

Giving up on the body politic

Miso, tofu, tempeh, noodles. In an exclusive extract from her forthcoming third novel, **Amanda Lohrey** muses on Zen, nutrition and mother-knows-best.

O grew up on a desolate housing estate out in the hot suburban wilds that manage to be at once both bland and hysterical, to look like a retirement village and operate like a combat zone.

Bored, terrified of the gangs, we studied our bodies obsessively for signs of strength, worshipping at the shrine of Muscle. Instinctively the body sought for a path of grace, of poise, and found as the only the outlet, fighting and football. We spent strained, anxious hours in the gym. We ate milk-shakes, Sustagen and cream buns to build up our weight and then sweated in the gym to alchemise the puppy fat into Muscle. We stocked up our arms, our shoulders, our chests, our male armoury.

The schoolyard was shaped like Pentridge prison, a bleak rectangle with railings. We were restless and apathetic; our teachers were weary and tense. One of them pulled me by the hair once, with such a wrench that a tuft came out in his hands. Cowered, we learned to hunch our shoulders.

On loose, empty Saturdays we loitered in the bowling alley, sending black ball after black ball down the glossy boards to a mirage of ninepins that quivered and, sometimes, fell. Then we raced home on bikes, spitting up the gravel in the convent schoolyard, doing wheelies on the bitumen courts. Home to Saturday night feasts of sausages and fish and chips and bacon and hamburgers and frozen peas and boiled eggs and tomato sauce and Neapolitan ice-cream in scoops with cascades of caramel topping and

dusty walnuts if Mother was in the mood for the trimmings.

Initially a stripling, tall and thin, by eighteen I had built myself into a facsimile of a brute; an architecture of meat pies and chiko rolls and steak and chips and mashed potato and pasta before football games because carbohydrate gave you a sustained energy burst. I can recall, especially, the taste of a cream bun.

The feeling when your teeth mesh into the yellow dough, the spongy, chewy mush of it, the smear of artificially coloured jam, hi-tech strawberry.

My football body was another body from the one I have now. Bulk. It was a dream of ballooning pneumatic contours, of pumped up Muscle. I ate. I ate. I ate my body into an artificial corset, a contoured landscape of the calorie.

And now I strip it away. Strip it back to the sinew, the bone, the finest silk purse. I am thin, wiry. I have the Zen body. Lean, minimal. I no longer sprint and pump iron. I liberate the Ki in the flowing meditative movements of the Kung.

Last month I went on my first three day rice fast. On the night of the second day I dreamed of chocolate cake. It was a brown oval mound like a huge cream puff and when I bit into it, it was dark and congealed and gluey and stuck my teeth together so that I couldn't speak. The sickliness of it made me cringe. The tongue, you know, is the body's opening for the heart. We eat; we speak.

You think I'm self-obsessed, don't you? You think there are bigger issues in the world than the state of my body. Famine in Africa. The greenhouse effect. Political stability in Europe. Perestroika. Tax reform and retrieving the Common Wealth.

Marita sometimes teases me about this and I retaliate by mocking her cumbersome tape recorder, her obsession with taping her friends and what can only be a series of lies, an outpouring of phantoms locked in words. Words will always let you down, words will betray you; the only tangible reality is the body. Marita transcribes her tapes and turns them into stories. I tell her this is a karmic cul-de-sac if ever I saw one.

You don't understand, she says.

One night, after work, she takes me to a lecture at the university, that dismal tower on the edge of the city. Up in the creaky lifts to the fifth floor where a visiting Italian professor, Claudia Guiliani, presides over a large seminar room. Professor Guiliani is an oral historian in a smart maroon linen suit and black stockings. We sit and try to absorb her indistinct English over the noise of the traffic below. *Every man or woman, she begins, is the subject of his or her own history and has the right to speak out and All subjectivity is antagonistic to the existent systems and Treat your own life as if it were an object of history.* She says we are all ego-historians. She is wrong. Where is the ego? It is

ephemeral. My history is inscribed on my body.

Andrzej says it will take seven years to clean out my body, to eliminate the emotional and material dross of a lifetime.

I could tell Professor Guiliani this but she would not know what I'm talking about. She would sip her red wine and short black and shrug and smile. Her poise is European; it is gesture, smile, an expensive haircut, understated clothes. But her shoulders are hunched, she twists her legs under the table, there are black smudges under her eyes, tell-tale signs of fear stored in the kidneys. Too much red wine, too many coffees heighten the fear. Her poise is a chimera, a sleight-of-hand, a dance of gesture to conceal decay. It is beguiling, the gloss on the leaf; it does not spring from the roots.

She talks to peasants about memory, their thoughts after fascism. She asks: what is it that they remember? I ask: what does it matter what they remember? The question is: what did they eat under fascism? If they'd given up meat they wouldn't have had fascism. I could explain things to her; I could explain that to solve the problems of the body politic you must first concentrate on the body.

That night in my dream Professor Guiliani addresses me. She shrugs, smiles. Hitler was a vegetarian, she says. Furthermore, he did not drink or smoke. The cancers of the body politic cannot be cured with seaweed broth and pickled radish. She shrugs again. And surely we must take into account the fact that the home of your Zen macrobiotics, Japan, has nourished a long-evolving militarism and fascista of its own. *Just a minute!* I cry out in my sleep - and wake. Too late! I want to tell her that George Oshara, the founder of macrobiotics, was one of the few Japanese to oppose the war in the Pacific. I want to say -

Never mind, one night I will dream her again and she will have to stay around to listen.

Tuesday

I walk home, up through the warm leafy back streets of the Glebe. Home is my sister's place on the Toxteth Estate. Joanna and Ric are away for

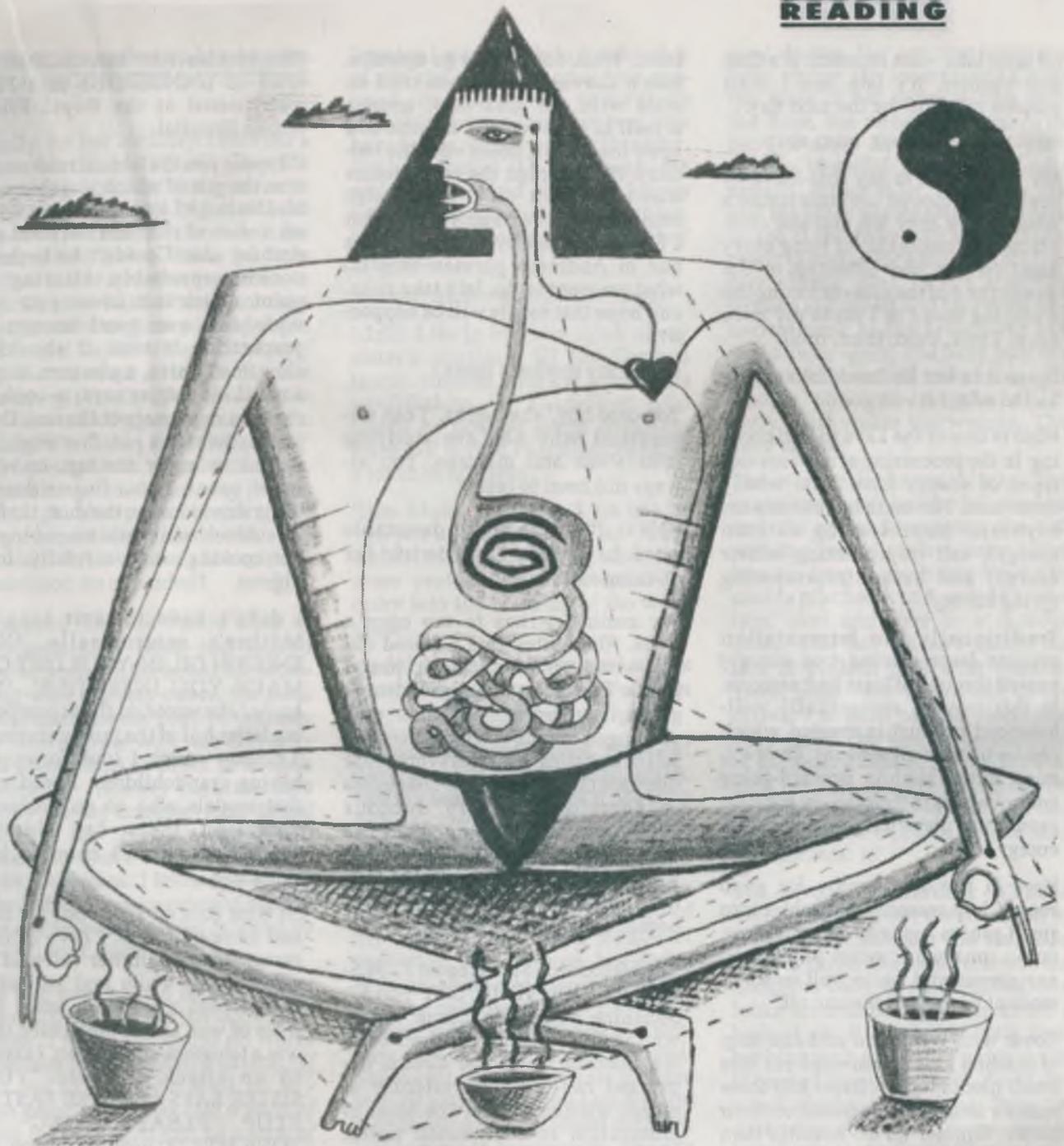
six months in Europe and I am babysitting their gargantuan mortgage; an elegant terrace with romantic balconies in wrought-iron lace, gilt mirrors, an acre of mushroom-tinted carpet and upstairs, off the master bedroom, my retreat; a curved sundeck that seems to float in the sky, hovering like a platform suspended from invisible wires. On warm evenings I sit up there and meditate, sunk in my sister's padded chair.

10.40 pm. I open the glass panelled front door and switch off the security alarm. On the lush pink carpet is a pile of mail, including, I see, postcards from my sister and brother-in-law who seem, unaccountably, to write to me in tandem.

July 2

Dear Steve, How is Sydney? I must be crazy but I miss it, although what exactly it is that I 'miss' I can't define. Jo is in love with Venice but it's too gloomy for me. I really made an effort today to traipse around with her. Dimly lit galleries, sulky madonnas, doughy little angels, smirking 18th century aristocrats surrounded by their children. At the Ca' d'Ora we looked at Mantegna's Death of San Sebastian by Cima - bland faces of pseudo-suffering, like the fake ecstasy in pornography magazines. Complacent, self-satisfied suffering - hovering of fat little angels - a technical martyrdom - note the few discreet drops of blood that trickle from the arrow wound in the neck and thigh. No pain, no convulsions, no distortions of limbs. Nothing messy. I think they were all gays into S and M and mugs like us are supposed to fall for it. We ate in the San Marco piazza, a dish of black risotto cooked in calamari ink. Black, rich and oily, like the canals.

Am tired and ratty, Sat up all night on the train from Venice. we sat near a young girl reading a novel in English. She read aloud to us. 'By night they gorged on one another, their lips swollen, their cheeks flushed, the blood simmering in their heads, their mouths full of whatever they could get into them.' That's how I feel about Italy. A surfeit of civilisation. Cheers, R.



Florence, July 28

Dearest Stephen, How is the house? How far away it seems, at times I have trouble remembering what it looks like. And yet I dream about it quite often and always that burglars have broken in. I think our dreams are always some months behind and our brains slow to catch up.

And how are you? Are you still growing thinner and thinner on that diet? Will there be anything left of you when I get back? It was you I thought

of this morning when I was in the Uffizi and a German tourist took a fit in front of Raphael's Madonna. I thought nothing of it but the Madame at our pensione told us that once a month on average a foreign tourist is rushed to the psychiatric ward of the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital suffering from an acute mental imbalance seemingly brought on by an encounter with the city's art treasures.

These people are apparently healthy when they leave home, Madame

said. Hence, they suddenly lose their equilibrium. The beauty of Florence, while not the cause itself, is a factor. It seems that art isn't always therapeutic. What can we deduce from this? That art isn't always therapeutic? Certainly it isn't for Ric. He moans constantly. Love, Jo.

The content of this postcard does not surprise me. This is the legacy of late Western civilisation: the destruction of equilibrium. The legacy of the past is to help us regain it. There is also a letter from my mother but I put that

Graphic: Simon Leitch

off until later - one reproach at a time and besides, it's late and I must prepare my food for the next day.

First the basic elixir, miso soup.

My sister used to say that I live by the knife. I moved into this house a week before they left and she complained of insomnia, of lying every night in her bed listening to the steady thud of the cleaver hitting the chopping board as I made my miso soup. Thud, thud, thud, thud.

I gave it to her for breakfast and she had to admit it was good.

Miso is one of the keys to Zen cooking. In the processing of miso several types of energy have been wisely combined. The main ingredients are soybeans (representing autumn energy), salt (representing winter energy) and barley (representing spring energy).

Traditionally the fermentation process (representing tree energy) passed through at least four seasons. In this way an energetically well-balanced product is created which can be used in all seasons. Over all, miso has a slightly upward-going energy, and is therefore very good for promoting digestion and for giving energy.

Here is my own recipe for miso soup. Chop seasonal vegetables into small pieces - ginger, carrot, celery, onion, pumpkin, sweet potato and any greens and saute well in small amount of roasted sesame oil.

Cover with water and add one strip of washed kombu seaweed cut into small pieces with scissors and three shitake mushrooms soaked on their backs. Simmer for 20 minutes then add miso paste mixed with a little warm water.

Garnish with something fresh just before serving - chopped spring onions, parsley, grated daikon radish. This will activate the salt and the enzymes. Always keep soups covered during cooking for full flavour.

To make a meal add diced tofu and tempeh, a handful of cooked brown rice or noodles.

11.40. I eat a small bowl of this standing over the sink and thus fortified I am ready to read my mother's

letter. Well, not quite, I go upstairs, take a shower in the white-tiled en suite with the gold taps, armour myself in Ric's red silk kimono and open the French doors onto the balcony. How benign the night seems when you sit on a high ledge cradled by the warm air. It's then that I feel supported by nature. This is one of Andrzej's phrases: let's do what we want to do, let's take risks, and hope that nature will be supportive.

I open my mother's letter.

'My dear boy,' she begins. 'I can understand why you are studying meditation and massage. You always did need to relax.'

Relax! What an ugly, detestable word that is! How characteristic her opening sortie!

My mother writes to me once a week. She writes on a battered old typewriter on which the 't' jumps half a line above the other letters giving her writing the look of a prolonged stammer. Her letters are full of irritating 't's. With every letter there are clippings. She is shameless in summoning every dubious authority to contest my diet. The daily paper is treated like gospel and we have entered into a war of citations, of chapter and verse, which began, as I recall, with this.

The Melbourne Sun, August 7. 'PESTICIDES FOUND IN SOY MILK'. Sunshine housewife, Diane Walsh, who is also President of the Northern Suburbs Consumer Group, expressed her concern yesterday at recent warnings about the level of aluminium in soya based milks. Mothers using these would be horrified to read of the possible dangers of brain damage and later development of Alzheimer's disease, she said. At that point I stopped reading.

Fortuitously there was an article in The Sydney Morning Herald some days later: 'DIOXIDE FOUND IN CARTON MILK'

I decided to fight fire with fire. That night I cut it out and posted it off. 'Traces of highly poisonous dioxin have been found in carton milk, a Department of Scientific and Industrial research scientist said...'

She retaliated: 'MACROBIOTIC DIET IS DANGEROUS says Head nutritionist at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

I'll spare you the tabloid rush on this one, the gist of which was that some birdbrain girl had died from living on a diet of rice and seaweed and *nothing else*. Couldn't be bothered cooking, probably. Missing the point, which is to invest your food with your own good energy; the preparation is vital; it should be slow, meditative, a pleasure, almost a ritual. As Sanjay says, to cook the rice you must respect the rice. Don't just throw it in a pot; first wash it in a strainer under the tap, in warm water, running your fingers through the grains to loosen the dust, then set it aside to drain while measuring out the cooking water carefully...but I digress.

I didn't have to wait long for Mother's return sally. 'NOT ENOUGH OIL IN YOUR DIET CAN MAKE YOU INFERTILE'. 'You know,' she wrote, in the accompanying letter full of the jumpy stuttering 't's, 'how much I look forward to having grandchildren. I read once that models who go on prolonged slimming diets can develop shrivelled ovaries from lack of Vitamin E...'

As time goes on she sends me more and more clippings: I have come to recognise the familiar self-seal envelope, grey-white and stuffed fat with folded newsprint; small mis-sives of war. Once, manically, there was a telegram, brought on, I assume by an attack of panic. 'YOUR SISTER SAYS YOU ARE FASTING STOP PLEASE RING ME TONIGHT.' 'A healthy person carries a little weight,' she had urged that evening, 'something in reserve'. 'This is a famine mentality,' I told her. 'The war is long over. We suffer now from a glut.'

But she was not persuaded.

She wrote: September 20. Launceston 'ARSENIC LEVELS IN SEAWEED TOO HIGH SAY CSIRO';

I replied: October 3. Sydney 'CHEESE BAD FOR THE HEART'.

She wrote: October 25. Adelaide 'VEGETARIANS RISK IRON DEFICIENCY'.

I replied: November 10. Los Angeles 'HOLLYWOOD STAR SAYS SUGAR AGES'.

Finally, for her birthday, I sent her a macrobiotic cookbook. Despite everything I couldn't believe her to be totally intractable. After all, she was always an innovative cook; for years, when I was little, the only mother in our street to use garlic, to cook Chinese food at home, to make runny omelettes. In my 20s I bought her Robert Carrier's *Great Dishes of the World* and Simone Beck's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Instead of glancing at them, saying 'That looks interesting, dear' and leaving them to gather dust on the shelf, she tried out many things, although always inclined to be heavy-handed with the herbs. The question is, how far can her spirit of innovation be extended?

I dropped into the Macro shop in Newtown after work and looked carefully among the books for something with a glossy cover, the gloss of the mainstream; none of that earthy brown paper with line drawings and invocations of Greek goddesses (Demeter, Athena) that screams 'hippy' to my mother. And found exactly the right text: Keith Michell's *The Practically Macrobiotic Cookbook*. I knew she'd have heard of him; he was almost her age and she probably fancied him and he doesn't look like a crank.

For two weeks I had no reply. And then: 'Thank you for the book,' she wrote. 'I think you could do worse than take Keith Michell's advice. "If you feel like eating a steak do so - with green vegetables and a glass of wine to balance it. Just be aware of the balance. Above all, don't become a fanatic about it." This last sentence was heavily underlined and the 't' in fanatic seemed to have jumped even higher, disappearing almost into the preceding line. She continued on. 'Exactly! All things in moderation, that's what I've always said. P.S. I tried his hummus recipe and it was very nice, if a little bland. I added some cummin and chili. It was a lot of mucking around, I ate it all in a day and it gave me wind.'

I suppose I should be pleased at this; she has begun to acknowledge the principle of harmony and when next

I see her I may be able to speak to her of yin and yang and once you succeed in changing someone's vocabulary, even a word or two, you have begun to change their thinking. But how typical of her to change the recipe, convinced that she knows best and can improve on everything. Like all mothers she has a control problem.

Mother: border-guard of the body.

12:01. I lie in bed and think of my sister's postcard. Of the German tourist stricken with the lows of his equilibrium. Of Yuan-Shen who seems to possess some depthless source of it. And I begin to compose a letter in my head.

'Dear Mum', it begins, 'I am not, as you put it, learning to "relax". I am embarked on something infinitely more profound, an existential inquiry into the meaning of the word poise...'

And then I'm dreaming, and in this dream I'm on my way to a Buddhist prayer-meeting in Randwick.

It's one of those heavy, paranoid days, overcast, the air dense, stuffy, like my head. Tropical rain has been pelting down at sudden intervals; the traffic is clogged all up and down the Parramatta Road. I'm sitting on the bus my nose pressed to the fogged-up window, to the pane of my unconscious (ha, ha, joke), half expecting one of those low-flying 727s to burst into flame and dive into the rooftops when I notice the woman opposite me. She's a slattern; let's face it she looks retarded. She wears grey track pants that are stained with grease; her bare feet are in rubber thongs that reveal the thick black grime in her toenails. She sits with her feet up on the seat opposite and she is holding a baby, a pert child of about nine months, clothed in a grubby white nightdress and barefoot, with a single wisp of fair hair that rises elfishly from her downy head. And she is so alert and cheerful; she looks around; her eyes are bright and mesmerising. And still we are stuck in the traffic, hemmed in on all sides by cars and vans and semi-trailers that hum resentfully in the rear. In the fetid atmosphere of the steamy bus the woman's head begins to nod, her eyes close, she slumps into the win-

dow, dozing. Her arm that holds the baby on her lap loosens and I hear the noise of her purse sliding onto the floor, the rattle of change. The baby is alert; her elfin head bobs with a cheerful poise; she looks around, smiles at us. We watch, me and the other passengers on the bus, to see if the baby will fall. I tense, ready to spring forward. The schoolboy sitting next to the sleeping woman is flushed and taut with embarrassment; he catches my eye and looks away again. The baby puts her finger in her mouth and then in the woman's mouth, and jabs persistently. This wakes the woman. The baby smiles.

The woman looks up, blinks. The schoolboy hands her the fallen purse and she opens it, registers the \$20 note inside and presses some silver into his limp, unresisting hand. 'Ya coulda pinched it and ya didn't,' she says, over and over in a raucous croak. The boy doesn't move, his face is pinkish pale with tension. 'Gees, mate!' she shouts out to the driver, 'I've gone past me stop.' The baby grins. The woman lurches out of her seat. I look at her wide backside, her lank straggly hair, the grubby white thongs. How could this self-possessed child belong to her? Did she steal it?

The driver opens the door - it's not a designated stop but we're locked in a traffic jam so what the hell. She lurches down the steps and out the door, the baby is still smiling; she looks around pertly, gives us all a look of gay farewell, her little head bobbing with a cheerful poise as she is carried down the steps. And I can smell alcohol, or is that from the dark priest sitting next to me, staring woodenly at the floor? Through the window I can see the woman shuffling back along the footpath in the direction from which we've come. The dim, oppressive smog begins to close in on us; the traffic is stale and unmoving; it's 4.13 and I'm stuck on the Parramatta Road on the way to a Buddhist prayer meeting.

Who is that baby? Where does she belong?

Wednesday

In the morning I'm summoned by Frank. Upstairs to the big boys; into the holy temple of tax auditors.

Have you ever seen a group of tax auditors? They have special bodies, but not bodies exclusive to them; no, solicitors and other public servants share it. It's the colon look. It's the soft jowl look, the disappearing jawbone, the fleshy cheeks and the bulging gut. And it's not beer, or even if it is that's not the crucial element. In their case it's coffee and biscuits. Too much sweetness and wetness. Too much yin. That's what they work off. That's their hit. Go into the tea room and look at the stacked packets of Family Assorted. And then they get fluid retention and flab. They lose their yang definition, their outlines. They work from 8 until 7, recovering the Common Wealth, living on coffee and biscuits and complaining a lot: 'I could be getting \$80,000 in private practice' - that sort of thing.

And I'm about to go upstairs and work with one of them, Frank Kelly, a senior auditor investigating a big fraud case who wants me to assist him for six weeks as a paralegal. Fine, anything for a change. The Dwarf has been informed and told

me to clean up my desk, as if I'm about to be let out of school and he's so pleased to see me go that in a burst of optimistic hope that I'll never return he's reshuffling the sections and moving Les and Lewis into my area. This is good news for Sanjay who loves to tease the fundamentalist Christians and Les and Lewis are as fundamental as you can get although, for obscure reasons unfathomable to the rest of us, they hate one another, belonging to different sects and each, I suspect, wanting to have a monopoly on the Word.

For Les everything is the work of the devil: he showed me a Bankcard the other day as if it were a strange and rare artefact from a doomed civilisation. "Look at that," he said, pointing to the dot-matrixed design of the triple six.

"What about it, Les?"

"Sign of the devil."

Oh no, not again. "Who told you that, Les?"

"That's what they tell me."

"That's what who told you?"

"That's what they tell me," he repeats, with irritable rising inflection.

Everything Les knows comes from 'they'. I wonder who 'they' are: a colloquialism that overcomes his diffidence about asserting the 'I' and his own view of the world, or does he hear voices? Whatever the source Les refuses to use a Bankcard: credit is the sign of the devil. This sounds like a loopy edict although, I suppose, you could make out a case for it.

"The capitalist system is based on credit, Les," I tell him.

He looks at me blankly. "Sign of the devil," he says "That's what they tell me."

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AMANDA LOHREY is the author of *The Morality of Gentlemen* (Picador 1984) and *The Reading Group* (Picador 1988). She is currently working on her third novel, from which 'Giving up on the body politic...' is an extract.

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