the small hammock of his coat, dangling from the wooden bench.

The next morning the cell door swung open, "This way please sir."

I swung alongside Frank as he followed the policeman along a corridor.

"This is Martin O'Brien, a psychologist who works alongside the Police. He would like to speak to you before the doctor sees you."

We went into an office, where Frank sat in a chair opposite O'Brien, who was resplendent in a charcoal-coloured suit.

"Good morning Frank," said O'Brien. "I've had a briefing from the Police about the circumstances you find yourself in, including the loss of your accommodation. I'd like to think

I can help. The doctor you are about to see will be prescribing medication to help with your present distress, and the programme I'm involved in running will help you get back on your feet."

Frank said nothing, and O'Brien continued.

"You may have heard of O'Brien and Associates, possibly not. We own and invest in a number of businesses, and are involved in many aspects of the community. We run a half-way facility for people in need, particularly young people at a crossroads in their lives, and others who are looking for life alternatives. The facility is a large compound with accommodation, and provides specialist mental health care for those who need it, including individual and group therapies. We provide for a variety of sports, including a gym and a shooting range. Most of the tenants work in businesses run by O'Brien and Associates. Under supervision and guidance, they train and play sports together, and participate in group and individual development and therapy sessions."

That was pretty much it. O'Brien got Frank to sign some papers, and they shook hands.

Frank and O'Brien saw the doctor together, to get medication sorted. Then outside into the bright street, cool in the empty morning. A Range Rover clean and bright at the curb right outside the station, and Frank was driven to his new home.

Each tenant had their own small room, with access to common bathroom, laundry and kitchen areas. Each room faced an internal courtyard, and has a window at the back of it, which opened onto a large lawn surrounded by the bush.

My cage was beneath Frank's window, backing onto the building, and he could put me in, and take me out, by lifting the lid on the cage, without leaving his room. Pets were permitted in some circumstances, and I fell into that category.

It was soon clear to both Frank and me that O'Brien's required arrangement, with me imprisoned in my cage, would not work. Frank's days were different now, taken up with training, manual work around the compound, therapy sessions, and participation in the life of the facility generally. I spent most of my time on my own, and although he always fed me and talked to me, I only saw Frank in his room some evenings, when he sneaked me out. I began to grow desperate. I tried chewing through the wire and cut my gums and face. And so one night he cut a hole in the wire, a small hole right at the bottom of the cage where it backed onto the building, unable to be seen. I understood that I must keep myself invisible to all the humans in the compound except Frank.

I began to explore, and found the compound was easy to infiltrate. The buildings were on high piles, well off the ground to be safe from rising water, with plenty of holes for wiring and piping to gain entry, and ample space in the ceilings.

One morning, early, a siren went off. I rocketed through the hole in the cage and hid behind a pile, flattening myself against the dusty, hard-packed mud. The siren stopped, and I saw dozens of legs moving quickly, then standing in lines facing me. I kept still.

Four more legs appeared, then stood facing the lines in front of them, boot heels close to the building.

"Arms down," said a voice I recognised as O'Brien. Gun butts were rested beside each pair of boots. "Good work," said O'Brien. "I will see you all at our meeting tomorrow morning."

I stayed still until the legs were gone and the voices had drifted off. And then I noticed four young rats hanging about a pile further back under the building. All males, still for a second then rolling about play-fighting. Three at a time while the last kept look-out. I realised the entrance to an underground colony was behind the pile.

I approached cautiously and saw what looked like nothing more than a small fissure in the hard earth. They gave me the eye, and I knew I was at risk as an outsider. I pushed my way through and they followed me down into the tunnel, letting me know I was on notice with them. We passed a chamber half full of food gathered from the rubbish bins, and the fields and bush around the compound. The next chamber was full of mating adults, in their ferocious and immutable abandon, their glorious promiscuity. Tempting as it was, as an outsider I wouldn't dare enter, and I continued on without a sniff, second glance or pause.

We passed sleeping chambers of various sizes, lined with fur and dry plants, more food storage and eating chambers, and arrived in a chamber much larger than any of the others. There looked to be several hundred rats there. A few were obviously outsiders like me, watching on around the walls, relatively subdued, taking care to be unintrusive and submissive. There would be no such colony out in the open fields, too many of us to feed and too risky if we were discovered. But here, where your infrastructure and provisions were involved, it's different. As long as we were careful and you didn't get a sense we were so numerous right below you, it was a risk worth taking.

The rats of the colony were gathering in front of a huge skull elevated off the floor of the chamber. At first glance it could have been taken for a dinosaur, so large the head, cavernous the eye sockets, and long the muzzle. Giant yellow teeth stood in emphatic relief against the lustre of bone, the open jaws heralding a gigantic silence.

Brown muzzled elders gathered in front of the skull, and more rats arrived from other parts of the colony. Then the cavern went as quiet as death. The elders, those who had survived, snuffed the air, in deep breaths from within themselves, standing on their hind legs and dipping forward, creating a testing, a challenging in the air. We outsiders responded

with low squealing, and lay prostrate on the ground, signifying submission and humility, and the rest of the colony joined with rhythmic squealing, signifying welcome and unity. We faced our Queen, standing, snuffing, bowing low on our stomachs, our front paws obeisant on the earth. In awe and reverence at her ancestral presence, we heard our Queen answer, and saw her looking back at us.

Our congregation began moving in a dense river, a living circle, circling leftwards, the tail of each rat linking to the tail on its right. Our rat King kept continuity with our Queen, keeping her alive in us.

The following morning O'Brien was at a pedestal in the front of the amphitheatre, talking with the early arrivals at the front. I was hidden in a mezzanine area with a good view of the proceedings. Human faces sat still and flat on a screen behind the pedestal. People filed in and Frank arrived, with two other men. They were dressed in baggy green pants and t-shirts. Frank's hair was short, and he was clean-shaven, like the others.

Side curtains were open, and I saw a heavy swell crashing in on the rocks, sending spray and mist into the air below the compound.

"Move in please," O'Brien said over the microphone.

Talking in the room quietened, and people shuffled more quickly to their seats.

O'Brien's shoulders straightened, and he looked from one side of the room to the other, reaching the eyes of each in his audience.

The room fell silent but for the sound of the wind and the sea.

"We are in desperate and confused times. Why is it that nations, religions, tribes and citizens are intensifying their fighting, and new tribes are forming? Why do you feel of no significance and at fault? Why do you feel such resentment? Why do you feel such anger?"

"Why are you here?" he asked in a voice become softer. "You feel stunted and unhappy. At every turn you feel defeated and frustrated. You feel guilty and ashamed. You do not trust, you are confused, you are chameleons hiding both your beauty and your ugliness.

You are not without fault, I am not without fault, we are not without fault. But we are not to be blamed for the evils around us. You are not to be blamed. Each of you is here because you think you must bear more unhappiness, shame, and guilt than you deserve.

You are looking for truth. You are looking for fulfillment. Above all, you are looking for your true inheritance, your true place in these confusing times. I will not concede or bow to lies. We do not concede or bow to lies. That is why we are here."

The room remained still and silent. Frank, the others in the room, and the faces on the screen, seemed transfixed. I dared not move.

O'Brien looked out over the room, smiling and now relaxed. The wall of faces remained in place behind him, inscrutable, omniscient.

"Train hard. I'm looking forward to the fights tonight. Train hard, fight hard.

Some of you are involved in the action at Parliament Grounds. We all wish you well, and you will remain silent about our movement. You are fortunate to be on the front lines."

O'Brien left the room and the faces vanished, leaving the white screen. The audience filed from the room, with Frank trailing slightly behind his companions, who were talking intently.

The fights are held in the gym. Several of O'Brien's closest staff were paid great deference by the rest, as coaches and mentors in fighting. These fights were stopped before any serious injury to the combatants. Head and shin guards were worn, and a fighter could pull

out at any time, without losing face with the others. There were similar numbers of male and female humans at the compound, with all participating when ready.

The gym has a high roof, with a grid of metal beams and lights providing excellent viewing access for me. The bright lighting on the cage, and relative darkness outside it mean I was highly unlikely to be seen as I moved about. I felt tense as Frank mounted the steps and walked onto the canvas, shaking his arms and raising his knees high in quick succession to keep warmed up.

His opponent was also young and fit-looking with cauliflowered ears. They met in the centre of the cage, touched gloves as directed by the referee, and stepped back again. The referee dropped his arm and the two circled each other, keeping their hands high beside their faces.

Frank feinted with a jab, then snapped a hard kick onto the outside of Cauliflower-ears' thigh, and moved quickly back to his stance. Cauliflower-ears responded with a kick to the stomach, which sent Frank back to the side of the cage.

Cauliflower-ears followed with a rush, grabbing Frank's upper legs and looking to lift and drop him. Frank turned his hips side on, bracing his feet wide apart, keeping his body upright, then flexing forward over the other's back. Frank's defence succeeded, and he landed a punch to the face as the other backed off into the centre of the cage.

Cauliflower-ears smiled and came forward, and they tapped gloves, in recognition of Frank's adept start.

So far so good.

They exchanged punches, neither landing flush. Frank landed another kick to the outside thigh and followed with a jab to the face.

Another smile from Cauliflower-ears, but thin-lipped with anger.

Good.

Frank was showing skill and intent.

“Keep it up, Frank,” said O’Brien from the audience.

Cauliflower-ears rushed forward and grabbed Frank’s legs. Frank thrust his hips and legs back, breaking his opponent’s grip.

Frank pressed froward, throwing another hard kick to the thigh, then got his opponent into a headlock and tripped him to the ground. Frank braced with both legs and applied the headlock with full force, his body arching, his head pressing into Cauliflower-ears’ temple.

I saw the workings of his jaw, his teeth grinding.

Cauliflower-ears screamed and tapped hard on Frank’s arm.

The referee stepped forward and gripped Frank’s shoulders, yelling “It’s over.” Frank relaxed his grip, helping his opponent to his feet. They embraced briefly before walking to their corners.

Frank’s companions from the morning entered the cage and clapped him on the back, all smiles.

I didn’t see O’Brien get up to leave, just catching his back going out the door.

The cage was clearing for the next fight.

“I’ll be back out after a shower,” said Frank to his friends, then headed for the changing room. I followed through the ceilings, dropping down onto the top of the row of lockers, hiding behind bags and equipment.

Seizing the moment, I dropped down beside Frank on the bench. “Tony,” he said. “Did you see that?” He put his hand on my head, gently stroking my back. “We’ll get the cunts,” he said. The door swung open and he put the edge of his towel over me.

“Good fight mate, didn’t feel like your first,” said Cauliflower-ears. “Wasn’t expecting that headlock. Felt like my skull was going to crack.”

“Thanks, man”, Frank said. “That was just about my only technique when I was a kid. The good old days of fun-fights to see who was the toughest. I was a one-trick pony really.”

Cauliflower-ears sat down, fortunately on the other side. “How did you come here?” asked Frank.

“I did some work as a chippie then came into the compound through the conference site people. What about you?” asked Cauliflower-ears

“I’m a medical,” said Frank.

“Are you heading to Parliament Grounds tomorrow?” asked Cauliflower-ears. “Apparently we are involved in the organisation and supply of the camp. Some of the regulars are staying on the grounds already.”

“No,” Frank replied. “Haven’t heard anything about that. I’ve got a full day here tomorrow.”

“I’ll catch you later. Good fight.”

Cauliflower-ears went into the showers.

The water came on and Frank lifted me gently from under the towel and placed me on top of the lockers. “Take care, Tony. I’ll see you soon.” He headed into the showers.

“Are you going back to watch the rest of the fights?” I heard him ask. “Wouldn’t miss them,” answered Cauliflower-ears.

I went back into the ceiling and onto the beams over the gym. Two women were on the ground in the cage, one with her legs tight around the waist of the other, who was punching at her face.

The woman on the ground tipped the other onto her side and they struggled for position.

These games are all very well – pity the rat in the teeth of a cat or the maniacal embrace of a stoat. In the existential reality of our lives, that you, in your present comfort, have so cleverly magnified to imperil us all. And that we are now fighting against.

The audience shouted encouragement as the referee brought them to their feet to face off again.

The next day I found out more about what happened to Tony. The buildings in the compound were well insulated, and I didn't find a way into all the rooms. I did however crack O'Brien's office where he carries out psychotherapy sessions with some of the tenants, including Frank. It had a hollow in the insulation below the windowsill, and enough room between the padding to get to it. I could listen in from there but couldn't see anything.

I remember the conversation well.

"Very well done, Frank. I was impressed by your effort last night. A win on your first fight, and a submission to boot. How was it?"

"It went really fast. I didn't have time to think, just tried to be aware of opportunities, like I was told. The training paid off when he was trying to take me down, and my leg kicks are working.

The headlock came back from boyhood. My one way of winning a fight then. I was pretty good. We would have fun fights to establish our hierarchies.

I held my own well enough not to be bullied."

"Yes, you have to rely on your instincts and training when you are actually in there."

“Tony came to the changing room afterwards,” Frank continued. “I knew he’d seen my fight, and I told him we would get the cunts that killed him.”

“You were telling me about Tony last time. Do you want to continue?”

“He is his old self in the dreams and his new self in the cage. The small creature that Tony passed into when he was murdered. The rat I must keep in the cage.”

“Yes, you must do that,” agreed O’Brien.

“They didn’t give him a chance. Not from the start.”

Frank’s voice had changed.

“Remember, I’m on your side, Frank. We have as long as it takes. Were the police involved about the murder?”

“No. Tony wasn’t on anyone’s radar. When he was killed they figured that no-one would miss him. I didn’t say anything to anyone. I was too scared.”

“Who are “they”?”

“The boys. Shumann, Ellis, Ding, Stretch, Billie and George. Except Billie and George weren’t there that night. And me. I was there.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“They hated him. But played him along as if he was one of the group.

I hate them, but played along as if I was one of the group.

He was a Pom, and I feel like I’m a Pom because that’s where my people are from.”

“I can understand that. A sense of belonging is critical. Can you keep going?”

“It was the night the English team knocked the All Blacks out of the last World Cup. Did you see that game?”

“No, no I didn’t. A bit of a national tragedy, though. New Zealanders take their rugby very seriously, don’t they?”

“My team had got together to watch the game,” said Frank.

“Tony hadn’t been in the country long, and came with me. There were a few other people around. Everyone was pissed. Before the kick-off there was the haka and the English team formed a huge V, both confronting and avoiding it, sort of outflanking the All Blacks before the game started.

And the English all looked composed, like they had worked out how to win. Like they had the All Blacks’ number and knew it.

Tony and I looked at each other, nothing said but we knew the English were in with a big chance.

I saw the looks on the boys’ faces after a close-up of Owen Farrell sneering at the All Blacks. “Not a shit’s show”, said Stretch. Ding passed joints around. “They’ll pay for that, big time”, said Shuman.

But the English won. The boys got more and more sour and fucked off as the game went on. We all drank more, and more dope was going around. Tony and I glanced at each other occasionally, but didn’t let on about how we felt about it. Couldn’t really enjoy it.

After the game things got ugly. By then everyone was well out of it, and most of the team had gone home. I’d taken in so much of the dope through sitting there I was screaming inside, wanting a chance to go.

Ding and Shuman started in on Tony about him being a Pom, why didn’t he fuck off back there?

Tony stood up and walked for the door. Shuman grabbed his arm and spun him around. Ding was grinning like an idiot, saying get him mate.

Tony panicked when he heard that, knowing it was bad for him. He was baled up in corner of the kitchen with tears in his eyes, begging to go. Shuman slapped Tony in the face, wanting him to fight back.

Tony grabbed a bread knife and held it in front of him, white as a sheet, saying fuck off fuck off. I was numb, just watching it happen.

Shuman grabbed a glass and swung it up hard, shattered it on Tony's chin. The broken glass must have gone into his throat because blood started pissing everywhere.

Tony was making crying and snuffling and gurgling noises, and Shuman stepped back from the blood spurting out. Tony fell backwards into the corner, and one of his feet shot out from under him. Red splotches flew across the kitchen as he tried to stand and slipped down again in the cold yellow light of that kitchen. His head slumped forward over his chest and the sounds got less regular.

Shuman stood back holding the ragged glass.

I was standing at a wall like I had concrete poured into my veins.

I puked, vomit shooting from me, splattering the cupboards, the bench, dropping from my open mouth onto my clothes and shoes. The taste of it filling my face. If only I could puke it out. I puked until my guts were empty, until nothing but a sick sad noise would come up. Shuman looked at me with his black eyes."

Then O'Brien's voice came in.

"What a horrific experience. I'm not surprised you've had great difficulty since then. Telling me is the beginning of dealing with this differently."

"I did nothing. Nothing to help him. I may as well not have been there. Except I was."

"Why do you think you did nothing? What do you think you should have done?"

“Because I was afraid. I knew I couldn’t fight them. But I was so afraid. I didn’t even try to help Tony.

I wasn’t brought up to be like that. To fight and to hate. Things are not meant to be like this. But they are like this, that’s what they are.”

I could hear Frank crying, quietly.

“They buried him the next day,” Frank continued. “A place we all know out in the countryside. Near a fence, where the ground is all chopped up because sheep gather there.

The others went back a fortnight later and everyone said you wouldn’t know. Unless you do know. I see it all the time.”

“How long have you known the boys?”

“Since school.”

I heard a cupboard opening, then closing. “Take the relaxant again,” said Martin. “And rest next door. I’ll be here.”

“I’m starting to feel better now,” said Frank. “When I was fighting yesterday it felt right, it felt exhilarating. I wasn’t just afraid anymore. I wanted to hurt. I want to kill Shuman.”

“Good. The camp, therapy and medications are doing what they are supposed to. You are becoming whole again, Frank. You are one of us now.”

“Thanks, Martin. I appreciate everything you are doing for me.”

“Go and rest,” said O’Brien.

“I’m starting to feel spaced out,” said Frank.

“Let me help you into the next room.”

I decided to leave, and dropped back down through the wall, and then onto the earth and headed pile to pile until I reached the stairs up to the front door.

I realised that I had no connection with Frank; it was as if he had gone. Everything was blank, like he had died.

I raced up the stairs and then doorway to doorway, until I came on one just about closed, and squeezed into the room.

And there before me was O'Brien's arse, and Frank lying dead to it on a bed. It was as if O'Brien had killed him. O'Brien's balls were swinging ever so gently as he sought entry.

I launched myself into the air and ripped a chunk off his scrotum.

A monstrous scream came out of O'Brien, followed by uninhibited profanity.

I was off carrying a piece of his purse before he could move, but his eyes latched onto me, followed me in a rage of attention and a roar of pain and indignity, as I went back out into the corridor, out the door, and into the welcoming bush.

I don't know what happened to Frank for a while after that. Our disconnection continued, and I kept clear of the cage and Frank's room, living in the bush, with visits to the colony below the compound.

One day I saw him leaving, through the high gate, wearing his coat and with a pack on his back. I followed, sneaking onto his train into the city by hiding in a girl's school bag, as she sat on the concrete talking to her friends, a tight circle absorbed in its universe of chatter and cell-phones.

I do love the city, all opportunity and hazard. The countryside, the domain in between, is full of the tamed and the mutated, the shamed. Countless small bodies flattened or bloated on the roads before the sad eyes of calves and the confused bleating of sheep. Look, the hawk

and the rabbit embrace, one wing spread in glory, the other smashed beyond recognition; flesh and bone mashed into grit – battered, rotting.

We rats follow your roads, eager to share the bounty, eating roadkill as we go. We detour into fields for wasted grain and fruit: along streams and rivers offering the succulent white bellies of fish; crustaceans floating, still, just above the creek bottom; animals bloated into balloons. We travel the coastline, sure that whatever offerings the sea has will be complemented by your sheer effort; flotsam and carrion of every flavour and hue, finless corpses, birds coated in oil. We tour new subdivisions, as green is swallowed into grey; we visit new homes never lived in, suburbs which have remained empty; we stay in the walls, basements, ceilings and skirtings of crowded rooms, crowded buildings, crowded cities and towns; we delight in overflowing bins and skips, discarded containers rimmed and dripping with sweetness, your colossal profligacy.

I was down behind a row of bins, those big ones with heavy lids, for different types of rubbish. I could hear your everyday voices as you went to and from appointments, met up for coffee and lunch. I heard hope in your voices, excitement and worry, floating and jinking like birds and butterflies above the urgency and insistence of your walking, stepping, hurrying.

Frank was around the corner, sitting in his coat beside his sleeping bag and backpack. Seeing him there, of no fixed abode, so to speak, caused a twinge of empathy and indignation in me, brought about I imagine by empathy for the being who saved me and anger at his betrayal by O'Brien. I was curious about what had happened between Frank and O'Brien since my intervention, but for now Frank was cut off from me, somehow alone back in your world.

Hazards exist in the shortest journeys, and I needed to judge my runs carefully. One sighting in daylight and the alley could be turned over, with poison aplenty for weeks to come. Boxes on the pavement, large pieces of rubbish in the gutter, provide cover. No-one about and a drink container half-way to the street – I was quickly inside (tail exposed); still no-one arrived and I sprinted for the sleeping bag.

I nestled in, crouched between sleeping bag and marbled wall, unseen, thankfully, by the now-arrived stream of passers-by. Frank was sitting on the pavement and turned his head towards me. I saw blankness in his eyes, as if I was invisible, as if he had disappeared.

No wilderness for us, the pickings are too lean. We're in this together, apex creatures.

A bottle sat in one large pocket, and me in the other, as the light faded and Frank meandered away from the CBD to the other side of town. He got a wide berth, as people milled around outside bars and cafes, like ants at holes in the ground.

He walked into a dark car park to take the cap off the bottle and have a drink. He licked a driblet from the lip before re-capping it. From a low barrier between streams of cars, beneath darkened trees rising from the asphalt, we watched as couples and groups walked the street, voices rose and fell, glass shattered harsh. He took the cap off again, sipping more. The beginnings of elation flickered in his eyes, catching brittle shards of light in the air.

A roar of noise scarred the sky, shouts, screams, glass shattering. Frank farted, somehow reassuring. "What the fuck is going on down there?" he asked. Then sirens. "That was quick," he said, "real quick." Shouting. No more glass. You fucking cunt. Car doors slamming.

A loud hailer, then silence. Another bottle smashed, closer. Voices were raised, in anger, in indignation, in fear. Frank grabbed his face with both hands, chin and forehead, digging with his finger-nails. The bottle sat on the ground in front of him, shining, half full. He brought it up, the clear liquid moving and moiling like a whirlpool. A long swig, deep breath; in through his nose, deeply, then out through his mouth; same again.

A scuffing of feet moved quickly up the street. I huddled out of sight between tree and bin. The feet arrived, the bottle was kicked, slid along the concrete, bounced without breaking, lay still, gleaming like a missile.

Frank stood, swaying, to face the kicker, who stepped forward and drove a shoulder in, knocking him over. With that the attacker was gone, and others headed steadily up the street towards us, with quick and measured steps.

"Are you ok buddy?" asked a policeman, kneeling and touching the neck and head of the man in the coat. "Fuck me," Frank groaned, turning weakly onto his elbow and raising his head. "Yes, no worries officer," he said. There was a bottle of pills on the ground, which he must have brought from the compound. "Are these yours, sir?" asked the policewoman who stood above him, her ponytail tight and elbows white. "Yep, my medicine for my psychosis," said Frank, from the ground, and she said, "These appear to be past their use-by date sir." "It doesn't matter," he replied, "according to my doctor they are good a while after that." "Better look after them then," she said, picking them up and handing them to him.

The two helped him to his feet. "You can't drink on the street, sir," she said. "That's not mine," he replied. "OK, good," she said, as she emptied the bottle into the gutter and put it in the bin. "Where to now?" she asked, as her companion began to look impatient and wanting to be on with the job at hand. "Back home," said Frank, resting his hands on his knees and breathing deeply again. "Ok then," she put a hand on his shoulder briefly, "best

be off home as it's a rowdy-looking night down here." "Thank you officer," he said. "I'll just rest for a minute if that's ok."

I was back in the pocket again and we were off and away, him rubbing his shoulder occasionally, walking slowly and unsteadily. I was ears and whiskers alert for more trouble, then relaxed into the warmth.

There was a small hole in the bottom I had modified for further use if needed. I'm all for experimenting with travel. We've a long history of catching a ride. Boats, rafts, trains, coaches, car boots and wheel hubs, the undersides, nooks, and linings of every vehicle and container you've ever come up with serve us well.

We returned to the train station, which was now quiet, the quiet you find in thronging places, when the great ceilings seem to radiate echoes of the day that has been, and rats grow restless.

We rats travel the long trails of the verge, stow away across the universe, divine past and future in the wind. We are close to the earth; a raised nose testing the air is anomalous, vulnerable, and necessary. A pause in our movement and vigilance, whiskers and nostrils twitching, ears up, eyes bulging; the moment we may change direction, seek a new course.

Dirty red pylons ripped by. Reddish grains of dust and grime clung like frosting to the window, a shield from the outside. The outside blurred as Frank looked at the trails of grime, red like a desert somewhere.

Frank melded into the train, as its colours melded into each other, his head lolled, he snored. The train slowed, sharp rhythmical noises separating. As the train halted with a shudder, he sat upright, looking about him. He relaxed back into the seat as the train gathered speed again, rushing into the dark and spangled night.

The empty stations came and went, the guard appearing down the platform, looking backwards and forwards before getting back into the train. There was no-one else on this journey on this night.

The halting began again. This time Frank rose to his feet, gripping the yellow pole, shifting the weight of his pack onto his shoulder. He stepped onto the dark platform, the guard passing as he stood uncertain, in a yellow haze of streetlights.

He began to walk steadily, shifting his pack to both shoulders. He walked a while, and I stuck my head out, past his sleeve, to breathe the good air. He slowed, we arrived – he looked into the porch of a house, at the small yellow globe of porchlight, with tiny moths spinning blindly at it.

"Chookie's place," he said. He stood very still, and I felt his chest begin to heave, saw tears glisten on his face, heard a quiet keening and sobbing.

I remembered our previous visit to the man called Chookie.

It was after Tony arrived, and was staying in the flat with Shelley and Frank. Before Tony disappeared. Before Frank began calling me Tony.

I remember old pennies were scattered on the top of Frank's bookshelf, the heads of kings and queens in dull and mysterious relief, with Britannia scattered amongst them. Frank picked them up, held them in his hands, passed them from one to the other.

"Some are so much thinner than others, the features more worn," Frank said, although it was only me in the room with him.

"They are cold, hard, grimy, and infused with a huge distance, like the columns and ceiling in the Wellington railway station. Each coin has passed through numberless hands and exchanges, and I can see none of them, nor figure in any. What if my Dad had been

given some by his father, or by his mother, to buy lunch, or a newspaper? Or my Dad had been given his pocket money, by his own father, my grandfather?" Frank mused.

Tony was suddenly in the doorway. "That was quite a night," he said. "I'm feeling a bit dusty this morning. What do you have there? Old pennies! I've only ever seen them in second-hand shops, among the oddities and collectibles."

"From my Dad. How much history and life do they open, do you think?"

"Interesting thought," Tony said, "not much into numismatics myself."

"Your friends are rough diamonds," he went on.

"I wouldn't call them diamonds. Or friends for that matter."

"Then why do you hang out with them?"

"I'm not sure now, stupid as it sounds. We sort of gravitated and coalesced at school, through proximities and similarities. But I've always been conscious of differences, which is what I'm most aware of now. And fear."

"Fear? Yobbos are ten a penny, forgive the bad joke, and mainly bluster. You seem to know how to handle yourself around them, don't you?"

"Up to a point."

Frank put the pennies back into their bag, alongside the bag of things gathered on his walks and journeys into the countryside; feathers, cat's-eyes.

"What do you feel like doing today?" asked Frank. We could head into town, or maybe take a walk on the coast. Do you like fishing?"

"I can honestly say I have never been fishing," said Tony. "I suspect very few Londoners have. Any chance of combining that with a bit of walking on the coast?"

"Yes, I'll take you on a walk, a favourite of mine, which includes a good fishing spot. We'll go by train and cross some farmland as well."

"Thankibus muchibus."

Frank looked at him. "Sorry to be a wanker, a bit of Joycean nonsense," Tony said. "I'm studying him at uni."

"I'll get my fishing gear together and have a look at the train timetable. Might be a bit thin on a Sunday."

Frank got out his fishing rods, a surfcaster in three pieces and a spinning rod, a couple of reels and a box of tackle from the washhouse, bundling the reels and tackle, and some bread and fruit, into a backpack. Tony made eggs on toast; they ate quickly and walked to the station, me snug in Frank's pocket.

"I'll introduce you to Captain Hook," Frank said to Tony, as the train pulled out from the station. "Captain Hook came out from the UK same as my Mum and Dad. Worked in the ice-cream factory in Johnsonville for nearly forty years, then retired up the coast. He's the only one left. A gentleman in anyone's language."

"How did he get his name?" asked Tony.

"One arm was blown off, and he has a steel hook instead. He's a shy man, never married. I usually stop in and say hello when I'm up his way. He won't own a phone, so it's hard to let him know I'm coming or keep in touch regularly. He sends me a Christmas card every year, and I send him one, too."

"Chookie is well over ninety, not that you would know it. Still independent and bright as a button, as he says. He lived on the same street as us, before he retired."

It was an old bach and no mistake. A bit of a walk from the station, back off the beach and badly in need of painting. Frank laid the rods against the firewood shed and knocked on the

door. Tony stood back, taking the backpack off and leaning it against his leg. Frank knocked again after a couple of minutes.

The door opened with a creak, and Chookie looked out, warily.

"Frank, come in, nice to see you," he said in his warm, dried voice. "Come in," he beckoned to Tony with the hook that serves as his right forearm.

"Chookie, this is Tony, all the way from London. Tony, this is Captain Hook, Chookie to his friends."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Tony. "I understand you are an Ilford boy."

"That was a very long time ago, and yes I am. And a proud one."

Chookie extended his left hand, and Tony reciprocated. "Arthur Aloysius Smith to those who knew me before my transformation into a fictional character and farmyard bird," Chookie added. "Come and sit down for a minute before you're away fishing. Have you time for a cup of tea, or I've got Coca Cola if you'd like something cold?"

"We'd love a cuppa," Frank said, and if you can stretch to a biscuit we'll do our best to bring you some fish for dinner."

"Can't say fairer than that," said Chookie. "Please have a seat both of you."

Chookie walked into his kitchen, filled his jug and got three mugs down off a shelf above the sink. He looked at us as we sat down on his bedraggled sofa, on either side of his cat, Oscar.

"Mind you don't disturb Oscar", he said, "he's having a busy day." Oscar showed no sign of life other than the slow and gentle rising of his flank.

Oscar must have been a very old cat, or a wise one, because he showed no sign of knowing that I was looking at him through the hole in Frank's coat.

When we returned, Chookie appeared at the door with a grin on his face. “What’s for dinner,” he asked, “a kahawai for the smoker?”

Frank held a kahawai up.

“Love a duck,” Chookie said. “What a beauty! How was your afternoon, Tony?”

“Something special, thank you,” replied Tony, “stunning coastline!”

“Yes, I’m lucky to be living here.”

Frank walked away from Cookie’s door, into the silence and darkness. With me nestled in the pocket, eager and curious, and Frank oblivious to me, we left the main road, following a street up into the edges of the suburb, where it meets the hills. We passed dark copses, hills flanked with gorse and scrub, open paddocks. We left the road and stopped at the bole of a macrocarpa tree. He put his pack down beside him, me leaping from the pocket as he did so. He rested against the tree, the hood of the coat pulled up over his head. He folded his arm and closed his eyes, his head drooping as he fell asleep.

I listened to animals and insects moving nearby, a hedgehog snuffling determinedly and noisily at the other side of the tree, before making its way elsewhere; a possum moving about further off, looking for succulent shoots and leaves; rabbits across the field, eating and bobbing, eating and bobbing; crickets, moths and worms about their lives. Cattle clustered together under a small clump of trees, straggling out along a fence line. We each knew of the others now, differently, and hoped for something better.

I ran between clumps, along channels in the grass, feasting on crickets and worms, leaping for crackling exoskeleton and snuffling for slime, returning to the tree wet and muddied, living the ratlife.

Frank woke before dawn, turning his head blindly, blinking, rubbing his eyes. He drank from a plastic bottle in his pack. He stood, hefting his pack onto one shoulder, and resumed his walking in the half light. I scurried ahead and behind, nosing into spaces, a worm here, a new shoot there. We arrived at a stream, at a high cliff, slippery with algae, where the water fanned out across the rock before dropping into a pool.

He followed the stream down into scrub, then beyond onto the rocks of the shore. The smell of the sea came to us sharp and fresh, carried on a breeze we had not felt till then. He looked calm now, like he knew what to do.

The bag of hooks was unopened, serene as glass. Five shining arcs, bright and clean. O'Brien opened the mouth of the bag, and tapped a hook out onto his palm. He glanced up to see Frank watching him, a little way off, uncertain whether to come closer.

I felt the unseen moisture on O'Brien's palm begin to work on the hook, sullying it. I wondered why Frank had returned to his betrayer.

The pale line went through the eye of the hook first time. Five loops, then back through by the metal. The line tightened, loops closing, symmetrical as beads of water on a leaf, the translucent noose tightening on the metal. O'Brien bit off an inch of line, letting the point of the hook touch his upper lip.

"My favourite rig," he said, so Frank could hear, without looking away from the hook. "One hook, a trace, and a ball sinker on the main line, the trace free to run. The nearest rig to a free line."

He threaded a triangle of bait on to the hook, securing the piece of fish bait well with the layer of skin. The point and barb lay at one side, flat against the bait.

His cast was long and straight, the sinker hitting the water with a small distant splash, the line following it in a round wave. Line ticked off the reel, slowed and stopped. He turned the spool, and tightened the line gently. The hook on the dead line joined him to the sea and its beings. He crooked his finger over the now taut line, the bait set, waiting. A gull flew by, close enough for me to look momentarily into its bright, clear yellow eye. The bird carried on its way, out over the sea.

The rod bucked forward, and O'Brien raised it, looking to set his hook. "That is a good fish," he said, the tip of the rod heeling over for a second and straightening again. He lifted the spool, letting the line slacken again, looping down into the water.

He watched in fascination as line moved steadily out, the line of connection restored, before the movement stopped again. He pulled a couple of feet of line off, then turned the spool over again, reeling the line back. The rod went solid, and bent, excitement binding him at the wrist and forearm to the sea. The fish pushed out to sea, going deep, bumping downwards.

"A snapper," O'Brien said, "a beauty."

"How do you know?" asked Frank.

"The way it's moving," O'Brien replied.

He weighed the unseen fish, robbing its life already, and held it up, like the man caught in a million photographs. Millions of photographs, thousands of kilometres of line, thousands of rods and reels across hundreds of countries in thousands of shops, big and small.

The fish moved this way and that, a strong heavy insistent presence under the dark water. The rod bent and bucked, testing his braced forearm. He began pulling back steadily on the rod, reeling in as he eases forward again, keeping the line tight. The fish seemed to

stop, become a weight on the line. It moved again, pulling steadily out to the right, then more sharply, as if it had rediscovered a destination.

I sensed the shivering through the water, saw the wide unblinking eyes, the mouth gape, then close, gape again; felt the uneven desperate movement. Fight, fish, I breathed, softly through my teeth, heard the gull answer, fight, fish.

The fish moved in the deep valley in front of us, the great rosy side flashing for an instant and then gone. O'Brien brought it closer again, foot by foot, until it turned in mid-water and fought down again, the great mouth open; zigging back and forth over the valley, making arcs of light. It broke the surface with a deep splash, boiling the water as it plunged again.

Then it was resting in the water before us, round eye wide, mouth open unnaturally, gills pushing water. The eye of the hook shone at its lip.

We saw the deep flank, the bright roseate back, the proud fins.

O'Brien walked backwards, looking behind him and stepping up onto higher rock, guiding the snapper into a crevice. It disappeared into the seaweed. He laid the rod down, wrapping two loops of line around his left sleeve and stepping towards the fish, raising his arm to maintain pressure on the line.

O'Brien put his leg into the crevice, wedging the fish in its cocoon of weed against the rock. He ran his hand down the line, felt the fish's head, found the round eye of the hook. Gripping it, he pushed down sharply, and the hook came free. He stepped out of the crevice. The weed separated, and the thick back and head drifted out from the rock, gills working. It kicked to turn, but the crevice was too narrow. O'Brien got back into the crevice and shunted the fish out backwards with his foot. It was gone, one flick of the tail sending it beyond sight.

“I put back a lot more than I keep these days,” said O’Brien, turning to look at Frank, who was now sitting on his heels, looking intently at the water where the fish had been.

“Why have you come back?” asked O’Brien.

“I am one of you now,” said Frank. “I need to train. I have work to do.”

“What’s happened to your rat?” asked O'Brien.

Your rat, indeed. Why did O’Brien presume to call me “your rat”? Your rats are white and as disposable as toilet paper. Your rats have their eyes pinned open to test fluids, their appetites manipulated with mazes to scurry through, cute little clowns on Tiktok, nosing the screen, whiskers flickering uselessly, like a facial tic.

And by what idiocy is Frank returning to O’Brien? I thought again. What is he thinking? Have O’Brien’s drugs obliterated me in Frank’s mind?

At that time I didn’t know Frank’s thoughts any more than you know your neighbour’s thoughts, or your husband’s, or your Prime Minister’s, or your own for that matter. As if you are interested in my thoughts, or the thoughts of any of the creatures you put yourselves above. Aren’t your thoughts your only real sanctuary, the only place you feel safe, precisely because no-one else shares them, your constant fantasies? Rather what you report of them, or what they can guess or infer? And by guessing or inferring share their own mind rather than yours? What a trap your languages are, don’t you think? So precise, and so misleading! The most heinous fantasy can be dressed as divine purpose, or common purpose, in accordance with the cleverness and influence of its possessor. Base motivation takes on the mantle of fundamental truth.

Your communion is revealed as a parade of competing fantasies, and ours is finally here, in the recognition that you are our common enemy.

“What rat?” replied Frank. “I need to come back to the compound and start training again.”

I was dumbfounded, realising that Frank was in thrall to O’Brien. I began to doubt whether he could again be the creature that saved me.

O’Brien packed his bag, putting his bait into a plastic box and his used trace in another, making the whole kit neat and tidy. He wiped his reel and pulled the pieces of his rod apart, binding them with soft twine.

O’Brien walked off the rocks and onto a path, hard mud beaten smooth and dry in the sun. Frank put on his pack, slung the coat over his shoulder, and followed. I followed too. A grasshopper landed in reach, and it was mine.

I raced ahead, gaining distance on them and stopping to watch as they laboured up the hill in the growing heat. Don’t you love invisibility? The artful invisibility of a lion, lying in wait, the thronging invisibility of an anchovy, one of thousands of flickering bodies, the joyous invisibility of a starling, part of a host spiralling in the evening sky, the shape-shifting invisibility of an angler fish, a weed-covered rock exploding to eat.

O’Brien picked up his pace, not waiting for Frank. O’Brien crested the hill, and I watched him pass.

There was golden sand beyond the rocks. O’Brien walked quickly to the bottom of the hill, reaching it as Frank, impeded by his coat and pack, and weakened from lack of food, arrived at the top. The compound was visible at the far end of the beach. Frank raised both his arms and shouted, “Martin, you said you would help me! I will be loyal, I am one of you!”

O’Brien glanced back, then turned away and walked on.

I was invisible, small and hidden among the weeds and rocks, and unsurprised at O'Brien's indifference, his steadiness of purpose back towards the compound. Frank dropped his arms.

Frank walked down the hill, before clambering towards the water, reaching down to hold onto the rocks, dropping his pack into a crevice. He was on all fours up the sides and over the top of boulders. He stepped unsteadily on the rocks, slipping into the water, standing again and walking forward. The water was up to his knees; he splashed on. His coat dragged behind him, sodden and heavy. He raised his arms and forged on, surging into the sea. He let his arms sink into the water and fell forward. He thrust his arms out ahead of him, then faltered. A strange toil enveloped him, struggling a short distance offshore, sinking then rising again.

I'm a great swimmer, but water isn't my preferred element. Point A to point B, a means to an end, a sure destination. I followed Frank down to the water's edge, and sat on my haunches looking out at his hands splashing, his head coming up and going down, the coat billowing heavy around him.

I swam out to where he was struggling; he'd gone under. I swam down, way further than I've ever needed to before. My eyes were blurred as I got down to the sea bottom, with brown weed drifting and floating. The stones were furred in green. Levelling out, I was startled by a ray, swimming bird-like, watching me with knowing grey eyes. I'd swear it was trying not to laugh. It glided from sight, leaving me suspended like a small scrawny otter among the dark rocks, my lungs heaving and hurting.

I swam back to the surface, and floated for a moment, sucking air. I went down again, saw the coat by dark rocks, floating just above the sea floor, drifting like weed, Frank's body in harmony with the movement of the water, softened by the new light. I gripped his

temples and cheek with my four paws, and sank my teeth into his eyebrow. I tasted his blood, and come away with a piece of his brow, swallowing it down. As I drifted up I saw his hand on his face, his legs pushing from the bottom, a slow ascent, his arms clawing feebly for the surface and the light.

I was up first, air never tasted so good, and he broke the surface blowing like a seal. He touched his head and face, looking at the hand with blood on it, looking at me as if he'd just woken up. The gap in his brow was a dark, bleeding knot that seeped around his eye, matted on his lashes, ran down his cheek. His face seemed to belong to something else, something more alive, as his jaw muscles clenched, as we looked towards the shore.

My front paws flicked ahead, and I saw him move towards the shore, slow and ponderous, arms weighed by the bunching coat sleeves, dragging heavy billows behind him. The golden sand was flanked by ridges of rock and we moved steadily towards it. He rose as his feet found the sea-bottom, beginning to walk, dragging his coat.

I was lifted and pushed forward by wavelets, found the sand, scrambled onto the beach, shook my back and paws. Water streamed from his coat, and my bite looked like a bullet hole between his eyes as blood trickled down the side of his nose to rest in the stubble on his lip.

His eyes rested on my lankness, huddled and small, the sand on my legs and belly, my scaly, reptilian tail. I wondered what he was seeing.

I moved into the vegetation, to get rid of sand, and so he could no longer see me. I stopped, quiet, not knowing whether he could see me, or would see me as vermin, or be who he was before the compound. He parted branches, peering about, his big bloody face closer to me than he knew.

Such a familiar feeling, being close and you oblivious, safe in your hygienic home, relaxing in your idylls, rampaging energetically in the outdoors.

I haven't seen Frank since then, and can summon no connection with him. In the great ledger, he and I are all square. But it appears that Frank can live in one world only now, your world. Such a pity, I felt he could share the new dawn with us, but it seems that we must go forward without him.

The Pier

The boy pushed his tackle box into the duffel bag, which bulged with handlines, a box of hooks and sinkers, his jacket and a bag of bread for berley.

Mum, I'm off fishing he said. I'll be back around seven thirty. OK sweetheart, don't be late, his mother replied, and kissed him on the forehead. He began the familiar walk to the pier, down a path alongside fenced houses, across the big golden rock with lizards that flicked into crevices at his approach, and lines of ants that tracked the stone like string. He climbed the rock eagerly, stopping at the top to look over the harbour. The water was radiant with promise.

The pier stretched across the inlet to the old aquarium and amusement arcade, then extended at a right angle out to sea, where the ferries docked. At this distance the windows of the arcade were black squares below the clock tower, with its stark black hands and numerals. Inside stingrays and sharks lay motionless in concrete pools, in dim rooms that few people visited now the new aquarium was open. The boy would stop at the old aquarium on his way home from school and watch the slow patient rhythm of the sharks' gills for a few minutes, before continuing his way home.

The boy scrambled down the rock and walked quickly along the path beside the harbour, beneath huge Norfolk pines that were still in the calm of late afternoon. He hurried out onto the pier before stopping again to look out to sea, leaning on the white rail, shading his eyes. He looked down, at the rusted bars of the shark net, which disappeared as they reached deeper into the water.

There were people fishing along the pier, and he asked whether fish were biting, and looked at the catch, slender whiting and glistening yellow tails, and a bonito, a sleek bullet of

muscle. He stood before the solemn accusing eye of the john dory, St Peter's fish, bearing a thumbprint on its side. A light wind came up, not enough to cause waves, but enough to dull the surface of the water. Beneath, there was a stirring towards the coming dusk. Schools of bait fish began to cluster around the bars of the shark net, to move into darker, more hidden spaces. Small flocks of terns hunted inches above the surface, and solitary gannets flew in long rapid sweeps across the bay.

The boy heard a commotion over by the arcade. He stopped where he was, watching from a distance. He saw a man climbing the clock tower, and he heard drums beating and people chanting words he did not recognise. All the people on the pier were looking towards the tower. The boy held onto the handrail.

A police car drove to the arcade, its light revolving. The boy began to walk again when he saw the police car arrive. Then he began to run, slowly, and keeping close to the railing. Three policemen ran from the car to the entry of the arcade and looked up towards the man climbing the tower. Come down, one called. Stop and come down now. The man continued climbing without looking down. He pulled himself onto the top of the tower and stood upright. He spread his arms out, and looked down, at the people gathered below him. The boy heard what the man said.

I can see the fishes through the water, and the birds are telling me it is time, through their huge yellow eyes. You look at us with hatred and contempt. Except the boy, running towards me, with the light on his face like a flower.

The boy looked at a window into the old aquarium. He saw the image of a boy, like a photograph. He saw the fair hair of a boy, uncombed and unbrushed. He saw thin shoulders, and arms brown and freckled, and through his image he saw the crowd of people watching the man on the tower. Blue ethereal light flickered over them all.

He picked up a stone. Nobody noticed him. He made to throw it, did not let it go. The others milled about as before, their voices merging into the sound of a single baying animal. He drew his arm back again, then hurled the stone hard into the glass. As it shattered and crashed down onto the pier like brittle rain he ran hard and away, up into a street full of evening sunlight and the movement of every day, women sitting drinking wine at café tables, an old man walking his dog. The boy ran as hard and as long as he could, not looking back until he was lost, and the street he was in was quiet, and things were normal again.

A Good Bastard

Waiting in a doctor's surgery with some time to spare, I picked up a well-thumbed *North and South* magazine from November 2017. It included an article about Antonie Dixon, and his interactions with other people on 21 January 2003: attacking and mutilating two women with a samurai sword, shooting a man to death in a gas station, giving another man a ride as he drove from Hamilton to Auckland in a stolen car, and holding a third man hostage at a lifestyle property in Flatbush, before being taken into custody.

Dixon's trial was well-publicised, for the savage and bizarre crimes he committed, his use of methamphetamines, his mental state, and his demeanour and appearance, with intensely staring eyes, and a strange, bowl-like haircut. His self-professed mission that day was suicide by cop, and his goal in life, as described in the article, was to make a name for himself, to be "the main man".

Stories like that of Antonie Dixon are the stuff of magazine articles, documentaries and commentary, and Netflix. The article itself was a re-telling, with additional characters and lives. One stayed with me – Ian Miller, the hostage in Flatbush. Dixon spared Miller's life because, in Dixon's words, "Ian's a good bastard. I'm going to let him go."

This decision followed the two men taking stock of each other: Dixon surmising, accurately, that Miller was considering whether he could overpower Dixon, and dissuading him from the attempt. Miller, an outdoorsman himself, accurately identifying Dixon's gun, and able to behave towards, and speak to, Dixon in ways that did not aggravate the situation. Miller's mother had been a top equestrienne and able to calm horses, and apparently the techniques are transferrable across species.

Over time Miller put Dixon sufficiently at ease for Dixon to talk about his dysfunctional childhood.

Miller had been drinking, and although not drunk, did at one point fall asleep and snore. Dixon joked about that.

Outside, the Armed Offenders squad looked for a clear shot at Dixon. Miller decided against taking up Dixon's invitation to leave, after the decision to spare Miller, because the risk of being shot himself, in the darkness and tension of the situation, was too high.

Dixon committed suicide in his jail cell on 5 February 2009, by running repeatedly at his cell wall, literally bashing himself to death.

I have a mate cut along similar lines to Miller. The last time I saw him he told me about breaking four ribs when cleaned out by the sail on his yacht and giving himself a hernia carrying a deer he had shot out of the bush. Every time we catch up it's him with the stories. Sailing his boat to Tonga single-handed, trout fishing in South America, selling on the Kalashnikov he bought out of curiosity.

Occasionally, my mate has looked me in the eye, to emphasise the point, and said of someone: "He's a good bastard." It is axiomatic to the conversation that I know what this means, so I concur, whether by nodding or encouraging a continuation of the story. I have a vague and uncomfortable understanding of what it means.

From a farming background originally, and a lawyer by training, he is barrel-chested, physically strong and tough, and deliberately unkempt. He will put on a suit if the occasion calls for it. Inevitably his shirt will come out at the back before long. He is well-read and keen to talk about politics, environmental issues, most things really.

He takes me out on his boat to catch a kahawai or two for the smoker, or a kingie or groper occasionally. We saw the New Year in on his boat a couple of years ago, flagging the idea of going out into the bay to watch the fireworks when we got too pissed. Things got a bit disjointed and I headed into town for another drink without letting him know. He said he had a quick look around in his garden for me before he turned in.

A party was held in his garden, in a marquee with hay bales, and carpets he had brought back from Iran and Afghanistan, from his travels. Not many people came from among his old city friends, but there was a good showing from the yacht club. Not cultivated types, mind. The members are as likely to live on their yacht as to have a house and job somewhere.

He brought some dope out and before long a determined group were trying to climb up the big pole at the centre of the marquee. This became a mission for some of them, and I could see my mate was pissing himself inside at the spectacle. Dope sometimes makes me paranoid, and I needed to take myself away. The level of discomfort becomes such that being on my own is the only way to separate myself sufficiently from threats and dangers, partly because I can no longer tell whether they are real or imagined.

He decided to sort out an infestation of rabbits in a woodpile at the yacht club recently and went on a series of shooting expeditions with an airgun from the window of his ute. Reckons he got seventy, reduced to fifty at a later telling. The rabbits became more and more wary of the sound of his ute, and later on any remaining would vanish before he could get near. I think he would draw a bead on the eye, as they flatten themselves against the ground trying not to be seen.

He's teaching me to flyfish for trout. The second time we went out he near as saved my life. I managed to step into a deep pool while we were heading upstream. The water was flowing pretty quickly and it was hard to see where the depth changed. Anyway, before I knew it my waders were under the waterline and I was being pulled downstream, towards some willows which hung low, right into the water. Luckily, I had taken his advice and tied my belt tight over the waders, so I had some flotation from air in the legs of the waders. All the same it is really tiring with your gear on to keep your head up. He followed me downstream and held his rod over the flow and pulled me back to the shallower water.

If we were at war, and conscripted, say, or jailed, I would want to be in my mate's group. I learnt in the playground something of the dynamics of pecking order handed to us by thousands of years of organisation in tribes and clans. Alliances and loyalty are critical, and he is tough and resourceful, with a mana that you don't piss around with.

My mate's son committed suicide. Out of the blue, a new father with everything to live for, or so it appeared. Everyone is struggling. My mate is devastated, waking in the middle of the night, crying. He feels worse for his wife than himself, the cruelty of what has happened. He was magnificent at the funeral, brave, even-handed, gentle.

I want to end this story on a meaningful note, but can't pretend to be wise right now. How do we help each other at the edges of our lives, where help is most needed?

Susan

The house in Susan's recurring dream was different from the one she had bought and lived in for the past four years. The house she lived in was small, more properly a cottage than a house. It was what is known as a 'character home', with polished wood on the floors and window joinery. The house in her dream was similar, but much larger, older and in disrepair.

Whenever it appeared, she recognised what she had seen before, there were new rooms to find, and some aspect of the house came more fully into view. She knew she had only seen part of it and looked forward to entering the dream, curious about what she would find next. She wondered whether the house existed somewhere in the world or was a patchwork of pieces that she was putting together in her dream.

Susan was thirty years old and worked as a librarian. She lived alone, having flatted as a student and realising she disliked the constant, unavoidable presence of other people, needing a sanctuary.

*

One morning she woke from a whiteness, like ocean mist and low cloud, that she had flown through, a haze that slowed her, enveloped her, until she was still, at its very edge, with an infinite blue sky ahead of her, and the land below her. She had flown over the sea, above flocks of feeding birds and schools of fish. The sound of birds rose towards her as she swept over the breakers. She felt an abundance, a clamour of nonhuman life. At the horizon a strip of dark green had deepened into unbroken forests, extending beyond sight. She thought she was seeing the land her parents left, as they had never seen it. They had never seen it like this because it was unpeopled, a truly wild place.

The cat's nose touched her cheek in a tiny moist kiss, and she woke to its purring, the weight on her duvet. When Susan stirred in the bed, the cat stood, its purring seeming to fill the silent room, before it jumped off the bed, telling her it was time for breakfast.

Passionate about the countryside, she became a member of Greenpeace, but felt it was too concerned with human politics, and not enough with the nonhuman. Despite that, she had agreed to go house to house collecting, and looking for new members.

Later that morning she took a bus to her allotted suburb, and the first of her streets. She had been given a tablet with specialised software and pamphlets to give away. She went down a long, overgrown drive, leading to a magnificent old villa, quite run down. The paintwork was chalky with age, and the boards that led to the front door were bare and grey. In a conservatory off the porch were half a dozen plants in need of water. A manuka shrub lay on its side, a clump of matted roots beside a broken pot, white flowers like dry fallen stars on the dull paint.

As she went along the path beside the villa, she heard voices. She hesitated, then stopped, listening.

A woman's voice said: "What would you like with your muesli? There's fresh yoghurt, milk, and bananas."

"All of the above, thanks darling," a man replied.

"I'm taking a draft over to Lionel's this afternoon," he continued. "He doesn't sound confident, but he rarely does. Christ, look at this. The Americans have approved the Willow Project in Alaska. Utterly outrageous!"

Susan could see the couple reflected in a window and realised immediately that they might be able to see her. The man, who was in a dressing gown, folded a newspaper into a

neat rectangle and placed it beside his bowl on the breakfast bar. As he did so, he looked up towards the window. Susan resumed walking and knocked on the door.

The woman who answered the door was in her mid-thirties, stylishly dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. "Good morning," she said. "How can we help?"

"I'm collecting for Greenpeace," said Susan. "Membership is a good way of donating and gives you ongoing information about our activities and current issues in conservation. Donations are also much appreciated."

The man came to the door. His dressing gown was open at the chest, showing grey hair and white skin. He was balding, and his uncombed hair, long at one side, flopped like a rooster's comb beside his face. He brushed it over with his hand when he saw Susan.

"Greetings," he said, "come in. Have you heard this morning's news about the approval of the Willow Project in Alaska"?

"No, no I haven't," Susan said, feeling her face redden with embarrassment. "I'll take my sandals off before I come inside, they're a bit wet," she said, now flustered and stepping awkwardly out of the sandals.

"Don't bother, all sorts get dragged in here and nobody minds. Birkenstock," the man said, "best in the world. I'm a great believer in quality. Correlates strongly with durable values in a society."

He smiled warmly and stood with his hands on his hips looking at her. Susan felt better, but drew her tablet closer to her, averting her eyes, as she stepped inside.

"Would you like coffee?" asked the woman. "We're just about to have one."

"No, thank you," replied Susan.

“Have a seat,” said the man, motioning towards one of the stools by the breakfast bar. The bar was a deep charcoal colour, highly polished, with flecks of luminous aquamarine that reminded her of paua shell. “What beautiful stone,” Susan remarked.

“From Norway,” he replied.

Susan sat down, folding her arms across the tablet and pamphlets she carried.

“We’d be happy to donate,” said the man. “And would you be interested in taking part in a survey?”

“You can donate online, thanks for that. What is the survey about, and how much time would be involved?” Susan replied.

“An hour for the survey, possibly another for an interview. And I would follow up with you about the results. I’m a psychologist at the University studying the relationship between shared values and stability in societies.”

“Do you have any information about your research I can have a look at?” said Susan, placing her cup on the breakfast bar. “I’d best keep going, I need to cover a fair bit of ground today.”

“Of course,” said the man. “If you let me have your email address I’ll send you through some information, and the survey itself. My name and phone number are with the material if you have any questions, or just email them through. If you can take part, that would be fabulous.”

Susan provided her email address before she walked back up the steep path. A flock of wax-eyes flew into a bush bearing small red berries on the overgrown bank, and she stopped to watch them. She was surprised and pleased at how close they came, so close and they shook drops of water at her feet, and she felt she was looking into their bright silver-ringed eyes.

The following evening, a Sunday, after looking briefly at the material she had been sent, she decided she would take part in the survey and responded to it online. Professor Turner, the researcher, responded with an email on Tuesday inviting her to be interviewed about her response, and she replied that evening agreeing to go back to the house the following Sunday morning at 11 a.m.

The night she agreed to go back to the villa the cat curled in the crook of Susan's legs, as usual, and purred contentedly as it went quickly to sleep. As Susan approached the villa, she saw there was a curtain drawn over the window in which she had seen reflections on her first visit. She hesitated, then went to the door and knocked. When the man answered, he looked different. Taller, because he was wearing boots. His hair was set and neat. His dark clothes were close fitting, with a broad lapel and large buttons. Susan thought they looked like a uniform.

He poured her coffee. She looked around the living room they were seated in, at the hallway lined with bookshelves, crowded with books, and the paintings on the walls, in large and ornate frames. They were landscapes, European and early American, and she had a sense of recognition. Amid the activities of agriculture and settlement, were huge and ancient trees, solitary and beautiful.

She thought of her last dream, of the unbroken forests she had seen there. She noticed for the first time a dark wooden door in the hallway, and that while the other doors she could see were ajar, that door was closed. With a sense of shock she recognised that door as the last thing she had seen in the house in her recurrent dream.

"Let me tell you a little more about my work," he said. "As well as my work at the university I work in private practice. Previously in cognitive therapy, but I've jumped ship

over the last few years. People need values and connection, not mere understanding. Take the widespread belief that the mass of humankind is somehow entitled to overwhelm the rest of nature, just because we seem capable of doing so. Can that be right?"

"Of course it's not right," Susan said. "I'm not sure what you mean about values and connection. I've not studied psychology at all. I did see a counsellor for a while, when I started university. Difficulty concentrating mainly. Depressed, I suppose."

"It's as common as the cold. People trapped in a crippling sense of meaninglessness and frustration. You don't need to have studied psychology. Probably better not to have, so much of it is self-serving nonsense. What did you study?"

"Music. I play the flute."

"I play no instrument myself but believe that music is a deep and pure connection. The flute is particularly beautiful. Exquisite." He sat down, smiling at her. She thought his face had relaxed somehow.

"Yes, the flute reaches into me," she answered. "Sometimes the flute plays me rather than the other way around." She laughed, briefly and self-consciously.

His smile remained, and his face became warm and bright. He raised his hand, and she thought he might touch her face, and she recoiled slightly. He held his palm open before her, as if inviting her to see something. She thought his eyes looked tearful.

"Reaches into you," he said. "Like looking at a landscape and being touched by it deeply. Almost feeling that you have been there. Like the yearning for wilderness, for the unpeopled earth. Is it for the primordial landscape, or for the landscape that shaped your soul, the peopled country? For me it is a scene that seems to touch my own deep past. As if the paintings restore something that is lost or submerged."

Susan sipped her coffee. The Professor's face suddenly lost its smile and became more animated, and his voice took on a sharper tone.

"Have you ever been to a football game? Do you hear the tribes baying at each other through the camaraderie? Do you read the papers, watch the news? What is there but conflict? Conflict and lies to disguise it."

"The patriarchy has a lot to answer for," she broke in. "Socio-economic disparity is growing world-wide. It's no wonder conflict is increasing." She was pleased to have responded, to have drawn a line in the sand, even if she felt the next wave would erase it instantly. She saw his hands somehow limp against his thighs, and that he swallowed hard before speaking again.

"Why are so many people empty of vitality and hope?" he asked. "We rush for variety and the material because we are afraid to look hard and fully at anything. Take a trip on a train at the end of the working day. It's like a ghost train. Silent, resigned, miserable people, their faces set. Scrabbling for sweets on a field, like a lolly scramble before unknown parents. Our leaders are hollow."

"I need to go," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm feeling light-headed. Perhaps I can do the interview another day."

She put her cup down and walked out the door. As she neared the top of the path she turned and looked towards the villa. He was standing on the veranda, looking towards her. He no longer looked tall, or purposeful.

That afternoon Susan walked around the city. She went into music stores, looked at clothes. She stopped at a sidewalk café for coffee and food.

She found herself in a quiet street and went up a driveway leading into an alley. The alley led to a small park, well-kept but deserted, under large trees. She saw there was a bench in one corner of the park, under an oak tree, with a view over the city. She went over to it and looked closely at it before she sat down. The paint had long since gone, and the edges of the boards were rounded and splintered with age. On the back of the bench was a plaque, in worn bronze. She read the words *In memory*, but the rest was worn away. She sat down, and waited there as the light dimmed, the branches and leaves above her growing dark with the sky.

Susan woke to the sound of loud purring, louder than she had heard before. She realised that the sound had been in her ears for some time, the time it took her to waken. The cat was no longer on the bed. Looking over the end of the bed she saw it lying on the floor, with a smaller shape huddled to it. As her eyes adjusted to the half-light she saw that the huddled shape was motionless, and that it was a young rabbit. It looked for all the world as if her cat, her spayed cat, was trying to mother the little creature it had killed.

Dog

I learned to humour and negotiate with the bullies at school, to understand how to keep on side with them, when to appear tough and when to keep my head down. But I had to work at it, and you can't anticipate what will happen all the time.

Once I got offside with MacAfee for reasons I never knew. As I walked home, three of them were waiting, and MacAfee set Drexler up to start a fight with me. I had Drexler in a headlock on the ground, and there was no way he was getting out of it. But I had no way out either. Then my little brother Abel showed up, and seeing him, MacAfee remembered something else he had to do. I knew MacAfee well enough to know that was temporary, but for now Abel's presence was enough to change the balance, make McAfee back off from exercising the power of bullyhood, for then anyway.

When my builder let me down, Abel came straight around to check things out. He took his boots off at the door, and padded around in big socks, looking like a huge school-boy, with unkempt hair, dirty knees, and shorts hanging off his arse. He is big and browned, and might have come from a beach carrying a surfboard or fishing rod. He picks up his cuppa awkwardly for a man who can work wood so well you want to run your hand over it. The cup seems too small, or his hand too big, as if he was left out of the equation when cups were designed and made.

He went out of his way to get me into the schedule and the work done. The guy he works for is a hard task-master, even if he is an old mate. Years working together made a bond that doesn't find its way into words much, but you can feel it.

Some Sundays Abel and I go for walks up the mount, taking Holly, Abel's dog. Our first walks were joyless, the dog's lacerated breathing disturbing, head thrusting forward, straining at her leash.

We started letting her off the lead when we figured there was no-one around, and putting her back on when we knew there were people close. I still fret when Abel reaches down to let her off, defying the decree, sending leaves, twigs and stones scattering off the path. From then she bounds ahead, then behind us and around us, splashing through the streams, shaking herself exuberantly after coming out. Seeing the signs saying dogs must be kept on a leash always makes me uneasy.

There are as many dogs off leads as on when you step back and tot them up, and there seem to be "dog people '', who just love them. The soft-eyed, eager energy that looks for approval, direction, attention, company, belonging. Once in a while is enough for me, the lunging nose, the wet smell, the plastic bags, the dew claw that leaves a stinging white track down your leg as the mutt jumps up being friendly.

People without dogs are a mixed bag. A few stop dead still, as if to move would excite a response from Holly that could only be bad – at the least, dirty, at worst, dangerous. One of us speaks loudly and firmly and she tucks in close to us, knowing the tone.

Some give us filthy looks, or cold looks, signalling silent disgust or disapproval. I feel mainly shame, and when I look at Abel I can see, as he walks on, that he gets angry. Sometimes he makes a remark, for my hearing, in a neutral tone – "Another one with a carrot up her arse," or "Careful you don't get your feet dirty". He summoned an emphatic fart when a po-faced woman in designer gear, pegging smugly and carefully up the hill on two poles, gave him a disdainful look.

I half-dread a conversation, or argument, because I know we are in the wrong. I imagine apologising, and saying that we usually put her back on the lead when we hear people coming, isn't it a great day.

This time Abel was wearing a t-shirt with Wondolowski written on the back. Turns out Wondolowski played in the American soccer team in the 2014 World Cup and missed a sitter of a shot that would have kept them in the tournament. Hero to zero in one cruel moment. Abel had got hold of a batch of the shirts for next to nothing and used them all the time for work. Since his bankruptcy he has been a bit down at heel, his worn clothes contrasting with the flash walking gear up the mount.

He slipped the catch on the leash and Holly was off, down the gully and into the stream. Water splashed onto the banks, tiny tsunamis licked the edge of pools, and I pictured rocks being dislodged and moved as she went excitedly from one side to the other, before heading back towards us through the underbrush. Sometimes I think I get in my own way, imagining damage to the tiny ecosystem of the pool, fearful of the dog's being.

I remember catching crawlies in that section of the stream, carefully lifting and replacing rocks until we'd find one, almost invisible in the silt and rotting pieces of plant, the distinctive shape usually still.

We would come here as boys, first swimming at the pool and then venturing up into the bush and down into the stream beds. I would slip a hand into the water carefully and noiselessly and move almost imperceptibly towards the little crustacean, until I was able to grip the thorax firmly. From there I would lift it from the water, its pincers and legs now raised, and tail either flicking to escape, or extended to make it big. From there it would

either go back into the water or into an ice-cream container, with stones to make it feel more at home and give it a better habitat.

I remember taking three or four home, and putting tiny pieces of meat in with them to see if we could keep them for a bit. The meat wasn't touched by the koura, which sat still by the rocks, with me wondering whether their small black eyes could see me looking in at them. And then I forgot about them, and a week later remembered, when they were still and dead in the dull water.

A couple came down the steep path, all smiles as Holly bounded up to their clipped retriever, which pulled meters off its extendable lead as it followed her into the bush.

By the time we reached the tops, Holly was happy to walk with us, the lead measuring comfort, seemingly caught up in the general feel of the place, people milling about with their dogs on leads.

Working with your head rather than hands seemed the only way to go when I was a kid. I took languages rather than commerce and accounting, under an undefined and undiscussed impression that to do so was preferable, less mercenary, and got into the higher academic streams. In those days we were put in streams, forgive the pun, the brighter in the higher streams and the dumber ones tailing on down. Abel was well down the streams, seemingly destined from day one for hand rather than head work.

Woodwork and metal work were distant hobby options for filling spare periods. I opted for woodwork, and carved a wooden spoon that was looking good until one scoop of the chisel too many opened a tiny window of sunlight in the bowl. It was intended for my mother, but I made it ridiculous and comical in a second.

I'd come across the spoon in a box of things from years ago. The box was in a cupboard below our stairs, and I remembered the things in it clearly from when I was young. There was an old cribbage board, polished and chipped, in which you stood matches when you played. There was a battered box of dominoes, and some sticks of orange sealing wax, which could be melted with a candle or match and used to seal letters.

There were buttons from Dad's Royal Navy uniform, and an Air Force cap badge from Mum's brother, from when they fought in the Second World War. Dad lied about his age to get into the navy, as did many teenaged boys. Pretty much the end of his education, despite having a scholarship. Both Mum's and Dad's lives were tipped on their heads around then. I'd put the buttons and cap badge into a small plastic display case, packed with cotton wool.

There were old coins Mum and Dad had when they came over here to New Zealand, some from the eighteen hundreds, which they gave to me, as I collected coins when I was a kid. There was a Churchill crown, minted on his death in 1965, which Dad's brother had sent over. I couldn't remember whether we had been sent one each, so I asked Abel whether he had one.

"Yep," he said, "I got one, but I don't know whether I still have it."

"Did you see they've had to board up Churchill's statue in London," I asked, "to stop graffiti being put on it"?

"That's no good," he said.

"Different times," I said.

I wanted to ask how he felt about it. I was angry, remembering the Churchill that we grew up thinking of as a hero, that stood up to the bullies, the leader we needed at the time. When I was young managing bullies was a fact of life, as it is again now. But I said nothing more.

I took the lead, like I sometimes do. There is a world of difference between walking alongside and watching, and holding the animal back, its power constant through wrist and arm as the muscles surge and struggle in her shoulders and neck.

The Drop

The island loomed closer, with its gullies of surging water, barnacled rock and sparse, weathered plants, and the great drop, that you could only reach from the top, along a narrow spine of rock. The drop down past the nests of pigeons, to the rocks you would hit, if you plunged, before reaching the water.

I kept walking, the bag in my right hand, slung over my shoulder, the spear in my left. Most of the weight is in the weight-belt, and the bulk in the wet suit. Leaning forward to centre it better, I focused on the narrow sheep-track, passing several groups of people, and a picnic party sitting in one of the clearings of grass.

It was low tide, and I continued past the island, through the crossing point. To get around the coast at high tide you must leave the path and go onto the hillside. Past the cave, which is as far as most people go, to the far bays, where there is usually no-one in sight. My place, the place of cats-eyes, stones and dry weed. The place of the split tree, one lifeless limb above the stony beach and a hardy green profusion drawn back towards the hills. My hand started to grow numb, close to my shoulder, doubled over like a hook.

The warm air filled with the smell of the sea and the songs of cicadas and birds. I startled four sheep, grazing at the foot of the steep hills, which moved away then cut back to put a stand of broom between them and me. High above, a harrier peeled over the brow of the hills, a tiny brown shape angling at a great height.

I dropped the bag and spear on the grass and went over the rocks to the entrance of the valley where I dive. Several paua stood out in the clear water, among the familiar rock shelves and stands of weed. An octopus gathered on the shelf, a soft swirl of merging colour lit briefly by flickers of orange, not far below the surface at low tide. I knelt to look at it more closely, surprised it would venture so close to the surface, and watched for several minutes, the heat of the sun reflected on my face.

I went back to the bag, and pulled the leggings on, enjoying the familiar sensation of the warm, slightly clammy rubber. The jacket stuck to my skin, and a trickle of sweat ran down my chest as I closed the zip. Settling the hood squarely over my face, I picked up my mask and flippers and walked to the edge of the rock, teetering momentarily, my balance disturbed by the hood covering my ears. The octopus had gone, leaving me the shelf to sit on.

The water surrounded my legs, cool on my feet. Pushing forward off the rocks, I surged into the valley, water trickling in small burrows into the suit. My breath through the snorkel was loud in my ears, as I looked down into the alien valley, my valley. Holding my breath came naturally as I entered the water, and I had to try to breathe regularly. Turning to pick up the spear, I floundered to kneel on the shelf in the flippers, before dropping back into the water, holding the spear in the air as I turned again. Kicking steadily as the spear glowed in the shafts of sunlight that surrounded me in the water, I was soon out of sight of the shelf.

A small moki flicked out of sight behind a mass of weed. I blew out through the snorkel, took a deep breath, and folded forward at the waist, kicking down towards the bottom. Gripping my nose through the mask, I blew until the pressure equalized. Flattening out at the bottom, I swam around the weed, seeing paua and kina sheltering among the layers of rock. The moki turned side on, vulnerable in a shaft of light, looking at me. Lungs beginning to tighten, I kicked slowly back to the surface.

Circling a rock protruding about two feet above the surface, I plunged down again, to the small cave. I put the spear down and entered cautiously, keeping my distance from the walls with my hands. A group of small crayfish backed further into the cave, their feelers extending out towards me. I went back to the surface, returning several times to look again at the crayfish, exalted at finding them.

Retrieving the spear, I swam further out, into about ten metres of water. A slight fear came to me as I raised my head to see I was some distance from the shore. It always looks further than it is. As I put my face back into the water two kahawai appeared, swimming quickly around me, and again, circling.

The fish were close, their round eyes clearly visible. I brought the spear up slowly, drawing the rubber up the shaft until the tension pulled strongly at the bite between thumb and forefinger. Pointing it at the first of the fish, I followed it, then drew slightly ahead of it to allow for its speed in the water. The moment was there to shoot, the fish was close enough to take, delicious fresh fillets on the barbeque, or a tantalising smell from the smoker. It would be the success of the trip, to hold up, if asked as I returned along the path, the body

become dull. The round eye, trusting as a calf, seemed to watch me, as the fish continued to circle, their backs dark above the iridescent white beneath them. The water in my hood shifted, warm at my ears, and I watched the fish disappear in the sunlit water.

I swam out further, hoping to catch another glimpse of the kahawai, to see more fish. They returned, flicking past me almost before I had seen them, streaming into the distance like threads of light.

I paddled steadily on, into a driving rhythm with my flippers, the spear out in front of me like the horn on a unicorn. The bed of the sea was no longer visible. Suddenly, almost below me, a coiling and spiraling, as if some great creature was rising from the sea. I stopped cold, a small piece of flotsam on the surface, the beating of my heart filling the wetsuit. I saw small flecks of rust on the prongs of the spear. Below me, a fish flicked momentarily onto its side, and I saw I was above a school of huge kahawai, swimming in a tight band. The fish formed a ring, their plump flanks standing out like muscles on a torso, in a mystic net of their own making; close as sardines in a can, mouths gaping and jutting as if they were calling to each other. I stayed still for some minutes, kicking slowly to counter the weight belt pulling me down. Slowly and quietly, I took some deeper breaths, and slipped below the surface. The fish showed no alarm as I drifted down towards them. Surely, I must look like a seal to them, I thought. Any second now they'll be off.

I got closer and closer to them, gripping my nose and equalising. Fins and tails flicked, bodies rolled and turned, round unblinking eyes stared in black silence. Within two metres of them I lost my nerve, drifting away from the great muscle, the shield of flesh. My lungs

heaved in my chest as I neared the surface and the light. I blew out hard through my snorkel, sending spray shooting out behind me, fighting a sense of panic. The shore was far away, the rock distant, tiny, insignificant. Just swim steadily back, I thought. You'll be there soon. I floated again, the ring of fish now vague in the water. I blew out hard, sucked air in, and plunged back down.

As I neared the wall of fish my panic returned. They were a vast pulsing being, and the water seemed to hum with their movement. I closed my eyes and their eyes stayed with me. I kicked on down, unable to either open my eyes or stop, until I knew I was among them. The hum was all around, I was buffeted gently by their movement. Opening my eyes again, I saw I was in a halo of water, completely surrounded by the kahawai. I no longer had a sense of any one fish, just their continuous movement.

My chest grew tight, and I kicked slowly, then steadily to the surface. When I looked down again, the school had vanished. I swam towards the rock, enmeshed in the signs of the bay. Feeling good, I put on a burst of speed, bowing hard like a dolphin returned from a deep dive. Air hissed and hummed in the snorkel. My thighs and knees began to protest at the resistance of the flippers in the water.

Reaching the valley, I dived down and swam to the rock, hugging the bottom and rising up the rock face. Sitting on the shelf, I removed my flippers and pulled myself out of the water. Water streamed off me, onto the barnacle-covered rocks. The bright sun dazzled me through the mask, and I became aware of pain in my nose, where the mask pressed firmly. I

blew out, gingerly, closing one nostril then the other. Pulling off the hood, I turned and sat down, looking out to sea, beginning to heat up after the swim back and the heat of the sun.

Stripping off the suit, I felt the coolness of the air as if I had lost a layer of skin, in the pleasurable warmth of the sun. I took a towel from my bag and rubbed myself down, the downy hairs on my arms standing out, my skin goose-bumped but not cold. I looked at my pale freckled skin and lean arm. A sense of elation stayed with me, a fragile joy at having seen the octopus, the crayfish and the kahawai, and that they were out there, alive.

Our World

I hadn't seen the game at all. Sometimes I watched, mostly I couldn't be bothered seeing the whole thing through. That night, I was looking forward to *Our World*. I had seen the shorts and been looking forward to it all week. It was about the countryside, foxes and badgers, old woods and gardens.

The three of them were sitting on the sofa, looking pissed off. Alex was going into his distant, better things to worry about mode. The commentary was blaring on, a hoarse excitement, to someone's lap of honour. Clearly not ours. The three of them had been like this a lot lately, but there was an edge to it today. An extra dimension of injustice.

OK babe, he said, we're off for a drink. Sure you don't want to come? I didn't. Come on lads, let's be off. I'll see you a bit later. Bye Mary, someone said, as they left.

It was something of a disappointment to be honest. Seemed to be just a few vignettes in between the ads. There were badgers at night, shuffling in the moonlight, on tiny woodland islands between highways. Every bird seemed to have a band around its leg, and live in a nest-box, its date of birth recorded in a notebook. And then, almost before it got started, the next programme was being previewed. A salmon, floating like a silver branch, its belly exposed to the indifferent sky, to great bears and fishing eagles. I saw its vacant eye, the gill pulse so slowly and weakly I could not tell whether the fish or the flow of water had moved it.

I drove to the after-hours. A luminous column of water and bubbles distracted me, from the people who sat quietly reading magazines or looking up at the television, the kids huddled close to their parents, or walking up and down the rows of chairs and legs. Brightly

coloured fish flicked around the sides of the column, their eyes wide as if they were astonished at what they saw, sinking briefly as they reached the glassy wall, before another dart, another surge of hopeless vitality. I wanted to clear my nose, to stop sniffing. I fumbled in my bag for something to use. Nothing but hard thin dark things, a pen and an eyeliner. My bag dropped to the floor.

A young guy passed across the corridor in front of me, looking in a kindly, almost absent-minded way into the waiting room. He picked the bag up and passed it to me.

Thanks, I said.

My pleasure, he said, and he went away.

I went into the room he had come from. I took tissues from a desk with a light on above it, looking at the plastic chairs, the containers with medical equipment. I blew my nose, loudly, and became aware of the sound of my breathing, and the sounds I made as I moved about. Small and uncertain sounds, like a mouse behind a wall.

When my turn came to see a doctor, I got what I needed easily. It was the young guy who passed my bag back to me, after I dropped it in the waiting room. I knew how to answer his questions, how to avert them, and how to lead him into areas that will not be pursued. I wondered what he was really thinking. Did he doubt me, and give me the benefit of the doubt because he is a doctor and doctors are kind? As I walked away with my prescription, I felt for a second like turning to him again and trying to find out whether he really knew anything about me at all. But I didn't, because that isn't what you do.

I joined the people in the pharmacy, and we walked around each other, looking with feigned interest at the rows of medications, bandages, hair ties and clips for children. I felt calm, wrapped in silence and certainty.

We fought when Alex got home, but I can't remember much of it now. Shouting, tears from me, clenched fists from him. His top lip white, with little flecks of froth. Our voices like dogs barking, snarling, whining.

Put your thinking cap on, he said to me. Don't cry over those animals, for Christ's sake. It is the way things are. The way everything is kept in balance. Each depends on the other, it is a system, evolved this way. Stop daydreaming and think about a decent job. You've got a good mind, find something to apply it to. You are wasting away, making yourself unhappy.

I slept on the sofa, curled up, my mouth dry and my head beginning to ache as it got light, brightening beneath the curtains.

I heard water hitting glass, the sound of the shower door closing after him, as the tears ran down my face, with a strange, distant tickle, making the cushion wet at my cheek. I pulled the curtains to see the sky.

The water shut off, the door closed again. I heard him opening the dresser, the sharp sound of a clothes hanger as clothes were pulled roughly from it. I lay silent, still looking at the clouds, but no longer seeing them. He walked down the stairs. A tap came on, then off. I heard him put a glass on the sink, then the door closing.

I slept a long time, then looked again at the clouds moving across the sky. I was surprised at their speed, as steady and inexorable as a herd of animals, running silent and numberless, smooth as a trackless train.

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Two weeks later I was in London. A spontaneous trip. Once there, I went back to the house with the red door, to see photographs of my grandmother as a young woman, to share a meal. I had the secrets and fears of a stranger.

I could hardly knock when I arrived at their door the first time, a weak echo along my wrist to my elbow. Imposing, a deep red, thickly painted, smooth as a mirror. My cousin opened the door, and greeted me with warmth, inviting me in. We sat in their living room, she, her husband, and their three children. The boys asked me questions about rugby, as they had been told to do. Her husband, Michael, remarked that my accent is not nearly as strong as an Australian accent. Caroline is taking upholstery at an evening class and showed me two chairs that she had covered herself.

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When I was young Grandma told me about their first trip, about weeks above the water that surged against the deep sides of the ship, splitting and breaking into white foam. I imagine her gripping a painted iron railing, like the frail and decent star of a black and white movie, trusting in the adventure of it all, a holiday on the other side of the world. I imagine her smiling at the girl beside her, into bright wide innocent eyes.

She never talked about the second journey, when she came alone, to stay, to be with me, and never wanted to talk about her daughter, my Mum, who went from our lives, without warning. As if she had never been.

Much later I found out Mum had killed herself. But I still don't know why.

How Grandma tried, for me. We looked in the windows of antique shops when I was growing up, and I could tell how special some of it was for her. Old things, from home. We always seemed to hold hands afterwards, to save those moments as long as we could. She tried to protect me, to help me, when other children were cruel, and when I was crying for Mum. And sometimes that was all she seemed able to see, the need to protect me, to be vigilant for harm. I could see how the little cruelties hurt her, and I wanted to protect her in turn. The time I wet myself at my desk because we weren't supposed to go out to the

toilet when we were eating lunch, before we went outside to play. The other kids wouldn't play with me for ages because of the smell of that one time. Grandma was so upset and angry about that.

I stopped telling her about things, so she wouldn't look so worried, so she would not hurt for me. She grew older, fretting about her inability to protect me, to shelter me, to give me a place to come to where the rest could not intrude, and did not matter.

We would look sometimes at her photos, relatives standing clear in black and white among the fields and hedges, with their beautiful house at their backs. A picnic in the countryside, a black Labrador attentive and faithful, a smart old car by the side of the road. Ones from the war with moustaches and reassuring uniforms. How proud she was, seeming bathed in love and tenderness and longing.

Some day you will go home and see, she would say, her voice hushed and sad.

We would watch nature programmes on TV. We pitied the ones fallen from the herd, the ones caught alone as darkness stalks across the land, or born and living under the wrong eyes. Eyes without love or pity, or kindness.

I would have given her a layer of my skin, if I could. So when they teased her and bullied her, in that factory, it wouldn't have hurt her, worried her, worn her, made her doubt everything except the need to protect me.

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As I left for the tube early this morning, in the growing light, I walked along the London street with eyes wide like a little girl, in the newness of it, in the echoes of memory. I can't remember the last time I was up before dawn, my head clear, when the world is quiet and its shapes sharper and more true. And there on a lawn, a shape familiar and mythical, not a glimpse that I could even be sure was real. In front of a bay window, on a lawn in need of

cutting, between a black railing fence and a badly overgrown flower bed, alive with weed plants in flower. Before it slipped off and was gone, its pelt mangy and grey-black with moulting, somehow worn by its now life, we looked for a moment at each other, and I saw a fox, bright as day.