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The perceptive poets: a comparative study of Jal lu'-Din Rûmi, Sant Kabîr, Matsuo Bashó and William Blake

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Elisa's India

Ph.D. Submission: Volume Two
A novel submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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B.A. (Professional Writing) Canb.

Faculty of Creative Arts

2008
CERTIFICATION

I, Michelle Shete, declare that this manuscript, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Michelle Shete
March 2008
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Michelle Shete
PREFACE

This novel accompanies the thesis titled *The Perceptive Poets: A Comparative Study of Jal lu'l-Dín Rúmi, Sant Kabír, Matsuo Bashó and William Blake*. While the novel and thesis are independent, the preoccupation with the roles of women in *Elisa’s India* balances the thesis which is dominated by the work of male poets. Both the thesis and the novel are concerned with themes of mysticism, intellectual limitation, madness, perception and states of consciousness. These themes are more apparent in the thesis but they are also reflected in this novel. *Elisa’s India* was written as an optional creative component. Both works together meet the requirements of the Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Wollongong.
Elisa's India


Elisa Donnelly, a twenty-five year old girl, is an anxious and fearful character whose memories of her mother's death have left her insecure and incapable of satisfying her husband's wish for children. Attempting to temporarily escape her confusion, she ventures on a research trip to India.

As an excessively analytical Western girl, she finds the reality of life in India shocking. Her journey takes her into the silent heart of Indian village life and into her own locked treasure chest of fears and jewels. From an uncreative, timid and troubled young woman, she begins a pathway towards transformation.

This novel explores the complicated nature of young Western women in the general absence of a metaphysical Mother figure. The novel moves from intellectualism to silence, from rigidity to creativity, and from agnosticism to revelation.
Elisa's India

a novel by

Michelle Shete
Dedicated to
those women who are still
becoming something.
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Part One:

DOUGH & DUST

1.

Delhi, 21.11.2006

My heart feels like a box. Can’t breathe very well. Constant pounding in my chest every time someone mentions the Schedule. Dr Kadamb gave us a welcoming lecture this morning. He kept talking about the Schedule. I thought I was going to be sick. He must be wealthy now, with seventy students paying Western money to breathe the dust, smell rotten-egg fumes and feel sweat trickling between their shoulderblades. I can’t live in this kind of suffocating weather for very long. It’s as if a giant has taken a steaming, hot bath and left the city windows shut. Even the palms of my hands are sweating.

It was actually cold when we first arrived. We were welcomed at the airport by fog. Dr Kadamb appeared, arm in arm with the fog, to guide us towards an old, coughing bus which was trying to warm itself up with its own breath. I began to make a list of urgently needed winter clothes. I didn’t even have Mummy’s shawl with me. It was in my suitcase. If someone had told me how cold it was going to be at 4 a.m. in Delhi I’d have had gloves, coat, beanie and socks in my hand-luggage. Men were
sitting in the fog at the outskirts of the airport, squatting and huddled next to little, open fires. You couldn't tell the difference between fire-smoke and fog so it looked as if the men were warming their hands in the chilly air. My hands felt as if they were going to snap off. But, as it turns out, it's now stuffy and hot.

All seventy of us are packed into huts at a place called "Nizamuddin Scout Camp", named after a Sufi. There are holes in the roof and walls, so I hope it doesn't rain. The light peeps in through the holes and makes dotty patterns on the floor, but apart from that, it's rather dark in here. People are using torches to search their luggage for mosquito repellent and sunscreen. The holes are actually a good thing, otherwise we'd all soon become asphyxiated with the smell of chemical lotions and sprays.

There are too many students for me. I haven’t really spoken to anyone yet except a woman who was sitting next to me on the aeroplane. Her name’s Kelly. She has the squarest jaw I've ever seen on a woman and a mane of unruly, brown hair. She’s taking me to a library in Delhi this week. I feel like a ten-year-old child when I talk to people like her. She’s so confident and worldly. When she stops talking I don’t know how to keep up my side of the conversation. All I can do is talk about my dangling existence.

I have a horrid sensation of suspension. Somebody once called it "psychic entropy". It’s as if some controlling hand has pressed the pause button on real life and now, while life is suspended, my second half has crept away to this unknown place to rebel against my future. And all the
time, real life hangs in the air like dust. As if God forgot all about the
girl who was left thinking about His absence. I’m reading a book called
God is Dead at the moment. Dad gave it to me before I left Sydney. I’m
reading a lot these days. I have to, otherwise I’ll suck my pen and that’d
be a bad idea. This is India after all, and I shouldn’t stick dirty things in
my mouth or I’ll end up back in the loo queue.

The other book Dad gave me is called The Origin and Development of Mystical Atheism. No wonder my thoughts are so unclear. Something enormous sits like a lump of dough in my head and I can’t work out what it is. Outside, a young boy is sweeping dust up from the ground as if there’s some advantage in having it airborne. It puffs up in a cloud and settles again, only to be disturbed once more. If this boy had a job title it would be Junior Agitator.

Our beds are too close together. Kelly’s bunk is above mine. I’m on the lower bunk at the moment. Don’t feel like talking to anyone. Everyone seems to know each other already, somehow. But that’s not possible because most of us have never met before. It’s just that I don’t know how to start conversation, or continue it. And I hate silent pauses. My stomach gets tight and tense as if silence means my conversation has failed again.

I just hit my mattress to swat a mosquito and a cloud of dust blew up like a nuclear explosion! My eyes are already gritty and sore from the aeroplane, the Delhi smog and now all this dust whirling around our beds. At this rate we’ll all end up with laryngitis. Someone outside is beating haphazardly on a drum – probably a tabla. I’m imagining Rumi, the
mystic, becoming ecstatic and working himself up into a poem-writing mood. He used to create poetry to the rhythm of his neighbour's hammer. So I've read.

I feel so tired when I talk to people who have no verbal threshold (that's what I call it). Most people have a built-in, cut-off switch which activates itself when conversation becomes one-sided and met with repetitive responses such as "hmm, yes" too many times. But some people think everything they have to say is important. My face becomes drawn and hollow like a sick person but their intensity continues. I think nothing I have to say is important, so I say nothing. I should try to make conversation but it's stressfully unnatural for me. The only person I can talk to is Sam. But he's my husband so I'm not sure whether that counts.

I've been doodling \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} symbols on my notebook for ten minutes trying to decide whether or not to phone Sam. I don't really want to talk to him right now and it's not easy to find a working phone here. But he's probably worried. He was concerned when I told him that Dr Kadamb is taking us to the Sufi mosque nearby. Sam immediately concluded that Dr Kadamb is a religious fanatic in academic disguise. But Dr Kadamb looks nothing like a mad man. He's completely respectable.

Dr Kadamb simply said he'd like to give us "the experience of \textit{Qawwali} music" while we're here. He said that a certain group of Sufis (who worship Nizamuddin Aulia and Hazrat Amir Khusrau) are coming to sing ecstatic music to celebrate the death of these saints. Apparently the Sufis really do celebrate death as if it's simply a day of transition.
There will be hundreds of Hindus and Muslims coming for this event they call Satrahvin Sharif. I’m looking forward to it.

I’d like to talk to Dr Kadamb about my thesis before we go back to Sydney. Apparently his field is "Religion and Literature", so I'm sure he would have insightful comments concerning my research. I’ve decided to temporarily title my thesis: Mystical Atheism and Illogical Discourse. Someone like Dr Kadamb would be fascinated to see the profoundly illogical and "tortured language" I’ve discovered. My favourite is Eckhart’s:

You should completely sink away from your you-ness and flow into his
his-ness and your you and his his shall become our ‘one’ so totally that
with him you eternally comprehend his unbecoming Isness and unnamed
Nothingness.

How can anyone make intelligent sense of that? And yet this same man is the one who sensibly states, "The one God is intellect and intellect is the one God...." Dad’s conclusions about God have always ended with the same Eckhart plagiarism. He would sit at the head of our dining table, and if it was too quiet he would clear his throat and quote Eckhart: "As I always say, the greatest honour the soul can pay to God is to leave God to himself and to be free of him. Now, let’s eat."

I think my thesis will focus on Eckhart. But I’m not sure exactly what point I need to make. It’s got something to do with the mystical insistence upon the superiority of the intellect. I need to finish an article on The Nothingness of God and Its Explosive Metaphors, then maybe my
thoughts will make better sense. Anyway, I hope they make better sense by the time I leave this place. I’ll try to speak with Dr Kadamb, but his Schedule is very tight. What a horrid word. Whoever thought of that word deserves to be locked in a dusty Delhi prison with nothing but a clock to pass the time.
Time was a problem for Elisa. The clock-face was her constant enemy – hands waving her life goodbye and tut-tutting about her inability to catch up. Time was so consumed by the inadequacy of Elisa that it found itself pulsating in her digestive tract. She had swallowed time to stop it from moving any faster, but it continued to tut-tut her and wave its spindly fingers from the depths of her stomach. Whenever time called externally, Elisa's internal clock screamed its alarm as if to inform everyone of its most unpleasant habitat inside her intestinal walls. The pounding in her heart came first; the wake-up call. The heart thumped at the door and then time screamed in its sleep, sending shockwaves of a five o'clock morning alarm through her digestive tract.

She was not a good traveller. And she was not good at waiting. Waiting, with nothing to do, meant her fragile mind could spin itself into a corner, like a spiral of dust in the wind. Every thought was equivalent to ten bolts of lightning. Eventually the mental, electric storm left her immobilised: to do or not to do? What to do? A maddening inability to take action seized her whenever she was left alone to wait and to think. She would succumb to doodling crosses, six-pointed stars and symbols of major religious traditions on the pages of her notebook. At home she sometimes had to stoop to the I Ching website to ask the computer for advice. Before coming to India, Elisa had asked the I Ching whether or not to suspend her studies and go abroad.
She was told, "The passive force of yin is gaining ground." It sounded liberating enough.

Sam was secretly pleased to hear Elisa confessing dismay and frustration about her studies. She's finally going to give it up, he thought. As the weeks passed however, his satisfaction churned into resentment at the realisation that she was, in fact, going to prolong the farce for another six months. Rather than realising how many young years had already passed her like strangers at the train station, while she had her intense head stuck in a book called *God is Dead*, she was going to pull a 'go-slow' on him and turn the pages of time like an old maid. She continued to analyse "God's funeral" with even less regard for Sam's timetable. "Suspension," she says. What's that? A suspension of life? Whose life? According to Sam's experience, a suspension was one stage before becoming expelled. Maybe, if she doesn't read enough books while she's suspended, he thought, the university might just chuck her out.

"So what? You're gonna hang around in a suspension like some pigeon for six whole months?" Sam said.

"I'm not in a suspension. My study is being suspended. And yes! I'm going to hang around. In fact, I'm going to hang around without you! Doing this." Elisa tossed a pamphlet at Sam. It read "Indian Mystery Study Tour."

"What's this? Some nineteen-sixty's, Beatles' leftovers?"
"It's for research students," Elisa retorted. "It's an international project and I've decided to go. So whatever you say is not going to make any difference. I've already paid the booking fee."

Sam knew Elisa had not decided anything at all. She paid the money to make it easier to decide whether to go or not. She was not a decisive person. At their wedding, Elisa could not even decide on a bridesmaid; Sam had to choose one on her behalf. If she had been a decisive person she would have been nice and settled, and pregnant. But she was not a round-figured, womanly woman. She had short hair and a flat tummy. And Sam liked those things about her. He liked the way she pushed her glasses on her nose when she was nervous. And the way she frowned, regardless of whether she was sad, frustrated, angry or frightened.

It was often difficult to tell what was wrong with Elisa. Sometimes she appeared sad and would sit alone in the bedroom, but it later became obvious that she was, in fact, angry. At other times, she smiled and laughed and seemed quite happy but after a few moments of conversation her lip would tremble and it would become apparent that she was, in fact, quite sad. On occasion she would even shout angrily at Sam and immediately after this, burst into tears. For Sam, it was all too complicated. Once, when Elisa was standing in the middle of long grass at the clothes line, Sam frightened her with a joke about a snake living in the backyard. At first, she yelled at him for not doing his own washing and then she started crying. Finally she said she was too scared to move, so Sam had to wade into the grass, pick her up and
carry her from the backyard. As soon as he walked off the grass, she got angry at him for carrying her and began kicking until he put her down. Then she was quietly nervous, or sad, or angry for the rest of the day.
Delhi, 23.11.2006

I've just returned from hell. Almost trod on a legless man. I couldn’t see what he was, until I practically fell over him. He was pushing himself across the road on a skateboard of some kind. I didn’t want to go into the city in the first place, but Kelly said, "You can’t come all the way to India and not even see the city!" She wanted to visit Delhi library and said we’d be fine. So there we were, in a rickshaw, pretending to be intelligent. She was talking loudly about mysticism, racism and feminism and I was covering my mouth from the city fumes when we were shocked by groping reality. People were pushing their shrivelled hands into our rickshaw begging for food or money. I immediately thought of Sam and wished he were here to make them all go away.

I don’t know how to deal with horror. First, I just want it to disappear. Then I start to feel guilty because I’m ignoring it. And then I start to feel responsible for the total, social problem, and finally I feel useless because I can’t fix it. But my brain won’t let me take the problem into my space. Leaking compassion saps me of the strength I need to keep myself above water. Life is intense. I have to remain "in the tense of the moment".

Flies and mosquitoes are like pokey neighbours all tagging along and disrupting my thoughts. The city is sleepless, diverse and anxious with smells ranging from armpit asafetida and perfume coriander, to
coconut hair oil and sweet incense. One thought about tomorrow is enough time for my passport to disappear. And to think about sleep while I eat breakfast is time enough for a family of flies to idle through my cauliflower bhajee.

Since we’ve been back at camp I’ve been preoccupied with horror. I remember once standing beside a mad man in a grocery shop in Sydney. He was angrily arguing with himself. At first, I thought it was funny and I watched the customers reacting to him. But then it became frightening. As I left the shop he followed me, growling like an animal. Then he laughed as if auditioning for the main role in The Howling. I imagined him in his house terrifying his neighbours with endless, insane laughter.

An Anglican Chaplain working in a Sydney hospital told me once that she had entered the psychiatric ward of a hospital and was greeted by an insane man who lifted his fist and shouted, "Do you believe in God?" Of course she said "yes," after all she was a Chaplain. And he said "good," and seemed happy with that. I couldn’t work with mental patients or I’d become one myself. It wouldn’t be difficult to become one.

It would be fascinating to study the religious opinions of mental patients in Sydney hospitals. But I’m not studying psychology; I’m studying religion. Well, that’s what I’m supposed to be studying, but "God is dead" so it doesn’t leave much to study. I can’t study religion on its own. It’s not like chemistry. I guess that’s why people study Feminist Theology, The Psychology of Religion and Religion and Mental Health.
Once I saw a woman in the city singing with a hand-held loudspeaker. What do you call them? Megaphones? Singing some Christian "soldiers" song while she marched down the road wearing sneakers and a long, full-circle, 1960s skirt. She had a pigtail too, like someone out of *Happy Days*. You can't ignore religious fanatics. They always say "hello" with emphasis on the last syllable (as if there are more words to follow, like, "What are you doing on Sunday?") Sam can't stand Bible-bashers. In fact he can't bear to listen to anyone quote anyone else's book - religious or not. "Gutless," he calls them.

Four theologians were on our aeroplane sitting together and loudly discussing things like "the mission", and the man who had recently "converted to Anglicanism". Not the least bothered by eavesdropping ears. One said, "Some people think Christians are wierdos". I almost turned around to start naming people, like Sam, for instance. He shook his head for days when I mentioned I had a vague memory of being in church once upon a time.

*Mummy* was there. I remember her wide, pink hat and her moving mouth. I guess she was singing. I remember she had a silver watch wrapped around the outside of her white glove so she could regularly check the time. I don't remember Dad - or actually, I do! Yes, I guess he would have gone to church in those days too! Funny to think of Dad in a church. He would probably deny it if I ever suggested he had once been a pew-sitter.

I wonder how often Mummy went to church. I think she was usually too busy for God - too busy cooking and cleaning. I remember her
often saying she was too busy to sit with me while I practised piano. She must have been too busy to clean the kitchen regularly because I remember there were always rotten tomatoes in a little drawer at the bottom of the fridge. Funny, she spent so much time cleaning, but I don't remember living in a particularly clean house.

I don't think she went to church very often. I only remember the one time. I was wearing my frilly, blue dress so I must have been five. She must have been hugely pregnant! But I can't recall her stomach at all! Why don't I remember enormous details like that?

My head hurts from thinking. Can't think anymore.

I've been feeling sick all afternoon. Another tension headache. I hope it doesn't become a migraine. It started when the rickshaw drivers began to hassle us. They all wanted to take us somewhere. Then, this little girl with matted hair and half a dress pulled at my skirt and called me "aunty". She had her small hand out waiting for some food or money. Kelly told me not to give her anything. Kelly said the girl was a "professional beggar". So I tried to turn away. But after a few seconds I couldn't help looking back at her dragging a woollen shawl behind her like a shadow. The tears burned in my chest. It was like gulping down all of my past with a glass full of salt water.

I'm glad Kelly was with me. If I'd been alone in the city I might have ripped out my hair just so no one could look at it. Nobody here has red hair (or blond hair). Kelly's hair is long, thick and beautiful but nobody seems very interested in it. Everyone already has dark, thick, long hair here - women, that is.
Kelly finds it abhorrent that all the women have the same hair style. She’s studying feminism or something. Lots of men in her class, she said. I never knew a man could be a feminist. Anyway, I don’t even know what a feminist is. Sam would probably call it "nineteen-sixty’s, Beatles’ leftover". But Kelly knows what she’s talking about. She knows everything about women’s liberation and women’s rights and she’s determined to make something out of herself. She even controls the size of her biceps. I wouldn’t know where to begin if I had to make something out of myself. I couldn’t even keep my hands still on the potter’s wheel at school. If I tried to make something out of myself, I’d probably just spin in circles off the planet.
Kelly's head was properly screwed on. She didn't get headaches. "No roving sheep in the top paddock," she would say. All right, so it was shocking in the city, but what did Elisa expect? Was her thesis on mystical atheism so ethereal that she had no basic knowledge about real-life situations? Kelly explained the economic, historical and social facts to Elisa, as she saw them, and then told Elisa to go to bed.

"I'll meet you in the marquee at one o'clock tomorrow. Save us a spot over there. Away from the stinking shoes." Kelly pointed deep into the marquee in the direction of a table steaming with fried food. She gave Elisa a hard pat on the back before taking off to meet with someone else. Kelly was amazingly sociable and always busy, with no time to waste. She was self-reliant and independent.

In tailored jacket and pants, and with keys rattling from a silver chain belt, she marched away from the huts. Most students had backpacks and old, walking shoes. Her shoes were leather with red and gold beads. She was not an ordinary student. She had big-city style and panache. That was the word, Elisa thought.

Elisa meandered back to her hut in a daze, because that's what she had been told to do. She would try to sleep early. It was a good idea. She felt battered and knocked about and, as usual, it took a long while for sleep to descend upon her. That night she had dreams about howling men and legless
dogs. In the morning she realised her hut was built next to the hunting ground of a pack of wild dogs. She stayed in the hut, reorganising her luggage, until it was almost time to meet Kelly. Then she made her way to the marquee, following Kelly's directions.

It looked much cooler on the outskirts of the marquee near the shoes. But Kelly had explicitly requested a more culturally acceptable space. She had already inspected the lunch marquee and her verdict was "edible in moderation." One was to avoid cucumbers because they had, according to Kelly, been washed in buckets of dirty, tap water. One was also advised to take food from the middle of each serving bowl because flies had already chosen portions from the top.

Elisa manoeuvred her way through the murmuring, lunching crowd, all sitting in groups on the floor, until she could see a patch wide enough to seat Kelly and herself. Sweat trickled between her shoulderblades. She sat cross-legged, with the backs of her knees feeling sticky, while waiting for her lunch in a claustrophobic corner of the marquee.

The spicy food stench was worse than anything she had smelt at the shoe entrance. She looked over at the distant rows of dusty shoes before turning to glare at the flames of a cooking fire on the table. What makes them think they're doing us a favour by adding that armpit spice to the food, she thought. She glared behind her through the steam and fixed her frustration on the cook.
In the midst of oily fumes, flies and overbearing heat, a fair, young woman gracefully flipped morsels in a wok. A pink scarf was wrapped around her head like a frame and not a single, pearly bead of sweat could be seen on her Madonna-serene, perfect face. She could have been a painting, created especially for the purpose of being stared at.

Elisa looked at the young woman for a few moments then turned back to scan the marquee. Her foot began to move backwards and forwards in agitation at having to wait for Kelly. Soon the whole of Elisa's right leg was moving up and down, almost on its own, as if, after a few more minutes, she might flap her legs like wings. She was quite unconscious of her jittering but completely aware of how many students had looked at her since she sat down. At least four students in the group of eight had turned to look at her and noticed her skinny arms, her unfashionable, red hair and dark-blue dress, and all of them had noticed how bored and lonely she was.

When at last Elisa realised she was frowning and chewing nervously on the inside of her cheek, she stopped, adjusted her glasses and pulled out her notebook. She always carried a notebook, even when she was not studying. She carried it in case of situations like this. A counsellor at school had once suggested it to her and since then, from age ten, she always kept a notebook and pen. They had become as important as house keys. When she left the house each morning she would do a quick head-check to see if anything had been forgotten. At the top of the list were notebook, keys and money. After many heart-palpitating experiences, when she had forgotten to
bring a pen – and therefore spent half-an-hour searching her bag for something to write with to keep herself busy in public – she decided to buy a pen with a chain and clip it to her notebook. So “pen” no longer featured on her check-list.

She put the notebook on her knee, opened it and began to feel better even though she had not begun writing anything. A pen in her mouth always looked impressive, as if she had a lot of important things to think about. The pen was actually more important than the book. In fact, it was her dummy.

Elisa caught a whiff of something awful. The breeze was blowing the oily steam in her direction. She turned again to squint through her glasses in the direction of the cooking corner and noticed that the serene woman had stepped out from behind the steaming wok. The woman was draped in a green sari and her belly was huge. She was fully pregnant and waddling slowly around the marquee, squatting occasionally to collect plates of food from the floor, and stacking them together for cleaning. When she stood up, the bottom of her sari rose to accommodate her huge belly, exposing her ankles.

Elisa watched the woman move – squatting in slow motion, standing carefully with a stack of dishes, waddling a bit further and squatting again. It was like watching a ballet about ducks. When the dance had finished and the woman had resumed cooking, Elisa stopped staring and began to write.
Delhi, 24.11.2006

Waiting for Kelly. Just can’t bear to sit doing nothing. At least I look busy. Hope no one is reading over my shoulder. No. There’s just a pregnant woman – in a lime-green sari – gazing lovingly into a greasy wok. Doesn’t look like an Indian woman. Maybe she’s Parsi. They have fair skin (I think). Her food smells anyway. I shouldn’t keep turning around to stare but she’s so intriguing. Looks almost as if she’s performing some kind of Zen-like frying ceremony.

Looking at her is surreal. How can she be so peaceful when her body, like a time bomb, is about to explode? How can she just go about smiling and frying with the knowledge that she has zero control over her physical being? Mummy’s books on pregnancy are probably still sticking out from Dad’s bookshelf. He snatched them off me once, when I was about eight-years-old. He said, "That’s not for you! Not yet!" But I had already read the first page, and the book was called Problems of Pregnancy. How can women remain oblivious to the fact that there’s enough matter in that subject to fill a fat, pregnant book? I assume this woman has no idea that such a book exists, otherwise, how could she appear so serene?

I’ve never seen a person with such a drooping mouth. This woman has lips like ripe fruit, weighing down her pale face. She’s ghostly in a green sari and yet, somehow, so serene – like a green tree bearing heavy
fruit in the heat. To see her is elevating; to think about her is exhausting.

I'd love some fresh, cold fruit or salad, but I'm afraid to eat anything. I saw a couple of dogs behind the marquee licking leftovers from the plates. A man was collecting the plates from the dogs, dipping the plates into a bucket of water and giving them to another man for stacking. So I don't eat the food from the bottom of my plate (or from the top because Kelly told me not to). That leaves only the middle. I'm losing weight and I've got dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep.

It's cold at night. I'm so glad I didn't forget to bring Mummy's shawl. I cover my wet nose and cheeks with it and stroke the goat's wool until I fall asleep. Sometimes it seems as if the shawl still smells like a real goat. I'm warm enough, but other students are obviously still cold because they keep waking and shuffling - making so much noise that they wake me too. And then I start thinking again and can't get back to sleep.

Last night I was thinking about our noisy unit at home with all the Day Care children. Then I was thinking about Sam and his reaction when I told him I was suspending my studies. Then, of course, my thesis. The little tunnels of light were shining into the hut so I couldn't see anything except floating dust. I stared into the darkness and remembered a book called *The Darkness of Unknowing*. It's about knowing the unknowable through knowing nothing. As you can imagine, my brain began to do backflips. Needless to say I was awake for two hours after that.

I should make some effort to talk to Dr Kadamb. I read an interesting article about Eckhart in the *American Academy of Religion*
journal called How not to Deconstruct a Dominican; Derrida on God and Hyper-Truth. And I have some new ideas for thesis subjects: God’s Presence and Absence in Postmodern Culture for example. Kelly is also inspiring me. She’s encouraging me to write a thesis called Exploding Bodies, Exploding Boundaries; Godlessness in Feminist Theological Discourse. She’s pushing me to speak with Dr Kadamb to get his advice, especially in relation to Indian postmodern religion and literature. Is God dead in India? I wonder about that. Or should the question be, "When will God be dead in India?"

Dr Kadamb is a peculiar sort of man – tall, thin and serious with unruly eyebrows and a cleft chin. His voice is deep and slow and he’s so particular about choosing words precisely. Sometimes he stops in the middle of a sentence, then presses his thumb and index finger of one hand together (as if by squeezing them his memory might be jolted into finding the appropriate word), and after an unusually long time, the lost word spurts out. It’s so comical that I completely forget what he’s saying. I’m hesitant to talk to him because he’s so intense. I know my stomach will react violently to his questions. He has such a probing manner. His family helped organise everything, from our aeroplane bookings to the garlic chopping.

This morning he announced that we’re all taking a daytrip to the Taj Mahal. The Schedule has allowed for one Delhi outing, but we have to be punctual and responsible in order to reach our destination within the allowed time. After his lecture I had to go straight to the toilet block. Sometimes I feel like making a dictionary of words to be expelled from
the English vocabulary. My dictionary includes words like venue (because it reminds people of organised, forced fun) departure and boarding. Nobody seems to react as drastically to these words as I do. I'm always holding my breath, anticipating disaster. For me, venue means embarrassment, departure means frantic, clock-watching activity and boarding means vomit.

Kelly said she'd be here at one o'clock. I've been waiting in this stuffy, hot place for twenty minutes, constantly wiping the sweat from the backs of my knees with my dress. I thought Kelly would be early. This is the last time I arrive early for anything. From now on I'll arrive exactly on time, so I don't have to wait around for people who don't care if they're late. Maybe she's asleep. Maybe she didn't bring her clock. Thank God (or whoever has replaced Him) that I remembered mine. How could I wake at five o'clock in the morning to get the bus for the Taj without an alarm? I'd end up lying awake all night, afraid to go to sleep in case I missed the bus.
At precisely one o'clock Elisa saw Kelly appear at the entrance of the marquee. Kelly stepped out of her beaded shoes and stood for a few moments looking around for Elisa. Kelly was wearing a new suit. It was not really a suit, Elisa thought, but an outfit – tailored and sophisticated, yet completely casual. She was still wearing her loose, chain belt, dangling with keys. Kelly could be formal and informal, relaxed and busy at the same time. Elisa shot her hand into the air to get her friend's attention then withdrew it, just as suddenly, when a few people turned around to look.

Seeing the jerky movements, Kelly walked among the crowd of students, as if they were her royal subjects bowing at her feet. She didn't once look down to check whether anyone's finger or foot was in her path. She carefully selected two plates of food and carried them over to sit with Elisa who felt like a chosen child.

"You eat meat, don't you?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, yes," Elisa reassured, "but not from the top."

Elisa picked at part of her food while Kelly filled a chupatti with curry, rolled the chupatti up and chomped into it. The veins in her throat bulged whenever she stuck her neck out to catch falling pieces of food. She munched her lunch before Elisa had even finished sorting out the middle from the bottom.
"It's mad, you know," Kelly began. "At least two of the Seven Wonders of the World are tombs. Do you realise the Taj is a tomb? And the Pyramids are tombs too! It's as if people need to immortalise death. Can't they just accept that life's a bitch, then you die?" Kelly closed the argument by gulping water from her bottle.

"But you know – I had a friend who said she never felt the same after being in the Pyramids. She became psychic."

"Maybe she just saw a mummy and went a bit soft in the head."

Elisa didn't see much point in attempting to prove the psychic capacity of her old friend. And the mere thought of associating the word mummy with dead and horrifying things shocked Elisa senseless. She stopped picking at her food and stared at the belly of the lime-green lady – feeling disturbed by the thought of how it must be to have something growing inside.

The lady was holding tongs and frying food as before. She had the most fascinating face. She had the kind of nose an artist might study before trying to replicate Sandro Botticelli's romantic "Portrait of a Young Woman". It was not a straight nose. It had an aesthetic curve in the middle, and the theme of curvaceousness continued in the soft curls of her hair. The colours of gold straw and sand were lovingly encircled with flecks of impatient grey. Large waves swept up from the top of her forehead, around and down her eyebrows, as if she had stepped out of a 1940s salon. A peculiar mixture of ages and cultures had crafted this serene, lime-green figurine.
Elisa could not work out exactly what was so interesting about this lady. It was not just her appearance. Perhaps it was the way she moved – almost in slow motion. It was as if she did everything according to a time-honoured tradition. If she had not been holding tongs, she would have been doing Tai Chi: stretching her arm to the side, opening tongs to drop food in a basket, bringing her arm back to the centre. Her movements were as smooth as a calm swim. Elisa felt her own muscles relaxing while she watched this unperturbed person draining the fat off fried pakoras.
Delhi, 26.11.2006

I can hardly see the page. The marble is so bright white. We’re at the Taj.

I just want to lie down and rest. Maybe sleep forever in this dazzling tomb and be with Mummy somewhere, wherever she is. Dad said she went to Heaven. He must have actually believed that at some stage. Or maybe it was just an easy answer to give someone who was too small to ask for more answers.

Every time I think of Mummy I remember the last time I saw her. She massaged me with eucalyptus oil before I went to bed and she patted me on the back. Sleeping on her lap was such a warm, secure feeling. No thoughts about what time you’re supposed to wake in the morning or what you have to do when you finally wake up. To sleep forever with a warm chest, knowing someone is always watching over you.

We were up at five o’clock this morning. I’ve been feeling sick ever since because of the stress of the bus departure time. I don’t want to hear any more about the schedule. I just want to lie down with Mummy’s woollen shawl, somewhere on this white, marble floor and rest. But the guards in green uniforms are holding rifles, so I can’t relax.

It’s supposed to be the Temple of Love. It’s more like an art gallery. Everyone is walking around whispering and staring into the architecture. There’s apparently nothing else like this tomb in the world
(because the king killed the architect just to be sure). Monkeys are jumping on top of the white walls, snatching at everything. There’s one here, in front of me, screeching because it can’t quite manage to scratch its own back. Everybody else is quiet and respectful. It’s just a big coffin when you think about it. I guess that’s why nobody’s laughing.

Kelly said an emperor (or king) built the temple for his wife who died giving birth to their fourteenth child (if I remember correctly). Fourteen! How could anyone give birth fourteen times and expect to be still alive? But people did. They had such large families. Ten or fifteen was quite normal - I guess. How can it go so smoothly for some women and not for others? It’s not as if Mummy had ten children already. She only had me! Did I make her so exhausted that she couldn’t have another one? Dad used to say, even in the beginning, that he thought she was too tired to have a second baby. He must have known something was going to go wrong.

The Yamuna River looks quite clean from up here, but when you look closer, it’s murky - dark and cloudy down there. Don’t think anything could live in there. Not sure whether I could even see my reflection in water like that. In the distance it’s peaceful and sprawling. The river eventually merges into misty sky. I should take photographs, but I feel conspicuous standing in strange places, taking pictures of odd things. I always feel as if someone is taking a photo of me taking a photo.

I had a dream once that I was looking at a stack of photographs of myself. There was a photo of me, at age five, looking out the bedroom window - waiting for Mummy to come home. And one of me at school,
sitting by myself. And a more recent photo, taken from behind my back, of me sitting at the desk in our study. But as I looked through the photos it occurred to me that I had no idea who had taken the pictures. Then I had this horrible realisation that someone had been watching me.

Now I’m looking up at the Taj roof to check whether anyone is up there, looking down. I always feel as if someone, or something, is checking up on me. But this place is so dazzling that I can’t see the roof anyway. Even if someone is up there he or she would have to be someone glowing white and angelic like some Holy Ghost or something (which reminds me of a book I must get called *Does the Trinity Add Up? Transcendental Mathematics and Trinitarian Speculation in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*). Someone told me once that the Holy Ghost was supposed to be the Great Mother. He said, "How can you have a Father and a Son without a Mother?" I nearly said to him, "Well, I don’t have a mother and I’m all right." But I wasn’t sure whether that was very accurate.
Elisa was so involved in her thoughts that she did not notice a bold-faced monkey sitting behind her with a small, clinging baby. A girl in a yellow punjabi dress had crept up beside her to take photographs of the baby monkey in its mother's lap. Elisa caught sight of the yellow punjabi dragging on white marble and jumped in fright.

"Sorry," the girl whispered. "I interrupted your meditation."

Elisa nervously smiled at the girl and the monkey, and then quietly slipped her notebook into her bag. The girl, who looked about the same age as Elisa, continued to creep towards the monkey. Her huge, wooden bangles clunked together with each movement.

Elisa began to frown and her breathing seemed to stop. Her stomach became a stone wall to protect her from any possible monkey attack. "Don't get too close. She'll snatch your camera."

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" The girl seemed to find the monkeys so human-like that she was willing to bet her camera on their civil behaviour. The mother monkey took a keen interest in the girl's empty hand.

Elisa began to imagine the monkey attack – the scratching and screaming; the blood and the bandaids she didn't bring; the dettol back at the camp; and the First Aid Kit at the huts. Thoughts travelled like lizards from her head, through her blood and into her heart. They beat themselves against
their prison walls and would have leapt from her mouth, had it not been so tightly shut.

The girl slowly withdrew her hand. She raised the camera to her face and snapped the monkeys twice. The mother screeched and flashed back an expression of terror before catapulting herself onto a wall and taking off with her clinging baby.

"I got it!" the girl said triumphantly as she waited for an instant photograph to emerge from the whirring camera. The girl waved the wet photograph around in the air while watching the monkey mother and baby leap over the grass into the distance. "I really had to get that picture," she told Elisa whose laughter echoed and bounced about the white walls, which suddenly felt like the walls of an Asylum.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked.

Elisa nodded between deep breaths.

The girl took Elisa's hand and squeezed it. "Did they make you nervous, darling?" she asked, as if completely surprised by the idea that a monkey with a human face and a baby on its lap, sucking a thumb like any other human baby, could make anybody ill at ease. "You know, their brains are much simpler than ours. They're much sweeter than us. I've always found that incredible."

Elisa said nothing. She was more astonished by this girl's presence than anything else.
"Just look at this photograph," the girl continued. "Look at that baby's face. I mean, what am I supposed to do with such a gorgeous face? Am I supposed to paint it? Pinch it to see if it's real? Stare at it? I needed to do something with it, you know. I hope I didn't upset you, darling."

"No, no. I'm fine," Elisa said, pushing up her glasses.

"You're one of us, aren't you?" The girl asked as if implying that Elisa was also from Planet of the Apes. Elisa's flat smile indicated the need for qualification.

"I mean from the tour," the girl said, laughing. "I'm Sky. You must think I'm mad. Most people do."
Delhi, 28.11.2006

I met a strange English girl the other day called Sky. She’s a bit of a loony-tune with an upturned nose and flared nostrils. She speaks in a slightly snobbish way, but I liked her, at first. At the Taj, she was trying to take photos of the monkeys, and had the confidence to offer them her naked hand. Then she started talking to me about monkey brains, comparing them to human brains and telling me horror stories about human behaviour.

Recently, apparently an English woman killed her two children because she’d lost her figure giving birth. After this particular story I was deaf for the rest of our conversation. I think it affected me so much that now I feel quite unwell.

How difficult motherhood must be if it can throw someone to the edge like that? How can there be so many children being born if it’s that difficult? I’ve been wondering whether Mummy really wanted to have a second baby anyway. Maybe she knew something was going to go wrong. Maybe she sensed it. I often know when something feels wrong. But then, actually, I seem to have this doom and gloom feeling about everything. I think it’s because I can’t stop myself from analysing things to death. If you give me a rose, I’ll make it ugly. And if I can’t make the rose ugly, then I’ll make you ugly instead.
I need the smell of eucalyptus. My chest is tight and my head is throbbing with excess mental stuffing. There are roses in the camp, but the smell of roses won’t work. I told Sky that I don’t like roses because I don’t like Mothers’ Day and she, of course, couldn’t believe it. Her astonished face made me feel so ugly that, for a second, I didn’t like her bubbly personality at all. For a moment she was more agitating than the dust in my eyes.

The noise outside is not helping my head. We’re back at camp and some loud boys are playing cricket outside the huts. Carpets of dust are swirling through the windows and one boy has a sandpaper voice which grates at my brain every time he shouts.

All these children are reminding me of Sam’s Day Care business and that whole frustrating situation. Sam seems to think that having a Day Care centre in our minuscule unit will be a "good experience" for me. He’s trying to turn me into a mother but he’s got Buckley’s chance.

The sandpaper boy just caught the ball. He’s yelling with his arms up to the sky to thank the sun for making him the only person on the planet. I’m feeling so bitter. But it’s all because of the roses! Can’t I be bitter without having to feel bad about it? Sky looked at me with such horror that I could see she was comparing me to a monkey and thinking how much sweeter her baby monkey was.

Sam seems to think I’ll just get over myself if he keeps pushing enough children in my direction. He expects me to make lunches for the Day Care kids who don’t bring food, and to watch the children every time he has a "work phone-call", as if I’m the Assistant Sandwich Hand or
Secretary. It just shows how little he cares about my research. Even with the door of the study closed, I can't work in that unit. The xylophone-bee is always banging on the verandah.

I'm working myself up into heated nausea. But when I think about the day I came into my study to find that baby girl in a wet nappy sitting on my notes, with scissors and my passport, in the act of destroying my life! Doesn't Sam consider anything I do as being slightly, or even possibly, useful? It has reached the point now where I'm just dangling over a cliff with no sense of what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm a puppet whose Master has taken a tea-break and left me hanging from a tree.

I thought I'd lost my passport. If it hadn't been for that baby crawling beneath my desk, I'd have missed this tour. I'm depending on this time-out to get rid of the lump of dough in my head. Can't go home with a head full of dusty dough. I need to relax - get some "fresh air". The words sound comical here. But that's what I should be doing. I'm only twenty-five after all.
Twenty-five was old enough, in Sam's view. Thirty would be too old for either of them to be changing nappies. They had been married for three years which, according to Sam, was long enough for them to become "acquainted" or "prepared".

The study would be converted into the baby's room when the time came. It was on the eastern side of the unit so the sunlight would shine through the window and bless the baby's cherub face by about eleven o'clock every morning, just the right time for bathing. It was a warm room painted cream with maroon edgings. It was already perfect. Sam would make a cot and anoint it with natural rose oil, and Elisa would cover the cot with cream calico and frills. That was the master plan, as far as Sam was concerned. He had already begun making wooden toys for the children coming for Day Care, in order to test the toys for durability. He had made many building blocks and now, he was trying his hand at making musical instruments. A small xylophone on square wheels was a favourite with the children. The two rubber, banging-sticks doubled as antennae when they were slotted at the end of the xylophone. Sam painted the instrument black and yellow to make it look like a stripy bee. His plan was to make an even better one for his son.

Elisa never thought to use the xylophone as a bee and run along the verandah pulling it behind her. The children liked to see the balls on the ends of the rubber antennae wobble. The balls were red plastic full of yellow beads
which rattled inside when the sticks wobbled, making the children giggle, scream and jump up and down.

Sam was proud of his xylophone-bee. If only Elisa could find it in her to wonder at his creative imagination. But she was too absorbed in her research to notice the yellow beads rattling on the verandah and the children laughing. Or to hear them playing songs which Sam had taught them on the xylophone. Or indeed to recognise what a good father Sam was going to be one day.

On occasion, Elisa would emerge from the study looking like an overworked, obsessed intellectual with dark circles under her eyes. Her face was pale from hardly ever being loved by the sun and her short, red hair hung limp and lifeless as if her brain had no energy left for making hair grow. Habitually, she would go to the kitchen to make herself a cup of black coffee but never thought to ask Sam if he wanted a cup of tea. She never made his lunch, even when she was preparing her own. Elisa was so out-of-touch with life that she would eat nutella sandwiches in front of the children and not expect them to ask for some. She even ate it off the spoon.
Delhi, 30.11.2006

The young girls here seem to work like their mothers from the moment they can hold a knife. I’ve finished lunch. Nothing to do. Nobody seems bothered by the oily smoke (except me). Sitting in the food marquee watching that lime-sari-clad woman fry armpit spices. Strange how she never sweats. She appears to have a daughter already. It’s difficult to tell how old the girl is. She could be anything between three and eight.

You’d think I’d be able to tell the difference between a three-year-old and an eight-year-old, but I’ve had so little interest in children that I really can’t work it out. And even the smallest child in this country seems to be much more grown up than one would expect. This little girl here is seriously chopping onions with a sharp knife. Her bones are so delicate and her features, so tiny. She reminds me of a baby bird.

There’s an old, Indian woman watching over her. The woman looks quite formidable. She’s sturdy and tall. I can’t see much from here but she seems to be the director of cooking. She’s holding a long wooden spoon with both hands and stirring a brew of some kind which is bubbling in a huge, iron pot. She’s churning the seven seas. I can hear her voice, but she’s not speaking English. She’s giving orders. Maybe she’s an in-law.
It always smells like body odour in here, because someone is continually cooking with asafetida. My nostrils are so dry that they stick together when I sniff. The cooks must be making dinner already. They can’t be cooking lunch. It’s past two o’clock and most people have finished. It’s not crowded, but it’s still hot and noisy with a few pockets of loud students here and there.

When I walk into this marquee, I feel as if everyone’s looking at me. They’re all saying, "Oh here comes that girl who has no friends." The closer I get to the food, the tighter my stomach muscles contract and the less appetite I have. I become so anxious. I don’t know where to sit or how to find some clean floor space which is not too close to any group of students. I can’t sit too close to them or they might make me talk about myself, or ask me too many questions and expect me to sing one of their songs. I’m not a good singer and I’m not good at chitchat.

They always ask me what I’m studying and what I’m going to become. Everyone has to become something when they grow up. I don’t think I’ve grown up yet anyway, so perhaps there’s still time. They’re all doing specialist degrees: studying medicine to become doctors, studying chemistry to become chemists, studying law to become lawyers. I’m studying religion to become - what? A priest? That’s what someone seriously asked me once! Can you believe it? People think their religion is the only one in existence. If you’re studying Religion, then you must be studying Christianity. Therefore, you’ll turn out to be a theologian, a priest or a nun (I guess), despite the fact that you’re actually more
interested in the *Three Categories of Nothingness in Meister Eckhart* than you are in wearing a black gown.

One Turkish woman told me that when she arrived in Australia a man asked her, "What do you do for Christmas in Turkey?" She replied, "We don't have Christmas in Turkey," and the man thought she was joking. Then when she didn't laugh the man became very worried. "That's terrible. You don't have Christmas. My God. Well, we have turkey for Christmas!" It's like the person who wrote the preface to Mummy's bible. The author declared that anyone practising any religion apart from Christianity was "a sinner".

There's a loud group of students sitting too close to me. They're taking turns at singing with their American and European accents. Wouldn't it be nice to have a voice worth singing with. Sometimes I feel like climbing a mountain and singing loudly. I imagine what it would be like to be Julie Andrews running around on top of a hill with my arms out, singing "The hills are alive with the sound of music!" That's funny - she was supposed to be a nun in that story. You don't see many nuns in real life singing, "Climb every mountain! Forge every stream!" Or do you? Why can't I just sing loudly here in this marquee with the other students? They live to look at each other and be looked at. They like it when people watch them. I wonder if I'll ever be brave enough to put down my guard. Anyway, I shouldn't keep watching them or they might politely include me.
The loud students were sitting on the ground, entertaining each other in a circle, in no particular hurry to finish lunch. Afternoon sunshine filtered through a blue, cotton roof, bathing everyone in otherworldly, blue light. Beneath the blue canopy, they performed Indian, filmstar impersonations and impressions of Marcel Marceau – pretending to sew their own lips together with needle and thread.

Elisa had momentarily forgotten to feel self-conscious while watching the group antics. Bursts of laughter made it impossible for her to continue analysing her inadequacies. With her pen fixed to one spot on the page she became mesmerised by the self-confidence of one Marcel Marceau impersonator. Her lips and eyebrows began to involuntarily twitch in unison with the movement of a make believe needle.

"You should have a go," Kelly's voice made Elisa jump. "Your face wants a turn."

Elisa pushed up her glasses, closed her notebook and tucked it into her bag while hoping Kelly had not read anything over her shoulder.

"You're always taking notes. How can you be so productive?" Kelly asked as she noticed the shy book disappear. She sat down to talk seriously. "I took notes in the library to remind myself to research the failure rate of the mini-sari in Delhi but since then, I've written nothing. What are you writing? Can I have a look?"
"Oh you wouldn't be able to read my scrawl. It's a sort of personal shorthand. I was actually just wondering whether that woman over there is Parsi. You know the Parsis?"

"What woman?"

"The one cooking. She doesn't look Indian."

"No. She's Dr Kadamb's wife. But she's French, from a rich French family, or so I'm told."

"Really?"

"The old woman is his mother. The girl, there, is his daughter."

"So they all live here?"

"They have a house in Delhi but they live in a village and travel with Dr Kadamb on these tours." Kelly's voice faded away as she turned from Elisa to pick at her teeth with short fingernails, and say goodbye to a couple of students who were walking past. Elisa waited a few moments until she had Kelly's full attention.

"How do you know about her?" Elisa asked.

"Dr Kadamb was sitting next to me on the plane, so I asked lots of questions. He introduced me to his family because I told him I was researching the situation of women in rural India. He was born in the village. His mother doesn't speak English. His wife can understand quite a lot of Hindi and translates into broken English." Kelly seemed a bit restless, or perhaps she was disturbed by the conversation. She waved goodbye to another student who was putting on his shoes at the marquee entrance. Then she
closed her eyes tightly and put her head down as a cloud of oily smoke blew in her direction.

"So his wife speaks French, English and Hindi? I wonder if she converted from Catholic to Hindu," Elisa persisted.

"Well you can ask her if you like."

Kelly stood up and arched her back. She lifted one arm and stretched it behind her head to scratch her shoulderblade, briefly reminding Elisa of the monkeys at the Taj Mahal. The healthy veins in her arm displayed themselves. "Come on. I'll introduce you."

Elisa hesitated, but felt compelled to follow Kelly because Kelly knew what she was doing. She walked behind Kelly around the circle of noisy students until the two of them reached the cooking corner of the marquee. There, the hiss of hot oil and the roar of flaming gas burners were quite loud. The heat was more intense and the smell was so strong that Elisa had to take short, shallow puffs of air.

Behind a table, the pregnant lady looked as if she were watching her own hand, like a ballet dancer. She dipped tongs into the wok, raised them out again and placed food to the side onto towels. Elisa stood behind Kelly, waiting to be introduced. The lady had green eyes and her face had a blue hue like everyone else. On her, however, the blue colour was like a spotlight, highlighting her pale face. Her heavy lips managed to come up at the corners into a flat smile as she wobbled her head to say hello. Her name was Maria. Maria continued to drop onions, coated in sloppy batter, into sizzling oil. The
parcels of onion-batter hissed, disappeared to the bottom of the wok then slowly resurfaced.

"You enjoy cooking," Elisa said.

"Yes of course. I like to see pakoras come up to top all by itself in bubbles. Like magic." Maria scooped some floating, hot parcels of magic off the surface of the oil. "From which country are you coming?" she asked.

"From Australia."

"Australia? This is very far country. We know some things about Australia from our school. Actually we have your Skippy on our television in France. India is having no kangaroos; we are having tigers here."

"Kelly told me you are French but you look very Indian."

"Really? But my skin is like French skin, yes?"

"Yes. I thought you were Parsi."

"Pardon?"

"Some Indian people have fair skin. And they have a sort of religion called Parsi."

"Oh. No, I'm not this one."

"Elisa is studying religion," Kelly blurted and turned away to see if she could find any other students worth waving to. She seemed particularly uninterested in discovering anything about Maria.

The old woman gave some blunt orders to the young girl who had received a slap on the back of the head and was now burying her face in Maria's sari. Maria smiled at the commotion.
"This is my daughter, Preeti. She is five."

Preeti continued to hide herself in the folds of Maria's sari until Maria spoke to her sternly in some kind of Indian dialect. The young girl came away from her mother and frowned at the floor. A small tear sat motionless beneath her left eye. Her skin was several shades darker than her mother's and her black hair hung in a thick, messy plait down to the ribbon around her waist. Her dress was puffy, frilly and pretty but the lace at the bottom was dangling off, as if every day had been a messy festival. Preeti went back to her job of chopping onions. The old woman first showed her how to do it properly, and then Preeti resumed practising.

"We are travelling with you on your tour. My daughter, my mother-in-law, and myself."

Elisa nodded in the direction of the old woman and smiled. The old woman's sari was bright orange and pulled around her shoulders. Her wrists rattled with dark-green, glass bangles. Surprisingly, the woman looked up and offered a smile like the sunrise – warm, slow and golden. A large moon-shaped, nose-ring hung so low that it touched her top lip when her smile had risen completely. Thick, gold loops, like Saturn's rings, decorated her ears.

The old woman took hold of both iron handles of the pot and manoeuvred it into a new position. As she bent down to adjust the gas cooker, her sari slipped from her shoulder, exposing a red tattoo of a coiled snake. Elisa stared at the tattoo. She had seen the design somewhere before. She tried to recall a memory which had almost surfaced – a gold coil on her
mother's red skivvy? It must have been a necklace. As the memory resurrected itself, her fascination for Maria and the moon-woman became more intense. What could Elisa's mother possibly have had in common with these strangers? Elisa squinted into the wok. Pakoras surfaced and memories floated about.

The old woman, still smiling, said something to Maria without taking her eyes off Elisa. Elisa was trying to recall the details of her mother's necklace. It was a spiral, like a snake. Maybe even with a snake's head? Yes, it had crystal eyes.

"My mother is asking how many children have you?"

With that question, Elisa's vision vanished. It suddenly seemed very quiet in the marquee, as if the gas had stopped roaring, the students had stopped laughing and Kelly had focussed her attention on the pakoras, just to hear Elisa's reply.

Elisa shook her head, while looking at the old woman, and explained to Maria that she had none.
Part Two:

RINGING BELLS

1.

Delhi, 31.11.2006

Dr Kadamb's mother has taken a liking to me. Can't imagine why. Her presence is like the solar system; mine is more molecular. We met in the lunch marquee and I noticed a red tattoo of a coiled serpent on her arm. I had to look in my mythology book to find out where it came from.

The first thing I discovered was that the word "myth" comes from *muthos* which originally referred to a form of knowledge predating logos or logic. That, in itself, is quite astounding. Then I discovered that the serpent has been worshipped on every continent, from the beginning of time. The Gnostics related the serpent to the spine, while other cultures used the serpent as a symbol of "spontaneous, creative energy and immortality". What is most fascinating though is that pregnant, human figurines, marked with spirals on their abdomens, have been found over "huge geographical regions of the world"! It looks as if the spiral is a sacred symbol of creative energy. It seems to be mostly a feminine symbol. Mummy used to wear it on her necklace. I wonder if she knew what it was. She had a Celtic ring too - a spiral, gold ring. Dad must have
them both somewhere. He wouldn’t have thrown away anything remotely Irish. I have to get them back. Mummy wants me to have them, I know she does.

I’m drawn to Mrs Kadamb for some reason. She has presence. I mean, her presence is completely solid. When she’s around, I’m mesmerised. It’s the sparkle of her jewellery, but it’s some other kind of sparkle too. She looked concerned and forgiving at the same time when I explained that I have no children. All I did was shake my head, but the way she looked at me, I felt as if I’d told her the most tragic part of my life story. I suddenly felt aware that I haven’t fulfilled some kind of unrealised life duty. I never thought of motherhood as a duty before. But if every girl were like me, I guess there’d be no new people on the planet. We’d be just another disappearing species.

Kelly kept insisting yesterday that my research was relevant to Dr Kadamb’s field of study. Eventually Mrs Kadamb said she’d take me to her son’s office at Delhi University which is where we are now. I’m quite surprised to have actually reached this place. Mrs Kadamb doesn’t know Delhi. For a moment in the rickshaw, I thought we were both lost; a village woman and a foreign girl in the middle of Delhi chaos. She’s gone now to find us some lunch.

Not sure whether I feel more conspicuous here with Mrs Kadamb, or on my own. She wears a village sari tucked up between her legs with one end of the sari over her head, while everyone else wears Western clothes: jeans, T-shirts, trendy shoes, leather jackets. I find this very strange. It’s as if the students are not sure which country they
live in, and Mrs Kadamb has gone off, quietly parting the sea of confusion, looking for something familiar.

Mrs Kadamb is tall for an old, Indian woman and her shoulders are always pushed so far back that her shoulderblades almost touch each other. There’s probably nothing in the world that scares her. She kills cockroaches with her bare feet. Her skin must be so thick that she can’t feel the beetles wiggle or feel the heat of the iron pot which she constantly lifts on and off the gas cooker. And yet, her eyes seem to belong to a different, softer body. They’re watery and kind – shining as if they were put there as decorations just like her jewellery.

I’m sitting at a table on an extremely hot, metal chair. Why would anyone choose to put metal chairs out in the midday Delhi heat? If Mrs Kadamb takes too long to find some remnants of ancient India, my brain-fat will be sizzling so madly that I’ll have no capacity for making intellectual conversation with Dr Kadamb.

One year ago a psychologist who did his thesis on "instinct," told us that writing a thesis was a creative act which involved "higher functions of the brain" and "meditative thoughts." He said, "Meditative thoughts are creative." When do people have time for creative meditation when they have reading lists longer than manuscripts?

For two hours this morning I was reading my notes. I know I have some interesting information but I can’t arrange it into any useful order. It’s like trying to project a voice loud enough to be heard in a marketplace: "This crate of tomatoes now only two dollars!" What do I want to write? A thesis about mystic atheism? What have the mystics
really told us? They only talk about silence. I don’t think they really know anything at all. They don’t give us any concrete information about God’s existence. But how can I write a thesis about nothingness and fill four-hundred pages? I’m getting sick of the word "religion".

Sam would be pleased to know that my efforts are, so far, fruitless. At the moment my notes are like crunchy, old leaves. All I want to do is step on them. I need to screw up most of the pages of scribble and waffle, and try to find some kind of core. But who am I fooling? No one is interested in mystical atheism. Becoming an expert on this subject is not going to get me a job. And what use would it be to become a Professor of Mystical Atheism anyway?

My head is like a brick. Don’t let it be a migraine. I couldn’t bear a day of vomiting and darkness in this place. Should stop thinking now.

One of the lecturers back home retired a few months ago. I saw her in the corridor just before we left Sydney and she started chatting with me. She looked well. She used to get migraines but apparently she hasn’t had a migraine since retiring. I asked what she’s been doing since leaving work. "I’ve been living!" she said, as if it were a new experience. As if she were describing a great new restaurant down the road. She’s doing Zen meditation and going on retreats. She’s about fifty.

Mrs Kadamb is coming. She walks so straight and steady that I wonder if she’s ever fallen over anything in her whole life.
Mrs Kadamb’s fresh cotton sari was the colour of egg-yolk. She belonged in a painting of green fields dotted with cows and goats. Or perhaps in a market, sitting cross-legged on the ground behind a basket overflowing with vegetables for sale. She did not belong in a university campus, surrounded by rebellious teenagers sporting mobile phones, but she walked straighter than anybody else.

Elisa’s notebook made a ripping sound as she peeled the cover off the hot, metal table. She pushed the book into her backpack, already full of notes, and began to clear away her things as Mrs Kadamb approached.

Mrs Kadamb sat on the grass. She set down enough flat bread and vegetables for both herself and Elisa. Elisa thought for a few seconds whether it would be too rude to remain sitting at the table while Mrs Kadamb sat at her feet – yes, it probably would be too rude. Elisa looked around briefly to see whether anyone was watching. Nobody usually moved from their seat to the grass – only the other way around. But it was okay, she assured herself. Nobody was watching.

Elisa sat on the grass with Mrs Kadamb who was sitting quietly with a relaxed but straight back – waiting to begin lunch. It seemed possible that she might have known exactly how many breaths she had taken since sitting on the grass. She was so focussed within herself. She did not even turn around to
look at a group of students behind her who burst into laughter over something.

The odd couple ate in silence. There was no point trying to make conversation. It was hardly possible. Elisa concentrated on quickly eating her lunch, so she could meet with Dr Kadamb before completely losing her nerve. She watched her new friend to figure out how to eat the bread with the vegetables. Mrs Kadamb managed to rip the flat bread into small pieces using only one hand. Then she pinched the messy, wet vegetable mixture with the bread, to pick it all up. Elisa copied the technique as best as she could but was quite slow. When Mrs Kadamb had finished the vegetables she rubbed the remaining bread between her hands until she had created sand-like crumbs. Then she raised her arm, called "yer, yer, yer" to the pigeons and opened her fist to let the crumbs fall quietly to the ground. The birds began propelling themselves across the grass. Some pecked noisily at the ground while others ate from Mrs Kadamb's cupped hands.

It was a picnic, Elisa suddenly thought. She had a picnic once. There were some ducks, and some bread – bigger pieces of bread, not crumbs. She threw them at the ducks' beaks. The ducks shook their heads and Elisa was laughing. Was it Dad who gave her the bread? No, it must have been Mummy because Dad never liked picnics. Elisa remembered having her lunch stolen by a family of ducks. She remembered peering into the duck pond, looking for something and knowing she would be in trouble if she slipped. Knowing, also,
that there was something living deep down in the murky water. It was alive and it was her friend.

Elisa ate more slowly than she had intended. She began to lose her nerve, or perhaps she just lost her train of thought. She fed the pigeons and became so relaxed that all the questions she had prepared for Dr Kadamb became scattered on the grass. She was left with nothing to discuss. When it was time to go for the meeting, Mrs Kadamb had to lead the way. Elisa followed behind, smiling and even enjoying the urgent sound of the pigeons' picnic.
Delhi, 31.11.2006

I’m waiting, yet again, for Mrs Kadamb. She left me here, outside her son’s office, sitting on an old, metal stool. I think she’s looking for a bathroom. It has only just occurred to me that she’s like a foreigner in Delhi. I was trying to be super clever, showing off my basic Hindi. I asked whether a particular sign (written in Hindi script) said "scholar", but she just laughed. Then it dawned on me - she cannot read or write, and I’m not talking about English! She cannot read or write the language of her country!

Imagine a brain without letters in it - a brain which thinks only about boiling water, cooking food and feeding visitors. One which has never known the words venue, boarding or departure. What a peaceful brain it would be. You’d have more time for picnics, to say the least. You’d have more time to sing. You’d probably then have a more beautiful voice. You’d have a face which didn’t look like mine.

I’ve spent the last seven years of my life intensely reading books as bizarre as The Darkness of Unknowing. Perhaps more than one third of my time would become free if I couldn’t read or write. Sometimes I feel like I need to press "save and continue" to keep all the information stored in my head without blowing a fuse. The useless information builds up, my eyes start to flicker, and an exploding icon tells me "Error! Shut down." Eventually I get a migraine.
Mrs Kadamb’s face is so bright and fresh; it’s not like mine. I can feel, even now, that my cheeks are weighed down by heavy, black bags beneath my eyes. My face is pale like death; hers is sun-kissed. Even with wrinkles she is more alive than me. It’s as if my brain has robbed my body of energy, so even though I can think clever thoughts and write clever things, I can’t climb fifty steps to reach a hilltop temple. Mrs Kadamb looks as if she could walk forever if she had to. She probably spends most of her time walking between her house and her neighbour’s farm.

I wonder what she thinks about. Perhaps she thinks about nothing. Whatever she thinks about, it must be something simple. She certainly wouldn’t be thinking about The Death of God, The Nothingness of God, The Psychology of Religion, or Transcendental Mathematics and Trinitarian Speculation. Funny that her son is a Professor of English. I wonder what he’s really like. I can hear him shuffling papers around in his office while I sit here waiting. On his door it says Professor Hari Kadamb, Respected Professor of Literature and Religion.

I’m not in the mood to talk. Suddenly, I feel like an impostor. I don’t even remember why I came here in the first place. What was I supposed to ask him? My stomach is doing somersaults. Any minute, he’s going to open this door and expect me to say something intelligent. I feel like leaving. Why did I let Kelly talk me into this? I should have just had a casual chat to Dr Kadamb in the food marquee over a plate of food instead of coming all the way in here and making the event so formal and
horrible. I've got a list of questions somewhere. I guess I should try to dig it out of my bag.
Dr Hari Kadamb was taller than Elisa had realised. After an introduction by his mother, he smiled, gave an efficient head wobble and opened the door to welcome his guests into his tiny, colourful room. They passed beneath a pretty, knitted door decoration dangling tassels above their heads, before entering Dr Kadamb's marvellous world of literature.

Books that Elisa had never heard of, together with classic Indian texts written in various Indian dialects, bulged from wall-to-wall bookshelves. Elisa's self-taught Hindi met the challenge of deciphering the word "Jnaneswari" on the spine of one book but the rest remained unfamiliar books of secret wisdom.

Mrs Kadamb and her son exchanged a family joke while examining a photograph of his daughter, Preeti. Dr Kadamb examined his huge leather chair and wiped something off it before he sat down. He swivelled the chair around to face his visitors and took a large notebook from his drawer. Putting the notebook neatly on his desk in front of him, he picked up a pen and leant forward in his chair to peer at Elisa, as if she contained precious pearls.

Elisa maintained her silent smile with teeth clenched and hands tightly together. She squeezed the index finger of her left hand. She was intensely aware of forthcoming intellectual conversation and tried to ignore the voice inside which hollered, "Who are you trying to fool!" The light silhouetting Dr Kadamb against the window hurt her eyes.
"So, Elisa, you have come to India to study Mysticism." Dr Kadamb's voice was quite deep and he spoke a little more quickly than usual. The statement was made so seriously that despite Elisa's first inclination to laugh at herself for doing such an outdated thing, she tried to clarify the absurdity.

"Mystical atheism, actually. Yes, I am. But I'm in India for other reasons also. I'm not formally enrolled at the moment."

"My mother said you are doing research."

"Well yes, sort of."

"Sort of? This is a study tour, you do understand? We expect you to be a postgraduate student."

"Well, yes I am. But I've suspended for six months."

"Ah ha. And why is that?"

Elisa squinted into the sunlight at Dr Kadamb. Behind him, a pigeon hovered above the window ledge.

"I needed some time out. To clear my head."

Dr Kadamb nodded, put his pen down, leant back in his chair and clasped his hands together. "But you must be having family commitments?"

"Yes, I'm married."

"No children yet?"

Elisa shook her head and began to feel as if she were being psychoanalysed for having anti-productive behaviour.
Dr Kadamb smiled and wobbled his head to disregard the conversation altogether. He noticed Elisa looking at a poster of an Indian saint on his wall and resumed his clinical questioning.

"What do you think about the mystics? Do you think they know something about God which the common people are not knowing?"

Surprisingly, this question put Elisa slightly at ease. Her brain worked better when it was not self-involved. "I think they were agnostic. I think they were surrendered to the idea of never being able to know about God."

"Agnostic!"

"Eckhart says the intellect is never satisfied, even with God himself."

"Yes, he does. That is true. But tell me then, what is Gnosticism?"

"Gnosticism is 'to know'."

"Yes, to know. But..." Dr Kadamb lifted his hand. He pressed his thumb and index finger together, thought hard, and then finished his sentence – "Not mentally!" He pointed his finger up into the air. "To know – but not mentally! You see this point?" he continued, then tapped his finger on his head. "This is very interesting to me. Gnosticism is to know – through the heart." Dr Kadamb almost whispered the last three words as if his breath might blow right through Elisa's body.

Elisa's heart was not a very easy box to open. She knew there were secrets in her treasure chest, but the key had been swallowed many years ago. It had wedged itself in her throat to stop her from saying anything to anyone
about her discomfort. If she wanted to discharge herself from her mental prison, she would have to ask someone with a bobby pin to pick the lock.

Mrs Kadamb fiddled with threads of cotton at the end of her sari while waiting for her son and the foreign girl to finish their conversation. She could not understand what they were saying, but she could see her son pointing to the air, tapping his head and holding his heart so she knew her efforts had not been futile. She was happy to sit and nibble at the loose, cotton threads of her sari, to break them off. It was something she had been meaning to do for quite a long time. The threads had started to dangle and pick up sticks and wool every time she went to feed the goats.

"Most mystic poets tell us that they know God. They use this word 'know'. But most often they do not read very much. So how can they 'be knowing' in the ordinary sense of that word?"

Elisa felt as if she didn't understand English any more than Mrs Kadamb. Suddenly she wished Mrs Kadamb would take her to a simpler place – a grassy patch perhaps, where they could eat lunch without the stress of conversation. And feed some bread to the pigeons to get rid of some excess dough. And stop the birds from hovering so close to their heads.
It's dark in the hut. I'm writing by torch light. Need to sleep soon before people start shuffling and waking from the cold. Not sure how I'm going to sleep though with all this clutter and flutter in my mind.

Dr Kadamb laboured over the definition of "Gnosticism" for so long that I ended up with a headache. He kept searching his office for books which declared that books were not necessary. I began to feel as if his room was swimming with non-books - books from the seventh dimension, books by authors who couldn't write, and poetry by poets who didn't like words.

He gave me a book about the Indian mystic Kabir, who lived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Nobody can agree on when he was born or what happened when he died. They say he turned into a bunch of flowers, and the Muslims and Hindus shared the petals. Apparently he was a mystic songwriter who probably never wrote anything. Dr Kadamb said Kabir might have been influenced by the Sufis. They branched out from Islam and believed knowledge could not be learnt from books. This poet didn't like books. They say he was probably illiterate.

When I left Dr Kadamb's office, I felt as if all of his books had just fallen on my head. I could hear my useless voice from beneath crying, "Where does this leave my thesis?" Then, of course, I remembered Sam banging my piano over the sound of our television so
that he couldn’t hear me. I was trying to tell him that my research was important to me but he wouldn’t accept my decision to come to India. He wanted me to give up the whole thing. He couldn’t believe that I could be more interested in reading books than in having babies, stuffing chickens and mashing potatoes. It’s as if a girl were born for no other reason than to learn how to boil potatoes in order to feed her babies mash.

Sam would be happier if I were illiterate. He’s from that place where all species believe that women are not supposed to read. He never sat through Yentl to the very end. He stopped watching at the point where Yentl started pretending to be a man. I never told Sam that I’m familiar with the Kabbalah and empathise with Yentl. She was a Jewish woman who wanted to know about God but because she was a woman, she was forbidden to read the Torah. So she cut her hair and pretended to be a man. In the end, this Jewish woman reading books and pretending to be a man found herself married to a woman, who taught her all about women. And this Jewish woman pretending to be a man was asked by a man, "Can you create life?" In the end the Jewish woman fell in love of course, with a man, and eventually became a wife and probably a mother. It’s all very mixed up – just like me.

The dogs are all going wild again. They seem to wake at night and fight over old bones as if they’re having demarcation and territorial disputes. Trying to sort out what they’re supposed to be doing and who’s supposed to be doing it. Kelly’s snoring is almost as loud, so the only way I’ll be able to sleep is if I snore more loudly than all the other noise put
together. But my mind is insisting on staying awake. Too many skeletons in my cupboard. The dogs would have a feast.

Apparently you reach a state of inertia if your mind is preoccupied with too many issues – inertia which doesn’t let you rest. You lie down, stare at the ceiling, and fret generally about your past, your present and your future, without really even knowing what you’re doing. The hours pass and still you lie in some kind of comatose state. Awake but not alert. Looking hard but not seeing anything clearly. Psychic entropy, they call it.

I was trying so desperately to understand Dr Kadamb. I really wanted to know what he was talking about, but the only thing I comprehended was his disappointment in my choice not to have children "yet". He made reference to a poet who I’ve never heard of called Mallarmé. He said I was "Mallarmé’s princess – escaping the state of becoming." Then he gave me a book (can you believe it?), called *The Soul as Virgin Wife*. Why do people assume that you’re going to have children just because you’re married? Doesn’t anybody consider the possibility that one might not want to have any?

Sometimes I wonder whether Mummy wanted to have me. I’m pretty sure she didn’t want to have a second child. It was probably Dad’s idea. It’s not as if she had all the time in the world to spare for me, let alone another baby. She must have spent so much time lying down because, in my memory, she was always resting and trying to make me rest also. I clearly remember lying down in my school uniform and Mummy was asleep next to me. I was supposed to just lie there. It must have
been after school, some time in the afternoon. What a strange thing to do. Maybe she was unwell. I guess she would have been pregnant at the time. Yes, if I was at school, then I was five. She was pregnant, and tired, I guess. Tired of me too probably.
Elisa turned off the torch, slid the notebook under her pillow and pushed a tear off her cheek. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the holes in the roof. A slice of moon peeped in through one of the holes. She moved her head slightly to find the rest of it. It was Shiva's moon. That's what they called this sliver of a moon. It was Mrs Kadamb's nose-ring.

Elisa felt frustrated about not being able to talk with Mrs Kadamb. Such a conversation might fill the silent space echoing with her mother's absence. She could not remember her mother's voice. There had not been many conversations. "Hurry, you're late for school." Was that it? Didn't they talk about anything except time? What about the picnic? Didn't they talk about the ducks, or the bread, or the water, or anything? Did Mummy always have her head in a book?

They talked about the new baby. There was going to be a "new baby brother or sister." Elisa would have to be the "big girl." She had to practise bathing her dolly. She had to learn to do up her own shoelaces. There would be no time left for Mummy to do shoelaces when the new baby came. So why did Mummy want a second baby anyway?

Elisa resolved that her mother's second pregnancy was unplanned and accidental, and Elisa was never going to have an unplanned or accidental baby. If Sam wanted a baby, he was going to have to wait until she had enough time. At least enough time to do up a couple of stinking shoelaces.
She began to sink into a disturbed sleep. The dogs startled her again with howling. She rolled over and pulled the sleeping-bag hood over her head to muffle the noises and warm her ears. Snug within her memories of Mummy, Elisa passed the whole night until memory and imagination merged together. She could still hear enough to know when the birds began to wake and when it was too late to sleep. She stopped trying to rest, and at that point of surrender, sleep relieved her of fretting for a couple of hours until Kelly woke her with rattling keys.

"I'm not getting up. Otherwise I won't be able to go tonight."

"Mrs Kadamb wants you to get dressed at her hut before the festival."
Kelly delivered her message from Maria and left Elisa by herself to sleep until lunch time.

The birds flew into Elisa's morning sleep and landed on a picnic blanket where they pecked at a loaf of bread in her hands. They were pigeons – white, grey and flecked pigeons with the colours green and purple shimmering in their neck feathers as they fluffed and bobbed about. Their cooing noises became so loud that altogether they sounded like one crying dog. On the shady part of the blanket, under the tree, Elisa's mother sat beneath a pink hat, her white gloves holding up a book so Elisa could not see her face. "Hurry up," she said from behind the book, "You have to dress yourself. You're late for school."
Everyone is sleeping. They’re exhausted after our incredible experience of Sufi music. I can’t sleep just yet. My ears are still ringing, and I want to write about my night before I forget.

I was all spangled up for the evening and ready to go, but had to wait around while Mrs Kadamb washed Maria’s hair and dressed her in a sari with bangles, hair flowers, earrings, shawl and handbag. I spent two hours wondering what the big occasion was and wondering why Maria couldn’t wash her hair by herself.

My mind said, "Go now. It’s time to go." The only part of me still waiting in the hut was my body. My physical organs, my mind and emotions had all walked through the hut’s flapping screen door and taken a seat on the floor amid the crowd.

One would think I’d have learnt by now that all things take their jolly time in this country and nothing can be made to move faster than its natural speed. I have to learn to pull back, say "woah" to my monkey body, just relax and enjoy myself. This is no easy task. It means retraining my entire psychological make-up.

Mrs Kadamb was making a great deal about Maria’s hair - showing me how beautiful it was and pointing to her hairclip and earrings. She looked like a princess, decorated literally from head to toe - correct colour hairclip, perfectly pleated sari and new toe-rings. I began to feel
inadequately dressed. I’d already changed into a new, blue punjabi. I bought it because it’s embroidered with Sanskrit words from the Vedas. I’d never seen such an intelligent-looking dress and was feeling comfortable in it until all the dressing up fuss.

Finally I realised the occasion was simply the act of dressing up! I was supposed to be enjoying the pre-event. I should have taken longer to get dressed instead of throwing on my clothes, then I’d probably have felt more regal. I started to wish I was wearing a sari, of all things.

At the last minute, Mrs Kadamb decided it was a good time to sing a song (despite the fact that we were supposed to be on our way to a festival). She broke into song so loudly in her deep voice that people came to look through the holes in the wall of the hut. I felt a bit uneasy being stared at, but soon realised the people were not staring at me at all. They were staring at Mrs Kadamb – her shining face, her dancing hands and her warm light. She’s so uninhibited and confident – so generous and beautiful.

By this time I had begun to surrender my evening to Mrs Kadamb. If Mrs Kadamb wanted to sing, instead of taking us to listen to Qawwali, then what could I do? I didn’t know the way to the mosque so I had no choice but to wait. Just as I began to settle in for the evening, and my nostrils and eyebrows had begun to move while I watched her expressive face, she said "tsala" and began ushering us out the door. With her shoulders back and her head up like royalty, she opened her arms to Maria and myself and moved us out of the hut as if we were both her children.
Trying to stop my mind from dashing ahead of me, I walked slowly towards the mosque where the sound of a busy tabla seemed to beckon. Mrs Kadamb led the way. She pushed through the crowd in search for some floor space beneath the canopy which had been erected and decorated especially for the evening.

A large, hulk-like man sat himself in front of a microphone without any grace whatsoever. He began his performance by flinging his arms up into the air, shaking his head and yelling (assumingly in praise of Allah because the crowd responded with great cheer and applause). Throughout the night, the crowd laughed and roared in response to the man's wit. He stopped singing and began talking spasmodically into the microphone, while the men behind him clapped rhythmically. He talked, according to Mrs Kadamb, about the greatness of God. Maria translated, "He is saying 'Sing with the voice God is giving'.'"

I tried to imagine sitting in a Sydney crowd listening to a man talk rhythmically about the greatness of God while all cheered, but could only think of evangelism. We have no such tradition. This was God music. And the people loved it.

Halfway through the night, I felt exhilarated to hear the crowd roaring and jumping up spontaneously to dance. In front of me, a small girl sprang to her feet with her arms raised to the sky. When she rose, something in my spine rose to dance with her, but I couldn’t free myself to actually stand up. She danced without inhibition, turning in circles and singing to the crowd.
It began to rain. Droplets fell through holes in the canopy onto the crowd. Chandeliers began to pop their bulbs as the rain interfered with their circuits. Cracking bulbs split above our heads at all corners of the canopy. And suddenly I was chosen by the rain to receive its grace. I was forced to stand up. And I had to dance. I danced as far as I knew how. I couldn’t think about the rain at the huts. I could only dance. And although, for a moment, the fleeting thought of wet luggage tried to dampen my spirits, I discovered through Mrs Kadamb and that persistent rain how it feels to dance beyond my brain.

The guards in green uniforms have gone.
I dance on white marble.
Breaking the rhythm
of my head.
And looking for a beat.
Kelly's mind was not to be lost. It was too intelligent to lose its place. According to her, this place was firmly ritualistic, fanatical, excessive and destructive. It was from places such as this that religious armies had been formed. Dogmatic fundamentalists were pushing in on her objective mind. She felt their hot feet at the base of her back while she was sitting on the floor, and their sweaty arms on her arms when she stood up. She smelt garlic when they snorted and she saw blood-black soil beneath their fingernails. They were men who were ready to die for their beloved God.

A hefty man on the stage was banging a bongo, or something like it, and shaking his wet, sweaty hair like a bathed dog. People were coming to him from the crowd and waving money around him, as if to pay for the blessing of tasting the spray of salty sweat. The music was aggressive and thumping. It was not exhilarating for Kelly. She could see Elisa's intelligence being nullified by the hypnotic rhythm. Elisa smiled at the musicians like a child smiling at a gigantic lollipop. Most tragically of all, she had begun to dance in the rain along with the others. Strands of red hair clung to her face. She had been scratched by the fingernails of fundamentalism.

Kelly stood with elbows out and feet apart like an athlete, keeping her ground. A mad-looking student with a yellow dress and bright-purple, glittering scarf, danced in circles like a Whirling Dervish so Kelly had to keep
stepping backwards. Finally she decided to retreat to the huts and rescue her luggage from the rain.

The lights in the camp had mostly gone out, but she could remember the way back to the huts. It was not far. It was better than staying at the Mad-Hatter's tea-party. She was only hesitant because of all the dogs. She broke off a branch from a tree outside the mosque and went looking for her shoes. They were new and they were leather. They were supposed to be next to each other, directly under the third rose bush, but they were not there. Reluctantly, Kelly swung her jacket over her head and stooped over in the rain to feel around for something solid in the rose garden. She stuck her hand on a thorn and found nothing.

Someone probably thought they looked special and expensive and walked off with them, she thought. She scanned the muddy ground and recognised one beaded shoe as her own. As she bent to fix her buckle, a snarling noise, which somehow sounded like heavy rain, made her turn. Beneath a tree, a dog was holding something in its mouth with its head bent low and its eyes glaring at Kelly's feet. It had her other shoe.

For a few seconds she could not decide what to do, but the dog jumped up and started chasing its tail, trying to bite an insect. She reached quickly with her branch for the shoe, then found a rock and threw it at the dog who yelped. He ran off into the rain with a buckle and strap hanging from his mouth.
Kelly ran awkwardly back to the huts while the dogs howled on her right. They seemed to be fighting in packs somewhere near the caves on the outskirts. She could not see very far ahead of her, but she could make out the shape of huts. She ducked through the screen door of her hut and stood in the quiet dark, shivering for a moment to survey the leaking roof. A trickling, dripping sound was coming from the direction of her bed.

Kelly swore under her breath at mad dogs, thorns and rainstorms and moved into the hut to check her luggage. Elisa's was not even damp. The beds all around Kelly's were dry, but Kelly's luggage and sleeping bag were soaking in a pool on the floor. It was as if the rain had chosen her simply because she was the cleanest, sanest, most sensible person in the hut.
Delhi, 2.12.2006

Sky is supposed to meet me here on this rock. We were talking together last night about the Qawwali music and the dancing. She had the urge to go outside in the early morning hours and create something out of clay, but it was pouring. So she’s taking me on an artistic expedition this morning. For some reason I became excited over the idea of tagging along with this crazy artist to whom I’ve hardly spoken. But now I’m feeling a bit pretentious. I’m not like her.

Sky is this enthusiastic, eccentric girl. She grew up in London. You can tell she’s an artist just by looking – purple, shimmering scarf, chunky jewellery, and a particularly individual style of dressing. But I’m not like that. I’m still wearing my dress from last night. Haven’t even had a wash yet. Feeling sticky and sweaty, and not at all in any kind of aesthetic frame of mind. My hair clashes with blue. I’m not going to buy any more blue clothes. Having red hair is a problem for someone with no colour sense. Why was I born with red hair and no sense of colour to go with it? I can’t understand. Someone must have thought, "Give her red hair and she might develop some kind of artistic sensibility." Well, it hasn’t worked yet.

I avoided Sky after the rose scenario. The sight of her, ever since that day, has been overwhelming. I mean, when I look at her I see a happy, well-adjusted person with an obvious sense of beauty and love for
living. The more perfect she looks, the more pathetic I become. So here I am, sitting on a rock, waiting to torture myself by hanging around with someone whose innocent existence makes me sick. It’s not her fault. Or maybe it is.

When I didn’t buy a rose from the boy at the Taj exit, or even donate any money to him, she couldn’t comprehend it. We had nothing to say to each other after that. It was as if the rose-smellers, who all love life, belonged together in one bus, and those who didn’t wear rose-coloured glasses were excluded. Her bus was full. I travelled back to camp on the second bus and didn’t speak to anyone.

But last night, Sky and I were dancing together at the festival. The rain seemed to wash away the lingering bad smell of roses, so we were able to talk. She wanted to go and make something out of the clay soil.

The rock I’m sitting on is completely dry and hot already. The water is rising into mist from the ground like the Earth’s own incense, as if it really didn’t rain at all last night and perhaps it was not so exhilarating after all. I wonder whether I was just hypnotised by the music. I don’t normally dance. It’s not the kind of thing I do. I’m also not good at it. I just watched Mrs Kadamb and tried to copy her. Come to think of it, I probably looked like a dork.

Kelly yelled at me when she woke up this morning. She assumed that I’d pushed her sleeping bag onto the floor. Apparently, when she came back to the huts last night, her sleeping bag and luggage were soaked with rain. But she knew I had been in Mrs Kadamb’s hut. She just
wanted to yell at me. She shouted, "Who was the last person in the hut last night?" I asked "Why?" But she didn't like to be answered by a question, so she said, "Aren't you listening to me? Who was the last person in the hut last night!" I quietly said, "Not me," but she continued to yell at me for the rest of the morning, as if she thought my hearing had been lost because of the loud music.

She's been acting strangely for the last few days - disturbed or something. I think she wants to go home. I don't. She missed the last part of the festival. The musicians started to clap rhythmically and loudly. There was nobody left sitting. Everyone was dancing. My heart expanded like a harmonium airbag full of potential music. But my feet were awkward, so I watched Mrs Kadamb to try and find a rhythm. She danced so lightly even though she's quite a big woman. My white body felt too rigid to dance. She had her arms up in the air, clapping, but even raising my arms felt too difficult for me. My mind was sitting like the guard of an ivory tower, saying, "If you raise your arms too high people will look at you," and "If you move your feet too much you'll look like a fool." I don't think Mrs Kadamb has ever known what it's like to live in a mental prison.

My feet are beginning to swell. If Sky doesn't come soon, I'll change my mind and go back to the huts for a sleep. We're leaving camp tomorrow morning and heading out of the city by train. I need to start packing. In fact, now I think of it, I shouldn't be out here taking some artistic excursion. I should be packing up my stuff. Must have had only four or five hours of sleep last night, but I woke up smiling at the
chirping birds and jumped out of my sleeping bag as if it were my birthday.

Oh my God! I just remembered I left Mummy’s shawl hanging on a tree! Stupid, pegless place. Couldn’t find a peg, or washing line. Now what am I supposed to do? Sky will be here in a minute. I’ve got to get Mummy’s shawl. It must have got drenched last night. If it fell off the tree the dogs would have taken it for sure. It’s goat’s wool.
Elisa wiped the ridge of her nose and adjusted her glasses. As she jumped off the rock, the clever embroidery of her new punjabi dress stuck on a nearby bush. Sky was coming soon. If Elisa did not disappear quickly it would be too late. She would spend her whole morning pretending to be an artist, instead of doing more productive things like reorganising her suitcase and rescuing her mother's shawl.

Frowning and clucking her tongue at Mother Nature, she tried for the last time to unhinge the cotton. With a final rip, she detached herself from the bush, gathered up her notebook, scarf and bag and began hastily back to the huts.

Scanning the ground for her mother's shawl, Elisa paced along with fists and teeth clenched. The dogs snarled at each other under a tree on her right. She peered at them, worried that she might find dirty pieces of her mother's shawl, soggy with saliva. She had no other memorabilia of her mother. It was not as if she had a box full of photographs, or a special portrait. Some children at school had lockets. Some at high school talked about their dowries and boxes full of antique tea-sets and embroidered tablecloths. "I've only got one shawl," Elisa said to herself. "Can't I just keep that one thing?"

Unconsciously, Elisa broke into a run. Her backpack bounced like a jockey. All the while, she peered about for remnants of her mother's shawl. Then Sky appeared from behind one of the huts up ahead. She could not be
mistaken in her yellow punjabi and purple glitter. Elisa slowed down and glanced sideways. She could dash to the right and go the long way back to the huts to avoid Sky, but there were too many dogs that way. She could go to the left, but there would be too much mud near the mosque. Maybe she could just turn back and keep walking in the same direction as Sky and pretend she never saw her.

Elisa had slowed down so obviously that Sky could see her new friend waiting there on the path, and began to sing in glory, "Oh what a beautiful morning!" She hollered, "Morning Liz!" to Elisa who, mindlessly responding, raised one hand as if she were about to take an oath upon the bible.

"How!" Sky said in mockery, imitating Elisa's hand gesture like a Native American.

Elisa's smile twitched as she tried to decide whether to stay or go. She made absent-minded excuses for her sense of direction, but Sky passed her a set of sculpture-tools and took her by the hand.

"I'm so happy you're coming with me!" Sky exclaimed as she led Elisa back out of the camp. "I absolutely must show you the fabulous colours up here. This earth is so rich! Especially after the rain. You'll love it!"

Elisa walked mindlessly. "You know, I probably can't stay long because I –"

"Don't worry! You'll have oodles of time to pack up. The train doesn't leave until the morning. And anyway you can't have that many things to do."

"Oh, it's just that I have to actually look for something..."
"Well, first darling, you have to look for the brightest colours in the earth with me. Look, we'll go up there."

The two young women flapped in their old sandals on the dusty dirt. Elisa began to mentally pack her suitcase. She had so much excess baggage. And what was she going to use to keep herself warm on the train? It was so cold at night. Elisa continued to look on the ground but knew very well that the dogs would not have carried the shawl this far out of camp.

They began approaching the ruins of ancient caves where boys were playing cricket. Tiny squirrels hopped along logs which lay in the way and small birds, like Willy Wagtails, tweeted and fluttered about. Elisa and Sky strolled towards something which, to Elisa, looked like a Roman amphitheatre. Sky surveyed the area with eyes as wide as a child's. "Have you ever seen colours as wonderful as this?"

Elisa suddenly felt like an impostor holding the sculpturing equipment. It occurred to her that she felt as uncomfortable with them as she would feel holding a baby.
Delhi, 2.12.2006

Why am I wasting my time like this? I'm sitting here with a bundle of artist's tools which I've never seen before and wouldn't know how to use if you paid me. Sky has gone off searching for the cave with the best clay. I'm not interested in this expedition any more. I want to go back to the camp. I'll kick myself if Mummy's shawl has gone. Can't believe I could do something so careless. Sky doesn't realise how important it is to me. Of course she wouldn't understand if I tried to explain it to her. She'd give me that same disapproving look as last time.

I remember when Mummy was knitting the shawl. She must have told me it was goat's wool, because I thought she was making it for somebody's goat. I wished I'd had a goat too, wrapped in a colourful blanket. When I opened the parcel on my birthday and she put the shawl around me, I was so surprised. She'd made it for me! She never made anything for me usually. She was too busy. I didn't have a birthday cake, but I had a shawl. Now I've probably lost it.

I'm hoping that Dad might have kept that necklace of Mummy's. She was wearing it right up until I was five-years-old. I remember she had it on when I was tying my own shoelaces. Dad must have it - he must - unless Mummy was wearing it on the day she went to hospital. Then, of course, they would have taken it off her and given it to Dad. She wouldn't still have it on. No, I can't think about that.
Mummy's plaque is very small. I don't go there very often. Sometimes I feel as if I'm disturbing her peace. I don't want to be stowed beneath the ground when it's my turn. I don't want people walking over my grave and bothering me with their worries. I don't want to feel stuck down there.
"I've found the best place! We'll go up there. It'll be excellent!" Sky pointed to the dark, cavernous arches of the ruins as she hitched her dress into a knot for climbing ease. The dust had coated Elisa's nostrils and settled into black, salty dollops in the inner corners of her eyes. She began to fret about how she was going to climb ruins wearing sandals. Sky stepped out of her shoes and left them in the dust at the bottom of the caves without glancing down, as if she were entering her own home. Well prepared for adventures, she carried a backpack of art supplies and essentials.

"You should have told me we were going hiking. I'm not properly dressed. I can't carry all these things up there." Elisa looked up at Sky who had already begun to climb and was disappearing into the glare of the sun with her bangles clunking and her earrings dancing. Elisa squinted upward and felt the pangs of sunlight in her temples.

"Liz, you're panicking again. I'm not going anywhere. Take off your scarf and make a sling."

Feeling ashamed of her lack of enthusiasm, Elisa followed Sky and her instructions, until they climbed into a cave at the top of the ruins. Inside, it was dark and damp. The clay earth was cold under their feet.

"Look at the colour!" Sky whispered as she took off her backpack, crouched down and scraped some tomato-red, clay soil up into her hands, examining its texture and letting it crumble back to the ground again.
Elisa put the tools down and wondered where to sit, while Sky pulled up a large rock and motioned for Elisa to do the same. The two young women sat on rocks in the cave, looking out at the view of the camp, the mosque and hazy surroundings.

"I hope you don't think I can make sculptures. I've never made anything," Elisa confessed.

"You made a clay bowl at school. I'm sure you did."

"Oh, yes once. Out of a coiled snake."

"Well you can make that, darling. I'm going to make Shri Ganesha. Have you seen him? He's that God with an elephant's head."

Elisa was not listening to Sky's story about Shri Ganesha. It had something to do with "Immaculate Conception" and the creation of Adam from the earth. But Elisa had only one thought. I have to get that necklace from Dad. He didn't throw it out. Why would he do that? If I can't find Mummy's shawl, then I have to get that necklace back.

Elisa began to feel slightly comforted. She remembered the snake's head and the two, tiny crystals in his eyes. Or maybe it was a lady snake. She would find it. If not, she would buy another, exactly the same, and wear it. It would be even better than the shawl. It was not practical to carry a shawl around everywhere she went anyway. It was inevitable that one day it would get ruined or lost. Inevitable.

Sky exhaled, closed her eyes and breathed in the view as if it would be sucked through her flared nostrils and into her imagination to leave a perfect
imprint for later artistic use. Her small nose turned upward at the mundane world below and her eyes closed to the smog of the city. She stayed in that position for so long that Elisa felt slightly awkward and thought the lesson must have already begun. The least she could do was inhale, so she did. But she could not relax to the point where her eyes would proudly close for such an uninhibited time. She managed to tightly shut them, however, for a couple of moments, in between checking to see whether Sky had finished her artistic preparations.

Sky was silent after opening her eyes. She unzipped her backpack, took out a few items for herself and Elisa, then settled down to work. Her expression grew intense – concentrated, focussed. Her exuberance vanished. It felt sacrilegious to interrupt her silence, so Elisa just watched and copied whatever Sky was doing, in the hope of gaining some insight into the passionate, artistic world of her new friend.

Sky began to dig into the ground, collecting red clay in a small bowl. She mixed the clay with a little water and pushed it into shape until it became soft and pliable. For ten minutes she worked, outlining the shape of the statue she was going to create, and then after much silence, offered Elisa a glimpse inside her artistic head. "Hermann Hesse tells the story of a Music Master. I need to find myself an Arts Master. Someone to teach me about divine creation. Someone to show me how to become a master of the arts, instead of just a casualty of creativity. That's why I'm here."
Elisa’s face went blank, then an uncomprehending smile appeared, as if she understood very little but appreciated Sky’s enthusiasm. As if she were trying to make friends with a wise foreigner who spoke no English but was strangely endearing.
Delhi, 3.12.2006

We’re leaving Delhi this morning. I’m packed and ready to go. Everything is packed except for Mummy’s shawl. It’s nowhere. Everybody thinks there must be something wrong with me because I’m so attached to it. Kelly told me to just forget about it or get a new one. Maria even offered me hers, but it wouldn’t be the same. Mummy’s shawl was more like a blanket. It wasn’t really soft. It was a little bit wiry, like a goat.

Sky said that I was meant to have lost it. She said it was a good thing! When I told her it was Mummy’s shawl, she immediately concluded that it should be in another realm like Mummy. She’s now insisting on buying me another one. I suppose she’ll get me some outrageously bright shawl which I’ll be way too embarrassed to wear.

The camp is particularly dusty this morning. Everyone is dragging their luggage out of the huts, towards the buses. We’ll leave for the station just before lunch and be served packed chupattis on the train. It’s getting warm already. Even though I had a cool, bucket-bath this morning, I’m feeling sticky now.

I wonder if people dig up graves to look for jewellery. There’s such a thing as a grave-robbber, I think. Gold wouldn’t perish, I guess. I hope Dad still has that necklace, otherwise I’ll be left with this horrid thought of gold and bones.
Elisa’s mother found a rhythm – a productive pastime – knitting with needles and rings, resting and listening to her daughter singing. Her hands were faster than birds in the garden. Two sparrows were making a nest, weaving and pulling at strands of Elisa’s red hair on the ground. Some were pecking at crumbs. Elisa was hungry too, but her mother had to finish making the goat’s blanket before they could eat lunch. It was a lucky goat, to have such a colourful blanket with all different kinds of reds, oranges and yellows.

"Hurry up, Elisa! Daddy’s coming soon. He’ll trip up the verandah if you leave things like that!" Elisa’s dolly was getting cold in the pot of water anyway. It was time to take dolly out and dry her in the sun. The verandah steps were nice and sunny for dolly to dry and take tea. Elisa emptied the pot and carried it inside, while humming to her mother’s rhythm.

Such a sweet voice. She’ll be a singer one day. Elisa’s mother noticed her daughter’s wet footprints beginning to fade from the verandah floor beneath the heavy, summer air. She surveyed the front garden. The shadow of the rose bush had shrunk into itself. It was past lunchtime. As she began the last line of knitting, her husband’s car pulled up. He must be early, she hoped.

Clearing her throat, she stuck the knitting needles into the ball of red wool and lifted herself out of the hard chair. It was easier to stand up from a hard chair than a soft chair, now that she had only three months left, but her dizziness came back as soon as she stood up. Everything went dark. She shut
her eyes for a minute but tried to appear as normal as possible to keep her husband settled. He was in a rush. He closed the car door, walked quickly up the path, jumped onto the second step and slipped on Elisa's tiny tea cup, clutching the railing just in time.

"Trying to kill me, are you?"

She kept quiet.

"I hope lunch is ready. I have to go in ten minutes."

He knew by the click of his wife's tongue that she had been sitting on the verandah doing nothing for the whole morning, and there was nothing to eat.

"I came home to have lunch. If there's no lunch, then I haven't got time, like you, to sit around doing nothing. I'll see you later."

Elisa wiped her dolly's bath and carefully stacked it in the lowest kitchen cupboard. It didn't really fit but she pushed it in until the door clicked shut. On her way down the corridor she saw her father walking quickly across the lawn. He shouted something, slammed the car door and drove off.
Delhi, 3.12.2006

When is this train (if you can call it that) going to get a move on? Just can’t sit here staring at the smog and wiggling my toes. My nostrils are dry and sore. My feet are hot, even without shoes. It feels like someone has wrapped them in shrinking, hot clay.

Why does everyone take so long to get ready? Don’t they even sense any nervous energy at all? The train departure-board starts flashing and I feel as if the hands of time have reached into my intestines and started turning my stomach like a clock. Not just a ticking clock, but some kind of spasmodic, spinning time machine. Whistles are blowing. Men are yelling every few moments to sell their chai. Women are yelling at their children for them to hurry up, or slow down. I’m digging in my heels to stop my thoughts from rushing faster than my blood can carry them.

A few men are sitting on the roof of the train opposite us. They’re looking at me because I looked at them. I’d better look at this paper instead, or the brown spots on my blanket. We have bunks on the train. Don’t know how long the trip will be. Hope I don’t get sick on the train. Hate being stuck inside something.

Constantly I say to myself, "I happily accept and digest all future experiences because they’re for my benevolence." But this New Age, Sky-mantra isn’t working. Sometimes I feel as if I could live in a box, or
that I am living in a box and that the box is becoming smaller and smaller, and soon I’ll be too frightened to move. I guess the only way to defeat this retarding mentality is to move beyond the limits of cause and effect - to leapfrog beyond reason and into "the unknown", as they repetitively call it.

The unknown - it could be the future. I can’t prevent the future from coming, but the thought of being a pawn in the game God has forgotten is more than unsettling. It’s enough to make me feel like jumping from the train roof when it eventually gets to the middle of nowhere.

Sky is supposed to be in this carriage. I guess it wouldn’t bother her if she missed the train. She’d say, "No use throwing a tantrum," and catch another one in the opposite direction just for fun. She’s doing a Master’s thesis in Fine Arts. She said, "I eat, I sleep, I make sculptures." Then she said something interesting. She said, "I don’t call myself an 'Eater', or a 'Sleeper'. So I don’t call myself a 'Sculptor'. But that’s what I do. And if I had to call myself a 'Sculptor', then it would have a capital S." She’s somewhere in between profundity and insanity. Her mission is to get beyond being a "mad artist" and find some kind of better method of inspiration. So she’s looking for a guru or something. Anyway, that’s what I understood.

The chai man just snorted, clearing his nose onto the ground. A little girl with two feather-duster ponytails and a pink, frilly dress sat on his goo. He picked her up, wiped her dress with his hand, wiped his hand on his shirt, and gave her a lolly from his basket. And he patted her hair
as if she were his most beloved puppy. Such affection from a strange man in the midst of chaos. One wonders, in this country, who are strangers and who are not. He could, quite conceivably, be her own father.
"What do you want to go to church for?" Elisa's father asked her. It was Sunday morning and Elisa was walking along, swinging the shiny, blue handbag her father had bought for her seventh birthday. On the side of the bag hung a silver chain dangling a tiny, tinkling bell. She imagined that her bag was magic and if she rattled the bell three times, she would become an angel in the church. Elisa felt all dressed up and remembered how Mummy used to get dressed up to go to church sometimes. She shrugged at her father. "I like the colours in the windows."

"We have colours in our windows at home on the back door."

Elisa looked up at the towering, steeple church with its bell at the top. The chimes on Mummy's grandfather clock at home had broken a long time ago. "But we don't have a bell."

"We can buy a bell."

"A church bell?"

"No. We'll buy a cowbell." Elisa's father adjusted his glasses.

"A cowbell!" Elisa laughed. "Then we'll have to buy a cow! And we can paint her and make her pretty like those people did at that festival."

"You're not supposed to paint cows, Lizzy!"

"Then why did they do it?"

"Because they think the cow is God. And I've already told you, there's no such thing as God!"
"Then why do they teach us religion at school?"

"They just want you to know that some people believe in God and go to church, and some people believe in God and go to temples, and some people believe in God and go to mosques. But we don't. Because if we did, we'd expect everyone else to do the same! And now I don't want to discuss it any further!"

Elisa rattled the bell on her bag as she walked along, following her father. She imagined that her tiny bell belonged to a colourful, little church in Wonderland and that she had eaten magic cake, like Alice, and become too big to fit through the stained glass doors.

Elisa's memory of her father vanished as she was jolted out of daydreaming by a loud train horn. Her train window was stuck open and the Delhi morning smog invaded the carriage where ten female students from Dr Kadamb's tour had been accommodated.

Sky finally made an entrance onto the train, stowed her mirror-studded suitcase away, and sat cross-legged opposite Elisa, next to the open window. Something tiny and pink sparkled in the centre of Sky's forehead. It was a little, stick-on dot. Her earring caught the sunlight every time she looked out the window to smile. "Isn't Delhi in the morning like a forest of birds!" she exclaimed.

Elisa couldn't see any birds just now.

"All calling and singing and worshipping the sun! With bells, flowers, garlands and incense! Isn't it excellent?"
Elisa acknowledged Sky's excitement by peering through the smog in search of the decorated cow she had just seen a moment ago. Yes, it was wearing a garland, and it had a bell – a deep, donging bell. It was quite peaceful.

"Don't you just adore seeing cows on the railway tracks? It's so – Zen! Incredible haiku!"

The cow and all its significance seemed to slip away as a loud whistle blew. The train exhaled and began to move.

Elisa did a recount of all her luggage and belongings and checked her waist to confirm that no one had yet stolen her passport. The other students in the carriage cheered with relief at having waited for more than one hour for the train to wake up.

"You have slept for millions and millions of years. Why not wake up this morning?" Elisa had opened a book on Kabir and was trying to comprehend his poetry, while occasionally glancing out the window to check how deep into India they had travelled.

The smog had cleared. The city was nowhere to be seen. Fields were green. People were scarce but bright, like strokes of purple and yellow on a landscape canvas. Old ladies doubled over to pick vegetables; their bare legs bent like brown crickets. Young girls in bright, torn dresses carried babies on their hips and silver pots on their heads. Baby goats ran along in high-heel-shoe style, poking the air with their faces, trying to catch their mothers.
On occasion, when the train turned, Elisa could see steam rising up and dissipating into blue sky. Clouds of something became nothing before her eyes, as if someone were wiping away the train's tracks, so no one could follow them into a different dimension.

"Did you know that we're going to be the first white people to go where we are going?" Kelly was taking notes for her thesis. She studied every female whose image passed by the window. She was obviously self-satisfied by the thought of making history. "Dr Kadamb said he chooses a new location every year. Imagine what a shock the village people will get to see a group like us! A group of liberated, Western women!" Kelly snorted to finish her sentence.

Is that what I am, Elisa thought – a liberated, Western woman? Somehow the description did not seem to fit her. Here she was embarking on a mystery study tour adventure along with so many intelligent men and women from around the world. But liberated? What did that mean anyway?

The sky had begun to turn pink as the train slowed down to enter a town called Rangibad. Elisa, sleepless as a result of the word "liberated", had been analysing and watching her new friends throughout most of the journey. Kelly was asleep against the grimy window with her neck squashed by her jaw. Her growling snore, together with shouting from the platform, woke Sky who smiled, stretched and blinked for a long time, as if to wipe away her last canvas and start a fresh, new one.
Part Three:

THE RATTLE OF BANGLES

1.

Laman was a village in the heart of India. Its rhythm had not changed for centuries. Morning was the time before sunrise. It was the cool, dark silent time of greeting God and the Earth with incense and reverence. It was the time of chanting and praying. Midday was after lunch – hot enough to permit a few hours of leisure. Women bathed and changed their saris. They sat outside together in the shade of verandahs, applying new red kumkum dots to their foreheads and combing their wet, freshly-oiled hair. Female whispers, chatting and laughing came from every hut and house, like pink ribbons tying the sprawling village together. Occasional snoring from beneath old blankets and white caps made strange, rhythmic patterns beside the snorting and grunting of bullocks. In the evenings, women huddled around kitchen fires, finishing their food, while men sipped chai beneath the stars. Goats and lambs found their mothers while kitchen fire smoke and field fire smoke mingled invisibly in the air somewhere.

The rhythm of life was slow but regular, and the seasons themselves were as predictable as the beat of wedding drums. Wedding season came
before the monsoon. The monsoon came after religious fires. Religious fires were lit because of the heat and the need for rain.

Around the village was a circle of rocky mountains separating Laman from the rest of the world. Beyond the mountains were such things as televisions, mobile phones, taxis, blenders and aeroplanes. Within the circle of mountains were valleys which filled with clear water during the monsoon, untouched crystals and semiprecious stones, clean air, baby goats and silence.

Coming by night, on a road of rocks and boulders, Dr Kadamb's bus stopped to let anything larger go first, and honked at every other moving object. Eventually, the bus drove into a sea of shallots and sugar cane. Barefoot ladies carried pots on their heads and walked alone in the dark, knowing only by their footsteps where they were and how much further they had to go before reaching home. On the bus, Elisa, woke to the feeling of falling. She peered at her reflection as she searched the dark window for some sign of a straight road, or at least some flat ground.
My heart feels like a box all wrapped up. We’re in the middle of nowhere, in another century - a village six hours east of Mumbai, three hours south of Rangibad and one hour away from a place called Nangipur. Even the names of the villages seem to come from the same place as Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.

We’ve landed in a square room with cement floors. We’re arguing whether or not the owners should have painted the walls bright pink. There are no mosquitoes, rats or cockroaches so I don’t care about the colour of the walls. There are little creatures, a bit like geckos, which don’t bother me. They climb the walls and come and go through crooked window shutters. They crawl beneath the door (which hangs a fist-length above the floor, even when it’s closed). When it’s open we look directly at wet saris hanging over branches and bushes. None of these things bother me.

But I’ve never heard so much silence. Broken now and again by jewellery - the rattle of bangles. Or a cowbell. A burp. Or spit. The silence makes my heart too loud. We’re probably the noisiest objects in the village. Even my stomach seems to rumble too loudly. My thoughts are too many and my breathing disturbs me at night.

On the other side of the room is a window. Outside the only moving thing is the occasional bullock cart. The men out there shout, "Ja/
"Ja!" to their bullocks. That’s about the only noise I’ve forgotten to mention - apart from my clock. And some drumming somewhere in the distance.

We travelled by train from Delhi to Rangibad, through shanty towns and fields. Women in saris ran down hills, holding two pots of water on their heads with a third pot under one arm. Babies wearing nothing but string around their waists and silver jewellery on their ankles sat on their soft bottoms happily tasting dirt.

After spending most of the day at Rangibad, we were finally discovered by three old buses. Trustingly we allowed the drivers, who spoke no English, to take us somewhere - or should I say nowhere. Sam would have had a heart attack if he knew how disorganised it all was. When we arrived at night in Laman, all the children came out to chase the buses. I was sure my bus was going to roll over and kill us all. Sam wouldn’t even read about it. It’d just become the Legend of the Rolling Bus, and the old people would tell it to the children for all time to stop them from playing on the roads. I wonder how many other legends we’ll leave behind.

Kelly is behaving in a claustrophobic, bizarre manner which reminds me of a bear I once saw in a zoo. The bear, on all fours, was walking to one side of the enclosure and swinging his huge head out to the side as if to shake a fly from his ear. Then he paced to the other side and did the same thing. He repeated this for as long as I had the heart to watch.
Funny though, how could she be claustrophobic in such a wide space? Maybe she’s agoraphobic. The space is endless. Beyond the screenless doors and windows is the colour green. Not Australian dark, bottle green but a bright, fragrant green which extends as far as I can see, right up to the mountains. There are even a few eucalyptus trees, and there’s nothing claustrophobic about this space. Maybe she’s afraid of nothingness - or displacement. Maybe she doesn’t like the idea of being cut off from the rest of the world by a circle of mountains. Maybe she’s just frustrated because she didn’t get to choose the colour of the walls.
From the window Kelly could see a bullock moving too slowly – trudging through mud as if he had never done anything more interesting in his whole life. He dragged a plough and allowed himself to be constantly hit with a stick.

"Dumb animal," Kelly said. She snorted to clear her throat, clogged with dust after the night's joyless bus excursion. Her leather sandals were still at the front door covered with mud. She had arrived somewhere on this muddy, dark planet unprepared. The driver did not understand her urgent demands to shine the torch into the thirsty ground, so she could retrieve her half-digested, broken shoe. He understood nothing, it seemed. He had no map and relied on Dr Kadamb’s memory to get them into this nothingness. Apparently this place wasn't even significant enough to be on a map anyway.

The driver had ripped her damp suitcase on a piece of metal protruding from the top of the bus. The suitcase stuck as he heaved it and threw it into the arms of another boy who dropped it in the mud. Somewhere, out there on the farm, were bus tyre tracks and a gaping hole where her dog-eaten shoe had temporarily sunk.

Kelly turned her back on the bullock and stepped over mattressess and sleeping bags to get to the door. She peered out at makeshift washing lines. A purple and green sari clung to a bush like a starfish. Its owner must have painted the walls, Kelly thought. No one would paint walls, ceiling,
doors, windowsills and light switches sickly pink unless they also wore purple and green saris.

Beneath the starfish bush, a black and red hen pecked at the dirt while a mangy dog chased his tail in a circle until he grabbed it. A woman in a pink sari carried enough wood on top of her head to build a dog house. Her neck was squashed by the load. She waved an arm at the hen as she passed by and sent it flapping over the hilly ground towards the neighbouring farm.

Kelly tossed her mane of hair out of her face and crossed back to the other side of the room to double-check for possible noise or movement. A skinny man called, "Ja! Ja!" to the bullock and someone rode past on a bicycle.

Knots of frustration tightened in Kelly's stomach. What were they going to do here for thirty days? Ride bullocks? Catch roosters? Make dog houses? The neighbour's dog barked, as if to select the most suitable option.

Kelly tossed her hair back again as she stepped over the sleeping bags. She tripped on Elisa's suitcase on her way to peer out the front door, in search of the dog who had dared to be so outspoken.
Laman, 9.12.2006

I can’t imagine what Dr Kadamb has planned for us. There can’t be many tourist sites in this place, although everything to me is a wonder. From the geckos and the lolly-pink walls to the washing bush and the too-small door. And we’ve only just arrived.

When we landed here the other evening, a small girl with rough, dry cheeks started touching my hair. Everyone began stroking it because it wasn’t black. They wanted to touch it, brush it, decorate it; even the flies wanted to play on my red head. Now my hair is crawling. My skin is wrinkling in places it never did before. My arms are scaly and my eyes are dry.

We’re the first white people to come here, apart from Maria of course. The women said hello to me by feeling my earrings to see whether they were genuine gold. Men didn’t look at me, as far as I was aware. Old women came rocking up to me on bow legs, shouting enthusiastically from a distance, as if I were also hard of hearing. One old lady yelled in my face, in a friendly way, as if this might improve my understanding of her language. She laughed when I didn’t respond, then spat and laughed some more. I thought for a moment she had spat out her tooth.

Mrs Kadamb was already here when we climbed down from the bus. She took my hand in both of hers and smiled so widely that she seemed surprised that we had, in fact, arrived safely. She escorted us
across the field with her bangles jingling, to our pink, cement house, and showed us where to find torches and bottles of water. Then she walked off into the darkness.

Maria’s face was almost luminous amid the crowd of villagers who greeted us. She doesn’t blend in very well. She’s taller than everyone. She’s whiter than everyone. And most obviously, she’s triple the weight of any other village women. She’s so fully pregnant that she has to lean backwards when she walks to prevent herself from falling forwards. Her state of being looks so ungainly and unnatural. But admittedly, she’s the most graceful and serene pregnant woman I’ve ever seen.

For some reason I have no recollection of Mummy being in that state. I don’t even remember her being fat or overweight. She was always slim, as far as I can recall. I can’t imagine Dad would have fallen over himself for an overweight woman. He’s so particular about the way women are supposed to look. Can’t imagine him even walking in the street with a pregnant lady, even if she were his own wife. He probably kept her at home. Mummy must have been bored - sitting around knitting and sleeping and feeling sick. I don’t think I could bear that kind of life for nine months, but Maria seems to enjoy being pregnant. She breathes the same rosy air as Sky. I wonder if I’ll ever find delight in that kind of asphyxiating existence.

When we arrived, Sky helped Maria light thin candles stuck onto pieces of cardboard, and place them along the verandah. Maria lit them, looking like a painting of the Madonna with a halo. Sky set the candles as reverently as possible on the cement floor. The edges of Maria’s sari
shimmered with sequins in the moonlight. Together they created this surreal, otherworldly atmosphere here in the middle of Wonderland. Sky told me she spoke with Dr Kadamb about the possibility of her staying in the village for a few months after the tour ends. She's in her element.
On arrival in Laman, Sky looked for her suitcase among the seventy bags scattered in the dark fields, to check whether her clay statue of Ganesha was still in one piece. When she had rescued her unbroken creation, she spontaneously decided to give it away, before it could be thrown around any further.

In the morning, after Dr Kadamb had finished breakfast, Sky asked him if he would like to keep her statue. Dr Kadamb’s mother came from the kitchen at that moment to take her son’s plate. Noticing the small, red Ganesha, she began to praise it enthusiastically. "Aréwa! Ganesha! Sundar ahé!" She put down the plates and picked up the big-bellied God, raising it to her forehead to respectfully place her head at its feet.

The next day, Sky found the statue sitting cross-legged in a square hole in one of the outside walls of the house. He was settled on a red, spiral mat edged with golden tassels. His trunk had been stroked with red paste and he wore a red bindi on his forehead. There was yellow powder scattered on his belly, and around him a wavy trail of incense smoke was rising from his little square house.

Sky gazed at her creation; it was alive. He had come from the earth and been molded with life-giving water, and there he was. Sky clasped her hands together and looked to the sun. At last she had found a purpose. She could be useful in this place, and this is where she wanted to stay.
Laman, 13.12.2006

Every morning at sunrise, Mrs Kadamb plays a raga on the harmonium before collecting wood for the fire. She begins slowly, playing one note at a time, as if allowing the instrument to breathe deeply before waking up. Gradually she quickens the pace, her fingers running a series of scales up and down, each time adding a new note until the village is woken by imitation bird calls. Something inside me rises as she plays the highest note. It pulls me to my feet like a puppet. I mean, a puppet with strings.

Kelly finds it irritating.

Mrs Kadamb showed me the Indian scales on the harmonium this morning. She sang loudly in her husky voice. When I played a song, her face lit up as if I were a maestro. Sky believes all of the notes relate to "energy centres" in the body. I never learnt this from my music teacher so I don't know where she gets her information - maybe from this old man playing a flute. He's sitting beneath a tree in an orange robe. No one is paying much attention (except me - and maybe a dancing snake). I saw Sky trying to communicate with him yesterday. They were such a sight. Sky was showing him how to use her pocket, compact disk player. The man was holding the earphone away from him and looking at it curiously. Then he put it to his mouth and started singing into it.
It’s now late afternoon. Children are running up and down the porch with shallot bazookas, chasing paper aeroplanes. They play with anything - shallots, bottles, stones, water, soil. Buzzing bazookas and flutes sound surreal together. I’m under a tree with the harmonium, surrounded by hens. Mrs Kadamb is helping Sky and Maria open the field-water. It comes bubbling up several times a day when they turn a large wheel. Water dances and sparkles and looks like a fountain. I can hear the fresh sound of splashing from here.

I’m not brave enough to drink from the tap. Dr Kadamb said the tap water is clean and Sky insists that it tastes sweet, but I’m not convinced. I’m sticking to bottled water. It’s warm and boring but I’m afraid to guzzle the tap water in case I shrink or something, like Alice, and find myself chasing a late, white rabbit with a loudly ticking clock.

There are silver pots full of bore water near the tap, just in case the water stops running. The women walk to the tap in the morning, fill their pots (at least two each), and carry them home. The most difficult part seems to be stacking the pots onto their heads, getting them off again, and figuring out how to turn the tap off without bending over.

Sometimes the lights work, but the people don’t seem the least bit bothered when the power cuts. The darkness is intense. Last night, in darkness blacker than my eyes could comprehend, I lay stiff in my sleeping bag, listening to distant drumming and my blood pulse. A cat pushed the window shutters open and began creeping around the room over everybody’s luggage and faces. I couldn’t see the cat, so I couldn’t chase it out. It meowed for hours and hours and then slept somewhere
near my luggage. I couldn’t relax for fear that it would wee on my suitcase. None of the other students were awake.

It’s wedding season apparently. That’s what they call it. The distant drumming means someone is getting married. When we were all about to go to sleep, I looked out the door to see rivers of people disappearing into the fields. They were all going to a wedding. I mean, the whole village was going to the wedding! They were walking off into the darkness without torches. A lot of the students had gone to sleep already so there was only Mrs Kadamb and Maria left in the kitchen, murmuring together.

I stood for a while watching the people disappear into darkness. It was as if the only important thing on the planet was the wedding. Nobody was going to sleep through it except us - a group of foreign, Western students whose dreams were more important than life. Even the crickets and dogs seemed to celebrate.

I don’t know what we missed but it must have been something big. Or maybe it was something small. Everyone seemed to be awake before us this morning despite the fact that we went to bed first.
The village women had been awake since the sun peeped into Laman that morning. In half-light, while the sweet, jasmine smell of *Ratra Rani* still lingered, they began preparing to host the visitors. Together they swept the verandah and front yard with bunches of sticks, picked up the students' old tissues and plastic wrappers, massaged large lumps of dough, collected wood for the kitchen fire and pulled up enough onions to fill several crates with shallots.

Maria was now very familiar with village routine. She had lived in her husband's village for seven years and found it quite easy to adopt his family's traditions. She did not question village life. Laman was a place where even Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* would have been grounded. Often, Maria travelled with her husband to nearby villages as an assistant during his student tours. But this was the first time an international group of students had come to his own village. She made it her job, that morning, to fill two crates with shallots and begin cutting them for lunch.

In her flipping-flopping *chapels*, followed by her daughter, Maria was content. She had learnt how to properly hitch the pleats of her sari, while carrying crates, to avoid tripping. She enjoyed wearing saris. Even while fully pregnant, she never felt clumsy. She felt protected and enjoyed wrapping her baby up in soft cotton even before the birth.
After gathering shallots, Maria walked past the door of the visitor's room in her jingling anklets. On top of her head, a wooden crate, the width and depth of a large suitcase, was overflowing with vegetables. The load made it impossible for her to turn and acknowledge Kelly who was too preoccupied with nothingness to say hello anyway. But she followed Maria towards the kitchen where some of the students had gone to fetch bath water.

Maria's sequin-patterned sari brushed past Kelly, catching hold of a loose cardigan thread and pulling it into the kitchen. Kelly felt herself being tugged. She looked at her sleeve and began wrapping the wool around her fingers. She snatched at the unravelling wool. It broke and floated to the floor.

Mrs Kadamb was pouring boiling water from a large iron pot into a bucket for one of the students who waited to take a bath. Near the fire, Maria's daughter squatted to watch a pot full of boiling eggs. Several other women had started to prepare lunch. The kitchen seemed too small to hold the quantity of steaming, boiling water and dinging, banging noises.

Kelly noticed one woman squatting on the kitchen bench to reach the gas cooker. Squatting was one thing, but squatting on the kitchen bench was another thing altogether. The woman was trying to light a match by scraping it backwards and forwards on a blunt matchbox while gas hissed patiently. Kelly assumed someone knew what they were doing, because the women were all talking and laughing, and none of them seemed at all concerned about the possibility of an explosion.
The crate of shallots was lowered from Maria's head onto the floor by two women. Maria made herself comfortable, selected one bunch of shallots and began to slice them with a single, upright blade. Kelly looked at the blade, then the box of shallots, and figured that lunch would be late – that is, assuming the kitchen had not blown up before the afternoon had finished.

"What time is lunch?" Kelly asked.

"When it is ready," Maria smiled back.

"Don't you have a clock?"

Maria briefly translated the amusing question to her mother-in-law, Mrs Kadamb, who laughed loudly and made a joke.

To Kelly's shock, the kitchen then exploded. It exploded in her face with laughter.
Yesterday I was on the porch reading a book from Dad called *How to Become Something*, when Dr Kadamb came along and gave some orders to his wife. She had already done a day’s work. She had swept the front porch, carried three pots of water up to the house from the tap, chopped enough food to feed seventy students, wrung and hung several saris and dhotis and had begun preparing some other meal. She was sitting at the far end of the porch with her legs crossed when her husband came. He stood over her, picked up an eggplant from the basket, turned it over in his hand and threw it at her, as if to say it was no good. He made some comment, then left. Maria sat for a few minutes staring at the basket of eggplants, with her mouth drooping, then took the basket to the sheep and dropped the eggplants into their enclosure. After that, she disappeared into the fields in search of better aubergines.

I looked down to my book to finish a chapter on *Creating Your Own Mythology*, but couldn’t concentrate. I was thinking about Dad and the conversations I’ve had with him about the non-existence of God. Then I remembered something. I distinctly remembered him shouting "Damn clock!" He was yelling at Mummy and was all red in the face. I have a vague recollection of glass shattering in the hallway. It must have been some time in the afternoon because I was in my school uniform.

I’ve been trying to remember more but that’s all I can recall.
Dad doesn’t speak much about Mummy. He doesn’t have many photos of her. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a photo of Mummy and Dad together! I wonder what kind of marriage they had. I wonder if it was anything like Maria’s marriage to Dr Kadamb.

When I see Maria toiling, I get angry and I wonder why she doesn’t just tell her husband to stuff the eggplants himself. But why should I think like that? She chose to live here. She could have stayed in France with her rich family or she could have gone to some other place, couldn’t she? She doesn’t have to wear a sari and a red dot on her forehead if she doesn’t want to. She must be here for some genuinely good reason. She has a certain kind of peacefulness, which I’ve never seen in any other Western woman.

A little while ago, Mrs Kadamb, with her sari pulled over her head in the front yard, was shaking a little basket full of grains. She was tossing them in the air and letting them fall to her feet so the husk could float off at an angle. Dr Kadamb was sitting nearby and I heard her say something to him which sounded sarcastic. They were arguing about Maria. I guessed Dr Kadamb was saying how useless Maria was, while Mrs Kadamb was saying something like, "She’s about to have a baby, you fool." That’s what I hoped anyway.

Now I suddenly feel as if there’s no century or country between Mrs Kadamb and myself, and I could quite happily touch her feet. It’s not something I usually think about, of course. But a few days ago I saw her bend right over to touch the feet of a woman who must have been even older than herself. These two old women, wearing huge moons on their
noses, came together with such mutual respect that I was dumbstruck. Not only by the power of tradition but by the power of old age and matriarchy. These old women hold this culture in their hands. They seem to have an incredible secret. Maria must know what it is, otherwise I can’t imagine why she’d put up with taking orders from everyone older than herself.

Old Moon-Woman,
knowing more than words,
stoops to touch the feet
of Old Moon-Woman.
Maria stuffed the eggplants with a mixture of garlic, peanuts and spices and cooked them in a large amount of oil. She arranged the silver, metal plates in rows along the porch for the students and set down saris, already sewn into long cushions, for the students to sit on. She served dinner and continued moving up and down the rows of students, offering chupattis from her basket and eggplant from the hot pot. Most of the students were very polite but, as usual, there were a few who frowned at the food and asked for beef.

Kelly could not bring herself to eat eggplants with bread. "I thought you were making something sweet," she said.

"That is for tomorrow lunch," Maria smiled. "This is dinner right now."

"I know what dinner is," Kelly retorted. She finished eating as much of the food as she could, and under her breath said, "This is not what I call dinner." She took her cup of water, washed her hands over the dinner plate, like everyone else, and made her way over to the tree where Elisa was always sitting.

As soon as Kelly stepped down from the porch with her keys rattling, the dogs began to bark like bombs exploding in different directions around the village. The night was coming quickly. The electricity could black out at
any moment and Elisa would be out there, writing under a tree on her own, without a torch or match, or even a bit of flint.

This was the Stone Age, Kelly thought. Even Elisa looked like a cavewoman, licking her pen and banging it on the paper. Didn't she bring another one? "Stop banging it like that!" Kelly interrupted Elisa who jumped and frightened a hen. "You look like some freaky animal out here in the dark. Get another pen!"

"I've finished anyway," Elisa said as she sat in a new position and put her notebook away.

"My son always does that and I'm always telling him to throw the stupid thing away and get a new one." Kelly put one hand on the ground behind her and awkwardly sat on a rock so she wouldn't get dusty.

"I didn't know you had a son." Elisa was surprised by his sudden appearance in the conversation. "How old is he?"

"Well, I was a pregnant bride at sixteen – I'm not married anymore. And he's six."

Kelly started drawing with a stick in the dirt while Elisa stared at her profile. Her face was not fleshy like a young woman. Her cheekbones were pronounced and her square jaw was tight as if she always had her teeth clenched. Elisa almost made the mistake of telling Kelly how old she looked, but stopped herself.
"I can't believe you... have done so much in your life already! I'm twenty-five but I don't feel old enough to look after anyone. So, who's looking after him while you're here? What's his name?"

"His name's Jack. He's with my brother until I get back.... If I ever get back."

Elisa was not really listening anymore. She was calculating Kelly's age for the third time to check she had not made a mistake.

"I didn't really want to have a baby at sixteen."

"No. I have to admit I'm not very interested in the whole idea of having babies myself," Elisa confessed.

"I elected to have a caesarean rather than go through the birth."

Elisa had never heard of such a thing as an elective caesarean. She sensed the conversation drifting to uncomfortable territory, shifted her position and decided not to ask anymore personal questions.

Maria had almost finished cleaning up after the students' dinner. Her stomach was so huge that it seemed to be pulling her to the ground. She kept lifting it up and straightening her back. Elisa wondered how old Maria was if Kelly was only twenty-two. It was quite possible that Maria, having a five-year-old daughter and perhaps marrying at a ridiculous age like sixteen, could have been only... twenty-one. Maria has no idea what she's doing, Elisa thought, and she's just doing what she's told. "I hope Maria knows where to go when it's time to go," Elisa said.

"She's having the baby in a hut. Can you believe it?"
"A hut? Not here, I hope."

"She's going with Mrs Kadamb into the wilderness somewhere, like a cavewoman."

As the conversation became more alarming, Elisa sensed that old dangling feeling. It was like free falling and waiting for her heartbeat to catch up. At that moment she sensed what it would be like to be a parachuter, unable to find the release cord. It seemed that her life and everyone else's depended upon whether or not she could get hold of that flimsy piece of string.
Laman, 17.12.2006

I never thought to ask Dad about what actually went wrong during Mummy's labour. I never really wanted to know before. But seeing Kelly looking so spent, at the age of twenty-two, makes me realise why Sam is in such a hurry to have a baby. I'm suddenly starting to wonder about Mummy's labour. But the whole subject of birth reminds me of death. And this reminds me that nothing at all is sacred. If birth isn't sacred, then what is? Labour, for me, means the end of bedtime stories. The end of Easter-bunny stories, Santa stories and stories about the "King of Angels".

When Mummy disappeared, I wondered for a while what had happened, but Dad just kept saying she went to Heaven. A few years later he said there wasn't any Heaven, and then I realised that there were no stories either. There was just nothing - except big boxes in the graveyard.

Most people knew there was nothing, but they didn't like to admit it. They needed something to cling to. So they formed, what I called, their "Fundamental Bundle" of beliefs. And they built their lives upon those unstable little mounds of fine sand. Sometimes I would see them balancing precariously on their little mounds and often they'd fall off - and keep falling.
But I never built a little mound like that. I believe in nothing, so I can’t fall very far. Sometimes though, I feel like there’s an underground river running right beneath me. And I feel like I could fall into it at any time.

Kelly’s mound is quite big. She stands up there as if nothing can bring her down. But what’s her mound made of? Belief in herself? How does she manage to create such a strong little mountain out of simply believing in her own capacity to succeed and excel?

Sky’s little mountain seems to be made of anything she can find to prop it up. She believes in everything - from bad luck and destiny to good luck and “positive visualisation”. But some people are left alone on their fine sandy mounds to keep on pretending that life is good. For some reason, they’re given nothing to complain about.

Maria’s "bundle" seems to be even more peculiar. She must believe in something, otherwise she wouldn’t be living here. She seems to believe that even if the sky falls down, she’ll be fine. She doesn’t see any holes in that argument. In fact, I don’t think she’s ever allowed herself to consider what she believes in, as opposed to what others would like her to believe.
Maria was at the end of her seventh month of pregnancy. It was the most auspicious time for the village women to celebrate her magnificent becoming. Some of the women suspected she would have twins. They had never seen any woman so full of growing life. Her stomach not only extended forwards, like a ball, but also to both sides. The tops of her arms were too thick for her sari blouses and her face was radiant. It was the right time for a pregnancy celebration.

Pink roses and red gerberas were bought from the market and made into garlands to decorate Maria's womanly arms and belly. Sweet dough was rolled into balls and soaked in syrup, or cut into shapes and fried. A silver tray was prepared with incense, rice, kumkum, turmeric and an oil burner, so that every woman could pay their respects and give blessings for the coming birth.

Maria was dressed by Mrs Kadamb in an elaborate, green sari and escorted to her throne made from an old chair draped with golden silk. Seventy Western students sat watching, while Maria stood to receive the attention of seven sisters who tied bands of flowers on her arms and around her waist. She sat down heavily, like a guru, while her sisters positioned the folds of her sari and the flowers on her belly. Hundreds of women from the village came, one at a time, to sprinkle rice on her head, wave the silver tray around her in semicircles and place fruit on her sacred lap. She received the
blessings with serene joy. She did not appear to mind sitting for hours on her throne, in fact, the ceremony seemed to suit Maria's personality quite well.

"Doesn't she look like royalty?" Sky whispered. Elisa watched the ritual with a mixture of curiosity, distaste and anxiety. Maria had been accepting gifts and attention all morning while the whole village looked on. Some of the students had already gone in search of snack-food, but all the village women sat huddled together, making jokes, laughing and adoring Maria.

Elisa's legs had gone numb. She could not cross them any longer. She repositioned herself, holding her legs with her knees up under her chin. She had begun to find the ceremony tedious. She had so many books to finish reading and the morning was her best time for concentrating. In the afternoon it would become too hot.

Sky's constant expression of exhilaration was also becoming annoying, but Elisa had to admit that Maria did look quite astonishing. She looked, as usual, like a painting. She was born to be looked at and adored. If Elisa had been carrying a camera, like Sky, she probably would have taken photographs too. Sky had a zoom lens the length of her long fingers.

"This will make the most divine series!" She said as she held the camera to her eye. "I'm taking a close-up of the garland on her stomach and the fruit in her lap."

Elisa wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. The day was warming up but Sky's stamina was not waning. Elisa examined Sky's face. The
camera was stuck to her eye. She looked like a picture herself with her purple scarf sparkling around her neck, her painted fingernails moving around the camera, and shiny gold balls dangling from her ears. She was a picture called "Peculiar Perception". She reminded Elisa of a child with a kaleidoscope.
Eucalyptus soothes my heart like nothing else in the world. I’m breathing the smell of broken leaves to clear my chest. It’s almost evening. Everyone is eating. I’m sitting here in the pink room by myself with a handful of leaves. Hope nobody comes looking for me. I need to be alone.

Once I had a kaleidescope. I was four or five. I could sit for hours happily watching the colours dance. I also had a set of forty crayons. Preeti has only ten, but she’s even more excited than I was when Mummy gave me mine.

Preeti was with her mother in the end room today, when I was sitting on the verandah steps, listening to the water bubbling. Maria called me to join them. It was cool and dark in the room. Maria was sifting flour through an old, cotton sari into a large bowl. She was cross-legged on the hard floor – her enormous stomach sitting in her lap like a huge egg. Preeti had her own bowl and piece of cotton but wasn’t doing a good enough job, so Maria asked if I could take over.

I sat reluctantly. It didn’t look like a very exciting job. But when I put my hands into the sack of flour to scoop it into the sifter, I was surprised. I’d never felt the coolness of flour before. It was similar to fine, cool sand. I had to move the flour in circles on the sari which was
knotted over the top of the pot. The fine grains were supposed to fall through, and the coarse grains had to be scraped up.

Maria didn’t speak much while we did this job. She wasn’t smiling, but her mouth was not drooping either. So I guess she must have been quite happy. I think she enjoyed her ceremony the other day. Her mouth was sort of flat. Now and again she’d massage her stomach. She looked pretty uncomfortable. Whenever she rubbed her stomach I felt embarrassed. It was a bit like burping (which she also does without much inhibition). I felt like asking why she was going to have her baby in a hut but I didn’t want to get into that conversation. So after some time, I asked whether this work made her tired. She said it didn’t and that she liked it. She called it "reality."

And so I sat there making little circles in flour thinking, "This is reality," until Preeti started to make a fuss. She wanted some reality too. Maria insisted that I keep sifting because I was apparently doing a good job, but Preeti started to cry and complain. She smacked her mother on the back, frowned and flopped into the corner on an old hessian sack. Maria stood up with a lot of difficulty. She said she had something special for Preeti and opened a wooden crate. I thought she was going to give Preeti a dress or something but, of all things, she gave her a packet of crayons!

My heart felt like it was about to split open. I knew what the crayons were for. Maria was going away - not to hospital in a taxi like Mummy, but to some hut to have her baby. And Preeti was supposed to stay behind with crayons to keep herself busy. She was supposed to just
keep drawing, like I did. And she was supposed to just wait for her mother to come home. I couldn’t say anything at all when Preeti showed me the crayons. I was overcome by a horrible feeling of dread and just stared at the smiling Maria. It was like staring at a woman who had no knowledge that she was about to die.

I went back to sifting flour. I tried to make the circular, sifting movements as perfect as possible and began to count how many circles I was making just to preoccupy my brain. After a moment, I began to think about Preeti. I could see the thoughts enter my head. My face was close to the bowl so the flour dust was up my nose and I could smell it. It must have looked as if I were searching for gold nuggets. I was still sitting by myself, staring at circles in the flour after Maria and Preeti had gone off for an afternoon sleep.

Eventually I had to stop and go in search of eucalyptus leaves. The smell reminds me of Mummy’s warm hands. She wrapped me in something like a little, cotton jacket and tied it on, nice and snug. I didn’t move in my bed at all. I lay completely still and breathed slowly. My chest was all wrapped up – secure and warm. I must have been quite a sick child because I remember Mummy rubbing eucalyptus into my chest regularly. I must have had bronchitis or something. Dad never said I was a sick child. Maybe he didn’t know.
"It's just that she has a very small chest," the doctor had said when Elisa was born four weeks early. Baby Elisa was taken away from her mother when she was one day old and kept in intensive care for the first three weeks of her life. Elisa's mother had wanted to nurse her first baby, but could barely manage to walk to the intensive care unit from her hospital ward. Her baby was stuck with suctions and fed through a drip, so there was really no need for Elisa's mother's milk. And when Elisa was finally brought home, she had become accustomed to a bottle and showed little interest in her mother's breast.

Elisa's mother had no older relations to instruct or help her. The Donnelly family lived alone, as most people did, and Mr Donnelly was responsibly hard at work, earning an income to keep his wife and child happy. Or so he thought. However, he soon noticed the house becoming less and less "aesthetic". There seemed to be more hair in the bath plug than on his short legs and the toilet was often left unflushed. Frequently, he arrived home to find his baby crying in her bed with a dirty nappy on, and his wife in a deep sleep. Unfortunately, while he was working hard to keep everyone happy, his wife was gradually slipping into a state of melancholy.

Elisa's father was not a counsellor or psychiatrist. He was not someone who had experience with or empathy for emotionally unbalanced people. It was not as if he had been trained in managing a depressed wife
prior to marriage. If he kept up his side of the deal, then his wife should have had nothing to be miserable about.

As the years passed, Elisa's mother slowly emerged from her dark cave, but somewhat too late. Mr Donnelly had come to prefer sleeping on his own in the lounge room. Nobody woke him up when he snored, and the baby slept better away from his snoring. So he decided to stay there.

Each winter Elisa suffered from breathing difficulties associated with the formation of her lungs. She needed to be massaged before bed. Her mother burnt eucalyptus oil in the bedroom all through the winter nights. She kept Elisa propped up on a pillow, always half sitting, so she would not wake from coughing. "Things would probably improve for her after the age of five," the doctor had told Elisa's mother.
Laman, 24.12.2006

My head is full of questions. Every conversation seems to be unsettling. Too many things are disturbing.

Firstly, I haven’t recovered from the shock of discovering Kelly’s age. She’s only twenty-two but divorced with a six-year old son. I assumed she was older than me, because she has such an attitude and the veins in her hands pop out. How could any Western girl feel ready to marry at sixteen? I guess she thought it was better than being a single mum, although she’s a single mum now anyway.

I can kind of understand why she behaves the way she does. She’s determined to become something great so she can manage her life. She has a son after all and someone has to buy him his soccer boots and cricket bats. She lives alone with him in a "stuffy flat", she said. She received a grant to come on this tour, otherwise she couldn’t have come. Her mother’s in a mental institution on the other side of Australia and her father’s somewhere else. She depends on a brother.

Maria is lucky in that way. She has her mother-in-law and the whole village to help her. Every woman in the village came to watch Maria being decorated and adored. She has more than two-hundred hands ready to rock her unborn baby. The village seems to move like one body. Everyone goes to the weddings. One of the neighbour’s sons is getting
married soon, so Mrs Kadamb and her friends are already starting to help with preparations.

Maria is the most significantly bothering factor. Why has this French woman given up her education and culture to live here, fry morsels and die giving birth in a hut? It’s as if she has suffered from some kind of horrid motherhood lobotomy. She looks pale in her yellow-green saris, with her hair tied back in a plait. She closes her eyes serenely, smiles, gives a head-wobble to say, "Everything is fine," but all I see is a white, wobbling head on a yellow stick with a green sari for hair. Like those toys they sell at sideshows.

I can barely hear the richness of her original accent. A French-English accent is thick like honey. But all I hear is butter - butter, oil, ghee, peanuts, garlic and chillies. I need to talk to someone about something other than stuffed chupattis. No. I need to talk to Maria. What was she like before she became a pregnant woman with anklets stuck to her sari and a daughter called Preeti stuck to her leg?
Dr Hari Kadamb liked honey. He had spent many of his young days climbing trees in his village, looking for bee's nests. His mother had told him that honey was God's nectar. It was Krishna's food, and Ganesha's food. It was the most poetic and symbolic food he had ever tasted, and he could think of no other food more delicious or more meaningful. So, when he arrived at the "Paris Conference of Literature and Mysticism", he was extremely pleased to find rich honey tarts made by the porcelain hand of a green-eyed beauty named Maria.

Maria sat at the back of the room next to her tea trolley set with French honey-cakes and tarts. She faced away from the group inconspicuously but listened to every word in the hope of hearing something about Anna Karenina. Dr Hari Kadamb's paper was on Tolstoy's mysticism. Maria could see Hari's reflection quite clearly in the window. He was tall and stood behind a desk, smartly dressed in a white shirt and maroon tie. He used his hands a lot and his hair was black, thick and shiny.

Maria put her head down to examine her shoe before turning to sneak a direct look at Hari's face. His skin was not an ordinary dark brown. Like the desert sand, his face seemed to have absorbed the colour of the afternoon sun and was almost glowing with a subtle, reddish-orange hue. He was very beautiful.
"However, we must remember..." Hari looked in Maria's direction and stopped speaking. His eyes were ebony. If Maria looked back at him, her heart would be sucked into his reality. That much she knew already. Her reality was not solid enough to prevent that kind of thing. It was made of Cinderella gowns and empty, sparkling slippers. It was a lonely, floating bubble within which she turned like a ballerina, waiting for a prince to slice her swirling world with his sword. The sword would pop her rainbow bubble and bring her down to solid ground.

Maria looked away from Hari's eyes but her heart had already been touched by something frightening. The sword had come so close to her bubble that she could feel herself spinning in the air. She shrank back into her chair and held onto the sides. The corners of her mouth turned slightly upward at the idea that she had interrupted the beautiful man's important point.

When Hari's reflection had stepped away from the window, she stood up to pour the tea. Sunlight fell from the pot in a golden-brown stream. From behind her, a brown hand claimed a cup and a second hand scooped four teaspoons of sugar, and stirred slowly. The slow stirring and slow pouring made Maria feel faint – the intensity of sweet sugar, mystical talk, steaming, bitter tea. And the taste of honey.

"Delicious. Do you make them?" Hari asked hopefully. It was like a proposal and Maria was unable to refuse. Looking up at him like a worried school girl admitting to Mother Superior that she loves chocolate, she said, "Yes, I do."
Can't believe Maria chose to live here. My taste buds can't comprehend the lack of cold food. There's no fridge. Everything is either warm or hot or extra hot. When I speak to her, I always think about a bucket of ice-water and how I'd like to throw it in her face. I feel like holding her by the shoulders and shaking her to make her conscious of her white, wobbling head.

She told me how she met Dr Kadamb - how they "fell into love" (as she put it), when she was a tea lady at a conference. Apparently they "got carried away together to India," and now she's "at home," whereas before, she "was having no life." So it all sounds very rosy. Unfortunately her flat smile is not convincing. The only time I felt she was being completely honest was when she spoke about Mrs Kadamb. She said, "She is more than my mother. She was with me when I had Preeti."

Apparently Maria gave birth to Preeti in a hut somewhere around here, and only Mrs Kadamb was with her at the time. There are no doctors anywhere, and I can't imagine any doctors from Mumbai coming all the way to the village. So I guess Mrs Kadamb delivered the baby, and somehow everything was all right.

It seems incomprehensible to me that someone could give birth out here in the middle of nowhere, with no medical help. Mummy couldn't manage to do something supposedly so natural despite being surrounded
by medical equipment, doctors, nurses and who knows what else. Hasn’t Maria ever heard of the word "accident"? Doesn’t she know anything about the potentially life-ending things that could happen to her in an isolated hut during labour? Why do I seem to know more about this than her?

It’s clear to me now. I’m more frightened for Maria and Preeti than anybody else. Everybody smiles when they see Maria. Everyone loves looking at her. They love the fact that she’s pregnant. And they love the way she holds her belly with her hands as if her baby might fall out if she didn’t. Even Maria doesn’t look scared. Actually, she looks kind of holy when she stands with her head covered in a sari, and the sun shining through onto her pale face on this Christmas day. She seems to glow.

She’s oblivious to future pain. And she’s not embarrassed to talk about it. She doesn’t react at all when Sky asks her personal questions like, "How does it feel?" Maria was even squatting on the kitchen bench yesterday in the way everyone else does, despite the fact that it looks like a rather dangerous thing for a fully pregnant woman to do. Often I see her out the front of the porch, down on all fours, painting dung onto the floor with her hands.

Preeti has already started to occupy herself with crayons. She sits alone on the porch, drawing flowers and trees while Maria stuffs and rolls, slices and sorts things. Every time I see Preeti on her own, I get so anxious that my stomach begins acting on its own accord and I feel like I need to run into the bushes. Even now, just thinking about her future, my stomach is tensing up.
I guess you’d become more nonchalant about your second pregnancy if your first one went okay. I don’t think Mummy was anxious about being pregnant. She was just tired all the time. But Dad might have been anxious. He was probably on edge, although he never talks about anything. It must have affected him terribly.
Elisa’s father was a short man. And short men, he said, necessarily "had to be loud in order to be seen.” His name was Mr Jack Donnelly and his wife, Elizabeth Donnelly, was, according to him, the only woman in the world who had noticed him before he had opened his mouth. She spotted him in his loud polka dot tie, as he walked past the school where she was teaching. Her smile undeniably said "I'll let you take me out."

When their first baby was born, she was named Elisa, after her mother, and christened at the local church. Jack's wife had knitted a white dress for their baby's christening and Jack had taken two rolls of film on the great day. His favourite photo turned out to be a close-up shot of his baby's screaming face.

In later years, he delighted in telling his daughter the story of how, at her christening, she had screamed just before the priest had begun pouring water onto her curly, red locks. She had struggled, like a writhing snake trying to shed a layer of skin, to free herself from the confines of flannel and forced fun. She had always been, according to him, a religious rebel. And it was because of her flaming curls, and those of her Irish father's great-grandfather, that she had been born struggling against the boundaries set before her.

When she was five, Elisa was taken to church to attend the funeral of her grandfather. During the intense silence, while the priest was solemnly reading the obituary, she began to hum a tune. As the obituary became more
and more heart-wrenching, Elisa's humming grew louder. Her father asked her to stop and she did – for a while. But she found it impossible to bear the silent, melancholy atmosphere. All at once she broke loudly into her own rendition of a Christmas carol, singing "Ding Dong merrily along, all the bells are ringing." She ended the song by wailing U2's pop song "Gloria" and was swiftly removed from the church, to the great embarrassment of her mother.

Mrs Donnelly had not really wished to attend the funeral. She was pregnant and not very useful, in the opinion of her husband. But the two of them tried to obey the expectations of their culture. Mr Donnelly followed his wife to church whenever she felt it was necessary to make an appearance, especially at Christmas and Easter – and for births, deaths and marriages. Her funeral was to be the very last religious ritual he would care to attend.

Christmas and Easter were no longer celebrated in the Donnelly's house after the death of Elisa's mother. Sometimes, Elisa would receive a special book or a new pen, but her father never bought a Christmas tree or told any Easter bunny stories. She heard all about the mysteries of Jesus, Santa and the Easter bunny from school, but *Alice in Wonderland* was probably the closest she ever got to the white Easter-rabbit.

When Elisa and Sam were married, Mr Donnelly insisted the wedding take place in the park with a celebrant; otherwise he would not have attended. He carefully examined the marriage vows before they were read, to edit them appropriately. Elisa, of course, agreed with her father when he kindly requested the celebrant to delete the word "God".
Laman, 27.12.2006

The words death and birth are not supposed to be in the same sentence. They’re two opposite subjects which seem to have mistakenly merged themselves together in my vocabulary. It’s like putting a full stop before you have even begun the sentence. It leaves nothing to discuss and makes no sense. It leaves a page, and life, full of empty space.

I’m here by myself again in this square, pink room. Dr Kadamb has taken everyone for a long walk through the fields. They all meandered in a long line past the field-water pipe and up through the middle of the neighbour’s herd of cows. They turned left at the field of shallots and kept on going, off into the distance, down a hill and into another farm. I guess they’re heading for the fire. Someone is burning off a whole field. The fire, from our window, looks like an accident – black smoke pouring into the sky.

I didn’t feel like walking all day in the heat. It’s not too bad now, but by the time they return, I’ll be lying flat on my sleeping bag, trying not to breathe too much.

They forgot to take the silence with them. They’ve left it behind. I can only hear Maria’s flapping shoes, Preeti’s sheets of paper, a cow, and Mrs Kadamb, who just yelled out something to her neighbour. And I can hear my scrambled thoughts about Maria and Mrs Kadamb in a
hut without a doctor to tell them what to do. I suppose Mrs Kadamb already knows what to do. But then, Mummy knew what to do too.

I wonder who was with Mummy at the time. I don't think they allowed men into the ward in those days. Dad was probably asleep at home. Or maybe he was pacing the hallway. I guess he was at home looking after me. Of course he was. I was asleep.

Mummy tucked me into bed as she always did. She massaged my chest with eucalyptus and must have mentioned something about a taxi. When I woke, mummy was gone. From then on I used to look for taxis. I didn't cry when she didn't come home, but I kept waiting. Dad knew she wasn't coming back, so it must have been worse for him.

I have this image of Mrs Kadamb wailing and crying all night long. That's what she'll do if Maria dies in the hut. And Preeti will just keep on colouring, while Sky praises her pictures and finds joy where there isn't really any at all. Dr Kadamb will stop talking about Gnosticism and send everyone back home. And Kelly will be thankful that someone has died so that she can get an early flight out of Laman.

And me? I have no image of what I would do. I just have this big, empty page.
Elisa drew pictures of Mummies in triangle dresses. She drew pictures of Daddies, dollies, moons and stars. She drew until the paper on her crayons had fallen off, and her crayons had broken into pieces so small that she could only rub them with her tiny thumb onto scraps of paper. Perhaps when the crayons had all completely disappeared, she thought, Mummy would come home with the new baby. And Mummy would help finish the pictures, and stick them on the cupboard for the new baby to look at.

She sat on the front verandah with her colouring book while her father fixed the wheels of her bicycle. The scent of roses pervaded the verandah. He worked with a spanner to tighten small bolts, to the constant sound of crayons rubbing on paper.

When the rubbing sound ceased, Elisa's father turned to glance at her. She was standing up, beaming at a taxi which had pulled up at the curb of the house.

"Mummy's home!" she ran down the front steps.

"Slow down, Lizzy!"

As Elisa ran closer to the parked taxi, a door opened and a walking-stick fell out. Elisa slowed down and stopped. Somebody's wrinkly, flabby arm stretched out from the front passenger's seat to reach for the stick.

"Lizzy, can you help the lady?" Elisa stared at the old lady's crooked, outstretched fingers and long, red fingernails. The hand was shaking. It was
dotted all over with white blotches. Elisa moved forward to pick up the walking-stick and let the lady take it. She did not wait to hear the lady's voice or to see the lady's face. She ran back up to her house as soon as the hand had taken hold of the stick. Mummy's hand could never look like that. Could it?
Around here they believe in things like curses and karma and explain inexplicable things using these theories. They would probably say I chose to be motherless so I could pay back some awful atrocity committed in my last life. People are quite superstitious here. There are ceremonies for everything and the ceremonies are grandiose. I wonder what they do to you if you lose your baby. The weddings alone go for three days so I can’t begin to imagine a funeral. Everyone here seems to look forward to their spiritual release through moksha so perhaps a funeral would be quite a big event.

The women are preparing for a wedding to take place soon. One of the young girls bought a box of wedding decorations from the town and opened it to show us. The box was full of assorted bottles of nail polish, red kumkum, sparkling things and face powder which she simply called "Ponds". She opened the box seriously and examined every item with complete respect for its significance. The details are all very important. The nail polish has to be the appropriate colour. It should be applied at the right time and in the most auspicious company.

Kelly always has something to say about these things. She didn’t stay to watch Maria’s pregnancy celebration. I saw her walk out in a huff quite early on, as though she couldn’t put up with it for any longer. Later, she came back and convinced Sky to go with her. It was very late in the
day by that time and Sky had finished taking photos so she disappeared with Kelly. When I asked Kelly later where she’d been, she said "up the mountain, looking for an escape." She went looking for a pathway out of Laman just in case the buses break down. She said she’s not staying a single moment longer than necessary.

Kelly has been asking questions about the coming wedding. She wants to know how the marriage was arranged, who arranged it and why. She told me that the girl is fifteen-years-old. "Only fifteen!" she exclaimed. For some reason she forgets that she, herself, married at sixteen. She seems to have also forgotten that her choice of husband was probably not a great one. She is, after all, divorced. Perhaps we should make the Western wedding ceremony last longer - a few weeks perhaps - so it becomes less appealing to go through it all a second, third, forth or fifth time. But that wouldn’t work. People would just give up on the idea altogether.
Elisa decided to stop writing because she could no longer concentrate. Kelly was walking up and down the porch, looking as if she might start a disturbance of some kind. Elisa put her pen down and breathed in the odd, sick smell of fat carrots dug up from the earth. The neighbour's bullocks called out to their friends across the valley to tell them it was lunch time. The water in the field bubbled and splashed and the children laughed.

Kelly was holding up her trousers with one hand while pacing the porch, searching for something important. She wasn't looking for her keys. They were still inanely rattling on her trousers. She interrupted Sky's lunch to demand an answer of some kind. Then she continued hunting, looking beneath hessian sacks on the porch and under an old steel bed which seemed to belong to no one and everyone. Eventually she stopped looking and started accusing.

First, she confronted the children who were blowing through shallots and swooping past each other with aeroplanes. They all stopped to shake their heads and defend themselves, so Kelly found a group of male students who began to look at their belts when she started asking questions. Finally, she looked out from the porch in Elisa's direction.

I can get up and go for a walk, Elisa thought. Or close my eyes and pretend to be Sky in deep contemplation. Or just look very busy. She turned
the page of her notebook, set her gaze on the mountains, picked up her pen and began to sketch.

The mountains were not completely visible from where she sat. They were half covered by a tamarind tree and the neighbouring cow shed. The bullocks were flapping their tails and ears and pulling on ropes, turning in circles. A very young woman, carrying a crying baby in a pouch, a crate of straw on her head and two silver buckets full of carrots, walked up steadily to the bullocks. She kneeled to lower the buckets then dumped the swishing straw from the crate at the feet of the hungry animals. The baby continued to cry while she emptied the buckets, and the bullocks munched the carrots, rustling the straw with their noses.

Elisa tried to ignore the crying baby. She tried to ignore the feelings of guilt at having ever been a screaming child. Kelly's rattling keys approached, drowning the sounds of babies and bubbling water.

"Elisa I'm trying to find my belt. Did you move it?"

She squinted up at Kelly who was standing with both hands on her hips while still holding her trousers. "What sort of belt?"

"You know! The belt I wear every day. The silver chain!"

The sun was behind Kelly's head. Elisa could not look up for long without feeling pangs of pain in her forehead. "No, I don't think so."

"What do you mean 'you don't think so'? Don't you know anything? Did you move it or did you not move it?"
Elisa’s tongue refused to answer the question. She decided to ignore Kelly altogether and continue sketching.

"Hello! Is anybody in there? Don't you realise what you look like? Sitting out here all the time staring into nothingness! Wake up!"

The baby cried louder, the bullocks bellowed and Elisa continued to sketch: the very small tree on top of the mountain – the small dots.

"Elisa! Just give me an answer!"

Green and brown and a bit of black. Moving objects which must have been goats.

"I'll look in your bag then." Kelly spun around and stomped back up to the porch with her keys rattling like a gaol-keeper.

Elisa’s teeth clenched as she stared at a dark hole in the mountain. Probably a tiger’s cave, she thought.
Kelly's presence is stressful. She's a demanding, bumptious person with no "Hindu detachment". Everything has to be in the right place, in the right order, at the right time. Everything has to be the way she wants it. And everyone has to be like her. Her whole attention is always on insignificant things like the colour of walls and the smell of food and, worse, she always watches me and finds fault in everything I do. Or don't do.

If my sleeping bag is not rolled up she points to the dust falling from the roof. If she sees me talking with Sky, she raves on about the importance of "keeping two feet flat on the ground." She has even lectured me about the correct procedure for going to the toilet in the bush. And she seems to find it an incredible challenge to accept the fact that I like sitting under the tamarind tree by myself. Having her critical eye stuck to my back is so debilitating. Between her rigidity and Mrs Kadamb's freedom, I find myself dangling like a parachuter stuck in a tree with the cord around my neck.

For most of the afternoon I've been trying to shake Kelly's accusations from my head. I've been fumbling with shaky hands and an absent brain - an innocent observer chosen for a lobotomy. At least I ignored her instead of pathetically attempting to defend myself.
We’re leaving tomorrow morning. I’m glad. I don’t want to be here when Maria goes to the hut. The bus has already been stacked with most of the luggage and will depart at six o’clock. My stomach is already churning at the thought of the trip home. I wish my body wasn’t so upset because I need to get organised and can’t concentrate properly. Half my mind has gone numb. I feel like Maria. Even her blood travels in slow motion, I think, because it takes so long for her to answer questions. I need some water in my face. Thoughts are completely scattered. I wonder if this is the way you feel when you’re pregnant. Apparently you become forgetful and vague.

How ironic that Kelly keeps telling me to pull myself together while her behaviour shocks my senses and blows my mind in the direction of migrating birds. She tells me to wake up, as if she exists at a higher level of awareness than everybody else. But I don’t think becoming obsessive over a chain belt is such a great sign of evolution.

Think clearly. Wet washing on the bushes. Need to phone Sam. Need to make sure I have everything essential in my overnight bag in case my luggage falls off the roof. What else...

I guess if I leave anything behind, Sky can post it to me. She’s staying here to find her guru.
Every morning Sky woke with the village women to watch them offer flowers and incense to their Gods. She sat in the dark on a rock overlooking fields of shallots, and waited for the clumps of white flowers to appear at dawn. The petals of *ratra rani* flowers closed as the egg-yolk sun rose.

In the evenings she sat on the porch with her eyes shut, listening to crickets while other students were reading, writing and complaining about the day. She had no complaints. She watched the village men crack open dry *haravara* pods and pick out the yellow lentils to eat while they had their evening conversations. The night curtain would close around the valley and there would be nothing but murmuring conversation and *haravara* pods. And a wedding perhaps.

In wedding season there was no rain. She loved the smell of the havan fires which had begun to burn all over the state, invoking rain from *Panduranga*. The people lived life according to the seasons and the Gods.

The clay earth at the top of the mountains was dry. Sky had become friendly with the hills since discovering them with Kelly. The mountain path was quiet and breathtaking. Below were mud huts and cement roof tops, wooden cow sheds and endless fields. There were no sounds up there, except the occasional cowbell and the crunch and roll of loose pebbles. She often went up the mountain to be alone and to sit with her eyes closed for as long as it took for inspiration to well up. Then she moulded and chiselled figurines
out of the clay earth. She had created one statue of Maria massaging her pregnant belly into the shape of an elephant. And another of Elisa reading words inscribed on an enormous egg held in her lap. Soon Sky would take a trip into town in search of better tools and a guru to show her how to become a Master Craftswoman.

Sky left her statues on the mountain, because she did not consider them as her own. They belonged to this mountain, she thought, and owed their existence to this village. They owed their life to this place: where love was expressed through washing someone else's hair; where water-urns were decorated with floating, pink petals; where babies were everybody's and weddings were sacred pilgrimages for the entire village.
Laman, 1.1.2007

There’s not much point in continuing to say "one would think this," and "one would think that." The fact is, nobody did a proper headcount and nobody missed me enough to realise I wasn’t in the bus! It left for Rangibad this morning with most of my luggage and without me. I’ve already spent hours cursing the driver and Dr Kadamb in my head, and now somehow I’ve resigned myself to spending another month here without the group. Kelly was probably so desperate to leave; she wouldn’t have told anyone if she’d noticed me missing anyway. At least Sky will be back in a few days. She went for the ride to Rangibad, to buy a chisel.

I felt like a fool when I realised that I’d missed the bus because of diarrhoea. I could hear the bus engine moving and getting louder. I could hear the village women calling out goodbye to the driver, then the bus turned and the engine noise faded into the distance. But what could I do? Nature called, and called again.

The bus left me in the middle of another century with nothing to do but chop beans. When the women saw me emerge from the bushes, they exchanged cross words with each other - assumingly about each other (and about those who had left us), and eventually motioned for me to join them in their bean-cutting ceremony. They were preparing dinner in the way I’d seen them do before, but I’d never been involved.
It was like being in Nonsense Land. I couldn’t understand their language and they couldn’t understand mine. The only thing we mutually understood was that we had several baskets of beans to chop for dinner and only one, single, upright blade to slice them with – one bean at a time. It was going to be my privilege.

I was seated on the grass and surrounded by old women, including Mrs Kadamb, who were supposed to direct me and enjoy assessing the skill I had in slicing beans. I had seen them slice beans on this sickle-looking thing, so I just began to do it. I reminded myself of a lunatic I once saw absorbed in his very important job of counting ants.

First, slicing the ends off each bean and letting the ends fall to the grass. Then, slicing each bean into equal divisions and catching the slices as they fell from the upright blade.

I once saw a documentary on Zen monks. They spend hours of their days doing mind-altering chores such as drawing tiny triangles all over the ground and colouring them in. After some time they go into meditation. This must have happened to me. When I first sat on the grass, my mind was consumed with the terror of being alone in another century without my books and with no native English-speaking person within several mountain ranges. But by the time we had emptied the bean basket, I felt as if anywhere, other than here, was the wrong place to be on the first day of the year.
One upright sickle
and a basket of long beans.
Slice away your time,
slide down and push through.
One second for one slice;
six slices per bean.
Singing and slicing,
seven thoughts per slice.
Slice away the thoughts;
slide down and push through.
Push through raw fingers and
smell green beans snapping.
Part Four:

BECOMING

1.

Mrs Kadamb rolled a little onto her hip to extract one foot from her lotus. She placed her foot on the ground, exposing the dark-brown skin of her calf muscle and bony knee. With one hand on the grass and the other firmly gripping the basket, she pushed herself into a standing position, briefly reminding Elisa of a goat standing up. Mrs Kadamb's face lit up with a smile. It reached her golden nose-ring. Elisa felt her heart warming. She returned the smile. All of the women seemed to be in complete agreement that the important job had been well done.

"Ika de ye," Mrs Kadamb gestured with her free hand for the pale girl to follow her to the kitchen. Placing the basket on top of her head and holding it with one hand, she began walking towards the house. Her shoulders and back were straight and barely moved at all, while her mountain goat legs took her firmly and smoothly across grass, stones and rocks as if she were walking on water. A few of the women followed behind, talking loudly, while Elisa tiptoed her way over stones up to the porch.
Mrs Kadamb’s chunky, silver toe-rings hit the kitchen floor to announce her presence. Elisa followed close behind, squinting through her glasses as she came from the bright light into the kitchen. She had not been in the kitchen very often. There had not been any need for her to even fetch herself a bucket of water because Maria had always made sure the bath buckets were left at the kitchen door. Mrs Kadamb pushed open the shutters of a small window to let the light shine in. It bounced off a gold circle of sequins sewn through the nostril of a Goddess figure. The Goddess was painted on a wall-hanging and decorated all over with sequins. Elisa was struck by shimmering gold.

From the hands of the Goddess spurted a stream of gold coins, and on her head she wore a golden crown. A red bindi marked her forehead while her hair was decorated with sequin-studded jewels. She had four arms and sat cross-legged inside a bright-pink, lotus flower. In front of her, a shiny oil lamp rested on a little cement shelf which appeared to have been built into the original construction of the house. It was as if every room not only had the usual four walls but an extra dimension – a special seat for the omniscient.

Mrs Kadamb surveyed Elisa – this pale girl with strange hair who had no idea how to slice beans. She would be more beautiful if her hair had been left to grow long and if her husband had decorated her with gold, or silver at least. She would be more beautiful with a child. Mrs Kadamb motioned for Elisa to sit on the floor and told her neighbour to go and get the baby from the farm next door and let the foreign girl hold it.
Elisa watched Mrs Kadamb light the kitchen fire and begin crushing garlic with a mortar and pestle. A few of the neighbours made themselves at home in the kitchen. They began sifting flour and stacking silver metal bowls. One started to sweep the floor as if it were her own. She knew where to find the bunch of sticks which were tied together, and happily got on with the job of cleaning someone else’s kitchen. Elisa wondered whether she should do something useful too, but then remembered that she had already spent the day slicing beans. She examined her raw, dirty fingers. Pieces of green beans were wedged behind her fingernails.

The basket of freshly cut beans had been placed beside the fire. Their watermelon smell cleared Elisa’s head, almost like eucalyptus. The smell of beans would never be the same. She smiled at the thought of being in this isolated part of the world, without any idea of what the rest of humanity was doing. While she had been sitting with a group of old ladies in the middle of Wonderland, concentrating on beans, the rest of the world could have been at war with itself. Elisa would not have known.

After several minutes of contemplating her life in the universe, Elisa was presented with the neighbour’s baby. A black-eyed, smiling sunflower in yellow, synthetic frills and a yellow bonnet, was carried into the room by a young girl, and brought before Elisa like an offering. The baby peered with wide eyes at Mrs Kadamb who was banging with the mortar and pestle, then peered, in the same manner at the cat which had quietly stalked to the kitchen
to lick drops of breakfast milk from the floor. Finally, the black-eyed baby looked into Elisa's face.
Madam Kelly is here. She missed the bus like me, so now I don't feel quite so pathetic. She was up the mountain when the buses left - which is completely ironic considering the only reason she ever went up there was to find another way out of Laman. If someone like her (who is ordinarily so accurate and organised) could miss the bus, then it's not such a pathetic thing for one such as myself, after all.

She's making herself scarce, however. The last time I saw her she was running down the mountain, half mad like that woman in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. She sent all the dogs barking when she ran past the cows and chooks shouting, "Where is everybody!" We were all intently cutting beans, but she didn't notice us. She was looking for a bus full of white faces, I guess. And mine was camouflaged amid the Indian women.

Dr Kadamb said there are tigers around the village. He said they usually only attack baby sheep and goats who wander by themselves, but he also said we should be careful. I wonder whether Kelly heard him. I can't believe she went up the mountain on her own so carelessly. How could someone so desperate and particular let herself become stuck here.

I don't feel stuck. Then again, I'm not in my element like Sky. She's back from Rangibad with her tools and her joy. She greeted Kelly and me with predictable tears of surprise. She said we were both
destined to have missed the bus. Kelly said "Crap!" She doesn't believe in
destiny. She only believes what she sees.

Now and again I feel as if I could just blend into this village if my
hair were not red and if the women wore dresses instead of saris. As it
is, unfortunately my red hair is a fluorescent beacon which draws
everyone's attention to the fact that I can’t sit cross-legged without my
knees sticking up, and I don’t know how to eat a plate of wet, slushy food
without the aid of a spoon.

Nevertheless, I feel quite at home now in a strange, outback kind
of way, especially when I'm near the eucalyptus trees. I half expect to
see a baby koala up there, hanging onto its mother while she goes about
her business of munching, climbing and sleeping. But, of course, there are
no koalas here, only babies. Lots of babies - hanging onto anybody who
happens to be around. And there’s always someone to hang onto.

In fact, everyone in the village, except Kelly and I, seems to be
baby-competent. I’d have thought Kelly, being a mother, wouldn't mind
babysitting now and again while she's here. But she’s made it clear
several times that she will not hold or look after anyone's child, other
than her own at home. A few days ago, before the buses left us stranded,
she was sitting on the verandah making thesis notes when a small boy
made himself comfortable beside her, chewing on one of her pencils. She
packed up her diary, took the pencil off the boy, went into the visitors'
room and shut the door.

Nobody closes doors around here (except Kelly). Some of the
village women thought she must have been sick or something - to go alone
into a room and lock the door from the inside. Normally, the villagers only lock them from the outside, when everyone is leaving the house. Kelly disappeared into the room and didn't even open the door when the boy started pulling the outside lock. He toddled off eventually, but only after he had accidentally locked her in. Nobody knew, of course, that she couldn't get out. Everyone just assumed she was behaving in her usual, odd way.

After several hours, Sky came to sit on the porch. She asked a village man to split a rock in half with an axe which hung on a nail by the side of the house. She called me to come and see the crystals inside the rock and said she'd found the crystal rocks up the mountain. Just as I came to look at them, Kelly began to yell out for me to open the door. Apparently she'd been trying to get out of the room for an hour. That's what she said anyway.

After I'd unlocked the door, Mrs Kadamb, Maria and some other women all began to appear and look on from a distance. I felt quite embarrassed because it must have seemed as though I'd locked Kelly inside in the first place. I had a particularly wide smile on my face to demonstrate that I wasn't angry with her and would never have locked her away like that. Of course, Kelly thought I was laughing at her. She got angry and looked around accusingly at everyone. She pointed out the boy who had played with the lock and all the women started looking worried and sorry for ever having known him.

Kelly strutted off, down into the bush - she must have needed to go to the toilet, to make matters worse. After she'd disappeared, the
women all stood around as if it were a funeral. I thought the whole event was very funny. Mrs Kadamb didn’t let her smile escape until she saw mine. I smirked and she bit her lip. We all seemed to be in agreement that Kelly’s dilemma was unspeakably amusing.
Kelly had noticed the axe still lying around on the porch when she returned from her time alone in the bush. She decided at that moment to make it useful. She made sure no one was watching and hid it under a tree by the side of the house.

A couple of days later, she woke before anyone else that morning, wrapped the axe in a rug, picked it all up, and quickly disappeared down the valley towards the mountains. The axe had two purposes to serve. She would use it to dig up crystal rocks and she would swing it at any mad dogs.

She followed the same path as before, passed the bushes with thorns as long as Sky's fingernails. The thorns grabbed her shirt as she made her way up the foothill of the mountain. She followed the track where a sheepdog had previously come running and growling towards her and Sky, and became slightly nervous when she noticed a cave. After all, she was alone, up a mountain, and there were tigers around this village. She crept around the cave and reached the top of the mountain; at about the same time, her luggage was being thrown to the top of the bus in the village below.

The rocks showed their crystal teeth when she hacked at them. She turned them over in the morning light to find the most impressive samples and placed them in the centre of the rug. Only a few were weak enough to break open, and she could not carry many home. They were too heavy and there was not much space left in her suitcase. Having travelled the world to
get here, however, it was her right to take as many crystals as possible. She deserved it, she thought. She was determined to get something out of this wretched place.

The broken rocks lay like open jaws in Kelly’s rug with crystals shining and displayed in the way they did in shop windows. She continued to hack at the mountain for about ten minutes then suddenly noticed the statues of Maria and Elisa balancing above her on a ledge. Standing up to look more closely, she began to feel as if someone might be watching. "Hello," she said to nobody. Only the answer of dogs echoed in the valley.

She turned the statues over in her hand. One was obviously Maria because it had thick lips and was pregnant, and the other was obviously Elisa because it had glasses and a pen in its mouth. They should have been in a shop. Not up a mountain.

Kelly wrapped the statues separately in the sleeves of her cardigan and put them in the centre of the rug. Pulling in the corners of the rug, she heaved the rocks and statues over her back. It was at that moment, as she stood up and turned to go back to the village, that she looked down from the mountain and noticed the long shape of a bus, parked beside the pink house. She threw the axe to the ground and began to run.

On the opposite mountain, a crazy dog ran zigzag behind a stream of sheep. Barking and snapping at their heels, he made loose rocks roll and tumble like running water. The sheep protested noisily as they trotted behind their human leader.
Kelly made her own waterfall as she tripped, slipped and frantically fell most of the way down the mountain. The statues of Maria and Elisa fell out from an open corner of the rug, with the crystals following close behind.
Laman, 5.1.2007

There's a tiny baby girl living at the farm next door. Her name is Shivani. She wears mostly nothing except a flimsy dress and a hat - no singlet, socks or nappy. The neighbour put her on my lap the other day, and when I lifted her off, she was as light as the cat. She kept crawling back to me, so Mrs Kadamb eventually motioned for me to keep still and let the baby sit. I thought she was going to wee on me, but Mrs Kadamb kept watching to check that I was still enjoying being useful. Unable to explain my worries to anyone at the time, I just had to console myself by saying, "The worst thing that can happen is I'll get wet." Eventually I relaxed.

I held the baby for more than an hour. She sucked pieces of chupatti bread and played with her feet. She was like a dolly. She wanted to eat my hair and bite her anklets and didn't seem to miss her mother. For some reason it didn't occur to her that I was a stranger with a white face. I expected her to start screaming at any moment, but she didn't. Maybe she gets passed around a lot.

When she finally became too hungry, she pushed her warm face into my neck and I could feel her tiny mouth searching for her mother. Mrs Kadamb laughed and clapped her hands to get the baby's attention. Shivani turned with a fright. Mrs Kadamb spoke to her with a loud, sing-
song voice, as if one of them were deaf. The baby made complaining replies and squealed at the cat.

I actually felt quite relaxed, holding this baby. That’s probably the first time I’ve felt comfortable in a situation like that. I don’t remember ever holding a baby for that long before. Sam has tried, several times, to pass me a few, but I’ve always given them back after a couple of minutes, at the most. I usually don’t let them sit on me. I just hold them out in the air, dangling. Once, I held a baby over my shoulder, but as a consequence, I walked around for the rest of the day smelling sickly. Then I realised I was wearing a patch of smelly, yellow goo. I’m really quite happy that I managed to deal with the neighbour’s baby for such a long time without having to change my clothes.

Mrs Kadamb seems to enjoy it when I hold this live dolly. I don’t really know what to do with it though. I just let it do whatever it wants, except pull my earrings. Mrs Kadamb saw me today, holding my ears, trying to get away from Shivani’s grabbing hands. Next thing I knew, she had asked one of the young girls to share their bangles with me. I was given four bangles for each hand, which appeased the baby. She took them off and dropped them onto the floor, one at a time, for the next hour.

I’m wearing the bangles now. Apparently they’re a gift. Today I was also adorned with a new pearl ring together with a glittery, red hair- scrunchy for the very short plait I now have. The neighbour brushed my hair, oiled it and spent at least thirty minutes creating an acceptable hair style for me. She took off her long, light scarf to drape it across the
front of my chest - it seems to be the modest thing to do here. She pinned it on, so I'm still wearing it. Nobody has ever fussed so much about me - not since I was five anyway.

Mummy used to brush my hair sometimes in the front garden. She said my hair was pretty in the sun and she said she'd like to try knitting with it one day. She was going to make an orange ball of "Elisa's wool" from strands in the brush.

It's nice to be fussed over. I feel like a princess, but that's the trouble. I don't feel like a queen, only a princess, and they're not very useful. Queens are the likes of Mrs Kadamb. They're fearless. They look after the universe. I just expect to be looked after.
"Lizzy, eat it with your fingers dear. I can't feed you just now. Mummy's busy." Elisa's mother was sitting and jiggling a screaming baby up and down over her shoulder. "You'll have to get used to this, Lizzy. When our new baby comes, Mummy isn't going to have time to feed you, darling."

This was not the first time Elisa had heard such a sentence from her mother. Elisa frowned at her plate of mushy potatoes and pushed the plate away. "I won't eat then," she decided.

"I can't mash it anymore, Lizzy. My arm is sore from holding the baby."

"Can't you give the baby to Aunt Betty?"

"We can hardly expect Aunt Betty to take her baby to the toilet with her, can we? We should look after her baby, for just a few minutes, at least. But she is taking a long time, isn't she? It's getting late and your father will be waiting for his dinner." Elisa's mother stood up and began to look at the clock. She paced around Aunt Betty's little flat.

This was the kind of thing Elisa's mother did. It was not unusual to find her looking at the clock while she was being a good Samaritan. Sometimes she would check her watch in the middle of the road if she had to help an elderly person cross over, especially if the road was very wide or if the person was too slow, or if the cars were honking. Many times, when certain people asked whether Elisa's mother could help carry groceries, she would
happily oblige, then immediately afterwards, check her watch and get angry with Elisa. Invariably, Elisa's mother would look at the clock whenever she was holding someone else's baby.

"What's wrong with him?" Elisa asked.

"He's just hungry, dear."

"He can have my dinner then. And you can feed me when we get home."

Elisa's mother clicked her tongue. "When I get home I'll have to clean up!"

Elisa thought for a few seconds about her predicament and then with wide eyes declared, "I know! Let's bring Aunt Betty home and she can clean up. And you can feed me. And her baby can go to sleep for a long, long time."

"Aunt Betty does not want to clean our house, Elisa!"

"Well you didn't want to look after Aunt Betty's baby!"

"Elisa! Feed yourself and be quiet!"

Elisa sulked at the table. She picked up her spoon and pushed the potato around the plate, until she had made a little valley surrounded by mountains. Maybe a new brother or sister was not a good idea. She hated the way her mother was so urgently bouncing the baby up and down. And the way her mother was walking around the tiny room as if she could not find a way out. Was this what life was going to be like with a new brother or sister? Maybe God will know better, Elisa thought.
Laman, 9.1.2007

Shivani’s mother came into the kitchen this morning, talking and laughing loudly, with her baby hanging like a koala on her hip. Mrs Kadamb smiled at the woman, agreed with everything she said, and indicated that my lap was available for holding any babies who happened to be in the way. So the woman handed me her baby again and began sifting flour.

I sat on the floor wondering how long I was going to be used as a bassinet this time. Mrs Kadamb handed me a custard apple and nodded at Shivani. I’d never eaten custard apple before. It was an extremely messy job. With the baby wriggling on my lap, somehow I managed to open this fruit and scoop out pieces of flesh to feed her. She wasn’t particularly interested, but Mrs Kadamb showed me how to do it properly. I had to take out the seeds, put the fleshy fruit on Shivani’s lips and just push it in, before she realised it was there.

While I was feeding Shivani, Sky came along and began to chitchat about the baby’s mother who has four other children and whose only son is getting married. I thought I must have looked astonished or something because, suddenly, Sky was looking at me with her mouth agape. She was remembering a dream. She looked up at the Goddess picture on the kitchen wall and said, "Oh! Elisa!" Then she told me that a Goddess had appeared in her dream the other night and had placed a hand upon my stomach as if to ask, "Why is nothing growing in there yet?"
Then, this Goddess apparently said to me, "Wait until you finish thinking before you have a baby." I thought that was an extremely odd dream to say the least! How can anyone ever "finish thinking"?

I sat pondering this dream and, soon enough, the kitchen became completely overrun by women from the village - maybe forty. They came with their rolling pins and breadboards and sat down to roll dough, layer sweet chupattis and cut out circle shapes. They also came with their children - dozens of them who laughed and screamed and ran all over the verandah amusing themselves with pebbles and sticks and whatever else they could find. Preeti came in, heaved Shivani out of my lap and carried her outside like a sack of flour. One minute after I was relieved of the baby, I was handed a rolling pin and a spare board.

Having already had the long experience of slicing beans, I was hardly enthusiastic to spend today rolling dough. But what choice did I have? A ball of dough was plopped on my board and all the women were smiling at me, waiting for me to start enjoying myself. The dough was like clay. I watched the women for some idea of how to begin - adding flour, rolling the dough into a ball, flattening, pinching, oiling, adding flour, rolling, turning, rolling, turning. And I just began to do it.

I must have rolled about thirty chupattis.

I couldn't think of anything except dough - what to do next, where to put oil, how much flour, how to stop it from sticking, how to roll it round. When I finished one ball, they quickly gave me another. Not enough thinking-time to even consider whether or not I'd done a good job! The women were laughing, talking and rolling. I understood nothing.
I started to hum a song which came into my head from nowhere, and I kind of got into the rhythm. I was even sitting with my hand out, asking for more dough at one stage. So they gave me a whole lump. And laughed some more. I thought I’d nearly finished that lot when they brought out another pot full. They all started making jokes and slapping each other. I wished I could have understood what they were saying.

Altogether, we voluntarily made more than one-thousand chupattis – all for the neighbour’s wedding. The women seemed to enjoy seeing me cross-legged on the floor of their kitchen, knee-to-knee with them. They wanted Kelly to join us but she was nowhere to be found. I’m better at rolling dough than minding babies. Babies make me feel nervous and incapable - nervous about the fragility of life and incapable of simplicity.

To think of the simple language one needs in order to deal with babies (in contrast to the waves the brain rides) is frightening. Children just play. They run around on the porch and in the playground. They have play time, play lunch and playing blocks. Millions of women have ignored the majority of their vocabulary in order to raise their children. Cow becomes "moo", food makes noises as it flies towards the tongue runway, and xylophone takes on a new significance altogether because it begins with X (not to mention the ascendancy of the Zebra).

Mummy must have used words with less than two syllables for years at a time, despite the fact that she was an English teacher. No wonder she always had her head in a book. She was probably trying to remember that she was actually an educated adult. But I resented having
to speak to her through the cover of a book. She used to read while she pushed me on the swing. Even on our picnic she didn’t notice the ducks when they were too close and took my lunch, because she was reading.
"Mummy!" Elisa cried as the big ducks waddled off in a hurry. Their beaks dangled whole pieces of bread, but they still managed to honk. "Mummy!" Elisa jumped up and down. She hopped across the picnic blanket and bent to shake her mother who was lying on one side with a book covering her face.

Elisa’s mother sat up in fright. "What is it?" Sitting up so suddenly made her dizzy. She held her forehead and shut her eyes.

"The duckies took my sandwich! Those big duckies over there!"

Elisa’s mother squinted into the glare of bright water and saw a family of white geese squabbling over something. Elisa’s plate was empty and there was nothing left to give her. Elisa’s mother had not packed a very exciting picnic. She had been too tired to plan it properly, and she was still too tired to do anything about it. Elisa began to cry but her mother just stared at the empty plate; the plate glared back.

"You said we’d have a picnic. This isn’t a picnic!"

Elisa’s mother closed her eyes and sighed. "Well," she said, "how about we have another picnic? A better one, when the baby comes."

"Yes," Elisa agreed, "But you have to leave your book at home next time, and watch me eat my sandwich in case I lose it. And you have to feed the birds with me. And the new baby can have a nice, big sleep."
"Yes. A nice, big sleep sounds like a good idea, Elisa." Elisa's mother lay down again and opened her book. It was a romantic novel. She was up to the part where the damsel was distressed. Fortunately, the hero was not far away. A couple more pages would guarantee a few moments of make believe happiness by the banks of the pond.

"Can I go down to the water?" Elisa asked.

"All right." Elisa's mother began to read, then added, "Don't fall in."

Elisa wondered what would happen if she fell into the duck pond; would Mummy hear her screaming or not? Mummy was not a good swimmer. Aunt Betty was a good swimmer. Elisa wished Aunt Betty could have come for the picnic. But Mummy had already said Aunt Betty was too busy.

The grass made Elisa's knees itchy as she waded through it towards the pond. The big ducks were almost bigger than her. They looked mean. She wondered why Daddy didn't come. Why didn't anybody else ever come anywhere? She stood at the edge of the pond looking down into the murky, green water. A fish made ripples a few metres away from the edge of the pond. A green-winged, buzzing insect stopped above the ripples, then flew off. Something was blowing bubbles in the water now and again. Elisa squatted to take a closer look. Somewhere down there were fish made from jelly. As she peered into the water she saw something slithering along. It swam right through her reflection, into the reeds and back again through her heart. It was a water snake. And it was looking for naughty, big ducks who took people's
sandwiches. Elisa decided that the snake was her best friend and she spent the rest of the day trying to find it.
It’s very late in the afternoon. A man is sleeping on the rusty verandah bed like a corpse. His shawl is pulled over his whole body and face and he’s snoring. Nothing else to do here in this hot hour. People just sleep in the afternoon. It’s so quiet here, like the centre of the spinning world. Hens cluck. An old lady is calling out. The water in the field is bubbling up.

I can hear my thoughts quite clearly now – each one. It’s as if the lump of dough in my head has been rolled out into a thousand chupattis. When I look around, I see one thing at a time, instead of just an ocean of shallots. I see the hen. I think about its eggs, and its chicks. And I know clearly that at the centre of my being is a fear of life. A fear of new life; a fear of anything I can’t understand. The dust is starting to settle and I see the shape of my skinny, scared body and my sizzling brain.

Here in this dusty place, I can make sense of the term dust-to-dust. Earth settles on my skin and I wipe it off like a snake shedding a layer. As if, when I die, I’ll simply shed and become this dusty earth – this clean, red earth. It leaves no dirty feeling on my hands when I let it fall through my fingers. It’s like some kind of natural, powder cleanser. The villagers use it as soap. Local women squat outside, rubbing handfuls of earth into their dirty pots to clean them.

Laman, 10.1.2007
A group of women are sitting at the end of the porch at the moment. One is pushing dough through a sieve. One is collecting the dough as it comes out like spaghetti. Two are sitting on planks of wood to stop the sieve machine from moving. Others are waiting to see who needs to take a break. They’re laughing because it takes too long to make this thing they call Shevaya. One is arranging plates of spiral dough on an old board out in the sun where it will be left to dry before being cooked. They say you’re supposed to eat this Shevaya with sweet milk. It’s all in preparation for the wedding.

These women don’t stop working. They work with their hands – pushing and moulding this dough until it’s all gone. Some of the women have crevices on their heels. Their feet are completely broken open like dry earth. They paint with wet cow dung. It sets hard and looks clean. They wipe dung from wall to wall using the sides of their hands. The dung is paint. The earth is soap. The people ask for forgiveness before they tread upon the cracked earth with their cracked feet in the morning.

I can’t imagine anyone at home asking the earth for forgiveness. They rip into the grass with football boots without glancing up or down. They have nothing precious in their eyes like Mrs Kadamb, but they bulldoze for precious stones.
Elisa put her notebook face down on the earth so she could straighten her legs and ease the stiffness in her knees. The neighbour's hen stalked and pecked about in the shade of the tamarind tree. It sat comfortably, keeping a watchful eye on her outstretched legs, and flapping in fright whenever she made any sudden movement. Old women wailed loud conversations to each other in the distance, in harmony with the buffalo.

The hen clucked and Elisa inhaled. Her hands skimmed the surface of the cool, sandy earth. She closed her eyes for a moment to smell and feel the way she had felt on the bean-cutting day, to bounce her gaze, like a beam of light, off the dark wall of her mind and into the well of her self. She began to see colours floating on water: pink driftwood, green crayons, drawings of her mother in a purple, triangle dress. She saw fuzzy, yellow jellyfish blobbing up and down between long reeds. And just below the surface of the well, something was quietly swimming. It was a serpent. It was black and it was rising upwards. Becoming larger and larger, it broke the surface of the water and shot up through Elisa's spine, forcing her eyes to open. She stared for an instant at the hen who clucked. Then her eyelids shut again.

It seemed she had only been sitting with her eyes closed for a few more seconds when she heard a voice – sharp and accusing – jolting her back into the sleepy village. The voice belonged to a woman wearing an orange sari and holding a pot of water on her head. She was walking past with Sky and
Maria. "She says – if you feeling like sleepy go into house for rest," Maria translated. The women's anklets all jingled as they flapped in chapels along the sandy trail. Sky turned back to offer Elisa a sympathetic smile as they passed by. In turn, Elisa raised her eyebrows as if the rest of her facial features were attached to them and might somehow spring back to life like puppets.

Drawing up her legs, she cleared her throat and stood up. The hen squawked, flapped and jumped away – holding up its white, frilly underskirt. Elisa apologised to it as she gathered up her belongings, brushing the dust off her dress. Embarrassed by the disturbance, she began to wonder how Buddha ever found enlightenment sitting beneath a tree somewhere in India, if this were the kind of support one usually received for resting in the shade. But then, Buddha was not a woman, Elisa concluded. She began walking up to the house, to take a more private nap and read the legend of Rabi‘ah al-Adawiyyah, the famous female Sufi.
There’s no place I can go to be alone. Even under the tree people constantly walk past with bullocks and wood and sheep, making comments. I’m forced to retreat inside and resort to reading the only book I have left. In the legend of Rabi’ah al-Adawiyyah, somebody asks this female Sufi to come outside and "see the work of God." She replies "Come inside that you may behold the Maker." Funny, this country always talks about contemplation and God but how does anyone contemplate anything here? It’s not as if they go into their own rooms and shut doors. The women and children all sleep together. The men sleep somewhere else, sometimes outside with the sheep.

I guess they contemplate while keeping busy. Somehow their work takes them inside. They watch the stars and sheep at the same time. They know the hour of day according to birds, shadows and celestial movements. They have no watches but they’re probably so in tune with the tide of life that they feel the ebb and flow within their moonlit bodies. This flowing work takes them into a kind of collective river which meanders along. It moves above the brainwaves, like one big electric eel - moving, living and shining. It’s as if everything is being done by someone else.

I’m starting to sound like a gibbering mystic. I hate the way they prattle about nonsense. They never speak directly. Why is that? Can’t
they just explain otherworldly phenomena in a way people can comprehend? Is it that difficult?

I've made zero progress with my thesis while being here. Kelly said she wanted to see my thesis structure. She said I should be finished by now. I just nodded. She stared at me until I had to turn away. I tried to change the conversation several times but she was intent on discovering whether or not I'd finished. She kept talking about "achieving" and "becoming something". She wants to finish her thesis quickly so she can "get on with something new". For some reason the importance of my thesis is diminishing in proportion to the number of chupattis I roll and the number of beans I cut. And the number of babies I hold.

Although I can think clearly now, I don’t have much to think about. Or perhaps, it's just that I'm not in the mood. When I start to think, I feel the mental cogwheels churning my physical organs. It makes me nauseous, nervous, and not at all relaxed. It's as if my brain fat becomes hot. Thoughts sit around like fatty deposits taking up space in my head and making it difficult for me to perceive anything clearly. I should spend a night under the moon with the sheep. But the dogs are so wild.

There are no dogs barking at the moment. In fact, there's hardly any noise at all. I'm alone in the visitor's room, with the door open. It seems strangely quiet.
Elisa sat completely still on her sleeping bag. She could not even hear a bangle. She stood up and walked across the room to look outside. Nobody was hanging out washing or collecting water. There were no women working at the spaghetti machine and nobody was in the end room. The kitchen door was locked which meant everyone had left the house.

As Elisa came out onto the porch she began to hear some kind of singing coming from the neighbour's farm. She was afraid to wander over there by herself because of the dogs and because of all the talk about tigers. But she looked across the fields and saw Mrs Kadamb waving for her to come. Elisa raised her hand in response, stepped down from the porch and began picking her way through a field of carrots.

As she approached the neighbour's house, the singing became quite loud. Mrs Kadamb motioned for her to hurry up. Elisa crossed the neighbour's verandah and followed Mrs Kadamb into the kitchen, which was full of women. Then the old lady gave some orders for everyone to make way until Elisa had squeezed through to the kitchen's heart.

Three of the oldest women were sitting next to a round, grindstone near the fire place. All three were holding the grinding wheel handle, turning it in circles. The youngest of the old women at the wheel stood up to let Mrs Kadamb sit in her place, and Elisa nestled in behind. Mrs Kadamb began to lead the song in her husky, loud voice and all the women echoed. Elisa's body
moved in circles as she leant forwards and backwards while Mrs Kadamb
turned the grindstone.

Elisa assumed the ceremony had something to do with the wedding.
Yellow, turmeric powder was falling to the floor from the rotating wheel. She
was surrounded by smiling women sitting cross-legged, each with one leg up,
to make room for the others. They were all holding the shoulder of the woman
in front, and moving with the rhythm of the wheel.

Elisa could not understand the meaning of the songs but the
chanting, turning and circular movement was so hypnotic that after a few
minutes she had no questions left. She stared at the yellow powder. The wheel
turned, the turmeric was crushed and the women sang. In the centre of the
spinning world, Elisa turned her body like a small planet orbiting the sun. Her
thoughts spun off, into a distant corner of the universe where they could be
neither seen nor heard. They left her head-space completely clear. The
turmeric became brighter and brighter.

Mrs Kadamb sighed heavily after every couplet of the song, as if the
weight of the wheel and the length of the couplet had left her breathless. The
song seemed to be an invocation to the deities to bless the coming marriage,
and the sigh was an integral part. As if, by the women's hard labour and
chanting, the Gods would be pleased and grant blessings.

The wheel was too heavy for one woman. Six hands were needed. The
kitchen could not have accommodated one extra body. The women had
squashed themselves so efficiently into the small space that Elisa's shoulders
were being pressed on both sides. She was too absorbed in the singing, however, and the movement of the wheel, to notice the sticky sweat. She wished that she could pronounce this foreign language properly.

Her head felt lighter and lighter, the circles became slower and the chanting became acute in her ears. Suddenly, she could hear separate words in each couplet and almost understand and repeat them. At that moment she was not thinking about the colour of her hair or how skinny her arms were. And she did not notice Kelly standing up, glaring at her from the back of the kitchen. She did not even notice the pain in her stomach muscles or the sweat on her neck.

She had never really belonged anywhere before. But she belonged within this feeling. She belonged within this singing, moving mass of women.
My muscles are sore. Must have strained something yesterday. I was sitting down, moving the upper part of my body in circles (because that’s what everyone else was doing in the neighbour’s kitchen). I must have got a bit carried away.

Can't remember how many hours we spent sitting and singing. It was almost dark when everyone began to wander home. And still it seemed too soon for them to be leaving. I wanted them to stay and teach me a new song. I could have sat there until midnight with my sisters, aunties and grandmas. Mrs Kadamb seemed to realise that I didn't want to go anywhere in a hurry. We were almost the last people to return to the pink house.

All the women here refer to each other as "sister", "aunty" or "grandma" in their language. Several women, and even some of the old ladies, call me "tai" which means "big sister". Even Maria calls me "tai". She doesn’t use my name at all.

Some time this week, we’re going with Mrs Kadamb to take Maria to "the hut". Maria’s baby isn’t due for another month. If it were due now, there’s no way I’d be going. I don’t really want to go to the hut at all, but I feel like I have to.

I’m trying not to fight this river. It’s like I’ve been taken in a rip and I’m on my way out to the middle of the ocean. There’s a
maelstrom out there, I know there is. And eventually I'm going to find myself in it.

Maria's so huge. She can barely pull herself up from a sitting position. Can't imagine what state she'll be in after another four weeks. In the last few days she's been looking particularly tired. Not surprising, since she's regularly cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner for us. I imagine she'll be glad when Kelly, Sky and I have gone.

I don't really want to go on this pilgrimage to Maria's baby cave. I don't want to listen to conversations about amniotic fluid and be forced to think about Mummy. Sky and Maria were having a horrifying conversation this morning about the ailments of pregnancy. Neither of them seemed perturbed by their subject. They were totally at ease talking about episiotomies and epidurals. I must have looked appalled, because Maria told me, once again, to go inside and "take rest before our travels."

I was surprised to hear Sky carrying on like a clinical nurse. She has no concept of disturbing language. She was talking so flippantly about birth and using so much jargon that, in the end, it simply sounded as if Maria is going to a festival to enjoy a roller-coaster ride.

When Maria laughed about her baby kicking, Sky became prophetic and declared that the baby's enthusiasm meant it had been given "a mission". The mission was to "break through the limits of human comprehension". By this time, of course, I had begun to roll my eyes, but Sky still became more and more excited about "the hut".
The atmosphere then became all artificially religious. I mean, once Sky began to associate "the hut" with creation, her favourite topic, she started to breathe deeply. She looked to the sky, in the way she does, as if seeking a pictorial sign in the clouds (an arrow perhaps, indicating the right moment to leave camp and follow a magical morning star to the Netherworld). To top it off, she began talking about "a vision" her sister had experienced during labour. We heard the entire story of the black-haired Goddess who comes roaring like a tiger and wielding golden weapons at the time of birth.

It was all too much.

I started to wish Sam were with me - down-to-earth Sam who rolled his eyes when I told him about this "magical, mystery study tour". Mr practical Sam Langley who simply wants his wife to be a mother.
In Dr Kadamb's village, pregnant wives were removed from their husbands several weeks before their babies were due. Dr Kadamb was not with his wife anyway. He was travelling in a bus on his way back from Delhi to collect a couple of stragglers, both from Australia, who had missed their aeroplane and were stuck in his village.

Elisa and Kelly were on their way to the hut where Dr Kadamb's wife was going to rest until her baby was born. Elisa walked with her head down to avoid getting her face burnt by the midday sun. Now and again, she pushed her glasses up to stop them from falling to the ground.

Maria had been waddling in front of Elisa, with shoes flapping and anklets chinking, for the last two hours. Sky and Preeti followed behind, while Kelly and Mrs Kadamb travelled ahead.

The six of them had been walking slowly along a ridge of dirt, through sugar cane and cornfields, keeping silent to conserve energy. Only Preeti occasionally made a loud complaint about the heat, or her feet, or the heavy statue. She carried Sky's statue of Ganesha. Mrs Kadamb was going to place it in the hut for Maria's protection.

Elisa listened to field-water bubbling somewhere in the distance and tried to stop thinking about her mistake. She should not have come on this pilgrimage. She was definitely out of bounds. There were tigers and who knows what else out here. And where was she anyway? Somewhere in the
middle of the universe surrounded by fields so tall and green that she could not look to either side for an escape. Sky had convinced her to come. It was Sky's fault. She had called the hut a “sacred place” and raved on about how Mrs Kadamb had delivered fourteen grandchildren in there. Hearing the word *delivered*, Elisa knew at that instant that the water level in Laman had already risen way above her head. She was no longer able to keep herself above it, and she was unable to answer back. She was already swimming with her mouth tightly shut and had no other choice but to keep going. Her breathing grew shallow; her heartbeat, loud.

    The women walked with a steady rhythm. Now and again, Sky got too close and pushed Elisa along. It was like being stuck in rapids, unable to catch hold of the sides. She knew she would eventually fall, goodness knows how many metres down a turbulent waterfall.

    Mrs Kadamb led the way until she finally found a clearing and came to the familiar dung hut. She smiled her smile of diamonds and moons, exclaimed "Ithel!" then gestured for the others to come up and witness the place of miracles.

    "Thank God!" Elisa said to herself as she headed straight for a strip of shade beside the hut. She was not ready to look inside with the others.

    Preeti ran after some baby goats that lived nearby. She grabbed one by the legs and lifted it, bleating, off the ground. It struggled in her arms but soon realised it could not free itself. Its wide eyes stared at Elisa. Preeti laughed and moved closer to her. "He is liking Aunty!"
Elisa reached out to touch the goat’s wool. His heart was a fast train and his wool was wiry, soft and warm. Elisa’s fingers spread out into the wool and her hand became still. The warmth was so soothing that she had to close her eyes. She tried hard to remember her mother being pregnant, but could only recall knitting needles and eucalyptus. She strained to remember church songs and the feeling of being snugly wrapped in a vest. She needed a vest, or something to keep herself together.

"Aunty, you hurting him," Preeti said as the goat bleated loudly. Elisa suddenly let go. She frowned, adjusted her glasses and sat up to let some air into her chest. Then she fumbled around in her backpack in search of a pen.
I need eucalyptus. My heart feels like a box all wrapped up to prevent the stench of fear escaping. There are no eucalyptus trees here. There's just an awful smell of sheep. The heat makes the smell all the more asphyxiating.

I'm outside a mud hut in the middle of nothingness. Preeti is playing with a baby goat. She carried it to me so I could pat it. I could have hugged it like a pillow if it hadn't been so scared and if Preeti were not here to wonder what's wrong with me. I wish I had Mummy's shawl.

I feel like we're in the centre of the world. Everything is dead calm. The fields don't move. There's no wind to blow away the bad smells.

When we arrived, Mrs Kadamb's face lit up as if this hut were the temple she'd built. But I don't have as much faith in her God Ganesha as she does. Nor do I have much faith in the Christian God who calls labour a punishment. If there's a reasonable, compassionate God (and that's the biggest question of all) then He would not have intended birth to be a curse. How could it be? It would go against the whole principle of life itself.

In this mud hut, surrounded by desert heat, Maria is going to wait for God's punishment. She doesn't seem the least bit concerned about anything going wrong. She isn't worried about getting into any kind of serious trouble. But what if the baby doesn't come on time, or wants
to come the wrong way or before anybody’s ready? It would be a disaster in this isolated place.

This hut is like something out of a school nativity play - but without the cradle. It’s lined with straw and decorated with sheep. I guess, at some time in history, babies were born in places like this, not in hospitals. They arrived in huts. And they arrived on Christmas day - like gifts. I’ve never thought of birth as a gift before.

Most of the women in this place seem to know who they are and what they’re supposed to be doing. They know they’re women and most of them seem to look forward to becoming mothers. Even when they do things like stuffing eggplants and mashing baby-food they do it with energy. It’s as if by grinding, stuffing and sifting, they will somehow, altogether, preserve the whole of creation.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to accept the fact that I’m supposed to be a reproductive female. I don’t want to be punished, like Mummy was, for simply being a woman.
Elisa put her head down to cover her face in her hands. Heat was rising from her heart, trying to force its way upwards. With both hands, she pushed against her eyes in a frustrated effort to hold back tears.

Preeti had stopped playing with the goats. She was placing red flowers on the statue of Ganesha. She had no idea why her mother had been escorted to this place, or for how long they were going to stay, or certainly anything about the coming baby.

Inside the dark, cool hut Maria was squatting on straw. Her mother-in-law was watching, so Maria made a point of it; squatting was good. The smell of straw reminded her of labour. She tried to ease into the smell instead of tensing up. Exhaling and relaxing, as if she might give birth spontaneously despite the presence of three women as well as her own daughter who had entered the hut.

Kelly stood in the centre of the women in her smart, casual attire, looking ill-at-ease, as if she needed a hospital visitor's chair. "I would never let anybody except a doctor or – at the very least – a nurse, deliver my baby!" Kelly announced indiscreetly in Preeti's presence. "What if something goes wrong, Maria? Why don't you at least book into a hospital in Mumbai? Women miscarry in these back-of-beyond places as often as they milk cows, for God's sake. You must have left your brain somewhere back in Europe."
There were risks involved in giving birth like this, without any medical support within a two-hour-bus-ride radius. Maria knew this but preferred not to think about it. The back shelf of her head was full of things she preferred not to think about. Indeed, so full was the back of her head that it had become difficult to think clearly about any subject at all. Her dry nostrils seemed too thin to hold back the excess blood which made her head so heavy. Full of the reality of life, there was no space left for old illusions, long words or analytical processes. Even some simple necessities seemed to have vanished from memory – the names of acquaintances, the date, the year. In reply to Kelly's remarks, Maria managed to give a half-smile which spread her thick lips flatly across her face.

Sky, who had made herself comfortable in the corner of the hut, sat cross-legged, breathing deeply. She had a few sticks of incense in her backpack, but decided it was probably not a safe place to light anything with all the straw about. "I'm sure everything will be wonderful, Maria. Not that I know very much about having babies, but it just feels really – like – calm in here." Sky's statue of Ganesha had become a decorated God at the door, so she felt privileged and humbled to be akin to God's right-hand woman. She had no children of her own but had four nieces and two nephews. The only story she recalled concerning labour was that her sister's most recent labour lasted only one hour. After the appearance of the Goddess, the baby was born smiling, in a warm bath.
Maria had begun to feel the strains of her two-hour walk. Her calf muscles needed rest. She explained to Mrs Kadamb that she was feeling tired and hoped the others would be ushered out. Meanwhile, she remained in a squatting position to please her mother-in-law.

Elisa appeared in the small door of the hut. She squinted as her eyes adjusted to the light. "It's very peaceful in here," she said, then she saw Maria squatting in the corner. What on Earth – was she already giving birth? "Oh my God!" Elisa held her heart and stared at Maria in shock. Maria moaned and stood up to stretch her back and aching legs. "Oh my God. I thought you were about to –" Suddenly, Maria made a loud noise and doubled over.

"Can I see Mummy?" asked Preeti, thinking her mother had hurt her foot.

"Go with Grandma. There's nothing to see," Maria said, holding her abdomen. "I can't walk right now."

Within a couple of seconds, Mrs Kadamb had pushed everyone, except Kelly, out of the hut and started giving orders. Kelly was to stay behind until Mrs Kadamb had arranged for someone to take the others home. Kelly stared out of the hut with a white face. "Elisa! Tell Mrs Kadamb to come back!"

Elisa vaguely nodded. Mrs Kadamb? Where was she? Elisa walked backwards, then turned and began to run.

"Elisa! Bring her back! Don't leave me here by myself!"
Elisa ran into the sugar cane looking for a ridge of dirt to take her home, and she kept running until she had almost forgotten what she was running away from.
I knew something dreadful would happen. It's too early for Maria. I shouldn't have gone to the hut at all. How am I going to tell Preeti? She can't keep drawing pictures forever.
Elisa drew pictures of mummies in triangle dresses. She drew pictures of moons, trees, goats, elephants, dogs, tigers and six-pointed stars. She drew until Preeti's eyelids had become like the wings of a butterfly – slowly closing, opening and closing. She was still drawing symbols of religious traditions after Preeti had fallen asleep on her lap.

Preeti's mouth was squashed into a soft pout on Elisa's leg. This peaceful sleep was something Elisa longed for. It was the sleep of puppets with Masters – a sleep which began with knowing the watchman would stay awake. Such Masters never slept nor let their puppets dangle. It seemed as if Preeti's peaceful sleep might be her last. Elisa dared not wake her.

All night she sat against a wall, on the porch, with Preeti asleep on her lap. Her own sleep, on the contrary, was intermittent, disturbed by dog bombs blasting her noisy heart and shattering the night. She covered Preeti's exposed ear with the palm of her hand. It seemed to be the most important thing – to preserve Preeti's peace. It had become her duty.

Elisa's dreams washed over each other, reaching her conscious mind like waves, waking her throughout the night. Kelly's frightened face appeared. Maria doubled over. A tiger emerged as Elisa ran after her mother through fields of corn and sugar cane all night. She was woken by the tiger's roar, into the reality of pulsating darkness.
As the morning began to stretch across Laman, the sound of chanting prayers merged into Elisa's sleep. She dreamt of a loud, grandfather clock, chiming the time. "Hurry up," said her mother. "We have to get the taxi before it's too late." The clock-glass shattered and fell to the floor.

"Wake up, Aunty," Preeti was tugging on Elisa's sleeve. Elisa woke to see Dr Kadamb rolling a glass bottle with his foot, off the porch.

It was late morning. Elisa could smell the kitchen smoke and someone was already walking bullocks back to their enclosure after working in the fields. She squinted into the sun at the figure looming above her. "Oh, Dr Kadamb," she said as she rubbed her eyes. "Thank goodness you're back."

"It is, I must say, because of you that I have come all the way back from Delhi. Now I am feeling very tired, as you would imagine. Would you please fetch my wife and tell her I have arrived."

"Actually, she's not here, Sir," Elisa pushed herself up off the floor.

"She's not still in the field, is she?

"No, Sir. She's... gone to the hut."

Dr Kadamb's expression immediately relaxed. "Well, Well! Already?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I'm really so sorry."

"What do you mean?"

Elisa explained the details about Maria's sudden labour with anxiety, then finished by confessing that she, herself, was also very tired.

"There is no reason to be panicking. My wife is in good hands." Dr Kadamb smiled and made a flicking gesture with his hand as if to indicate that
he had no concerns in the world whatsoever. "My mother is better than any
doctor. Fourteen grandchildren she has delivered in that hut! We will just wait
a few days for some good news. You should pack now and be ready for the
bus. We will leave in two days."

Dr Kadamb said "tsala" to Preeti. She jumped off the porch and
skipped behind her father as he strolled away towards the neighbour's farm.
Elisa watched Preeti and her father as they went about their morning,
oblivious to the seriousness of their situation.

"Where have you been?" Sky interrupted.

Elisa made no reply. Dr Kadamb strolled off through fields of carrots.
She could almost see the strings attached to his arms and legs. He had a
Master like his daughter. They lived in a place ruled by Gods.
Laman, 18.1.2007

I’m in the visitor’s room with Sky. She’s asleep to any remote possibility of tragedy and not the least bit anxious about Maria.

Dr Kadamb is back. He’s equally unaffected. Not bothered, even slightly, about Maria or his daughter or anything!

Why am I sitting here – anxious and disturbed in the dark with a torch, while everybody else is asleep?

I haven’t slept properly for two nights. It’s nearly morning now. The wind is howling.

I need to go back to the hut. I can’t leave Laman until I know what happened. And I can’t just wait around for "good news". I’ve waited long enough.
There was nothing else to think about. Elisa's feet found their shoes in the dark, and her heart became the only sense organ. It's thumping filled her ears. It was better to cross a tiger in the wild, she thought, than live without obeying the pain in her heart which demanded that she follow the track, back to the hut.

Thistles clung to her dress as she paced along the soil ridge in darkness. The wind pushed her with its great hand. Her dress flapped about and hair flew in her mouth. Her eyes remained half-closed all the way through sugar cane and cornfields until she reached the hut.

In the stillness, Elisa could not hear a baby – only baby lambs and the sound of chirping high in the trees where the stars were beginning to fade. She could not hear Maria's voice. The silence of the hut was sacred and horrifying all at once. Elisa's body felt hot and cold at the same time. It seemed as if she had been travelling her whole life just to reach this place.

As she tried to gather confidence to move forwards, she heard sudden rustling among the tall corn. She shut her mouth. A black snake! Instinct told her to be quiet. Her heartbeat was too quick; her breathing too loud.

The snake, only partly visible against the soil in the dawn light, came close to Elisa's feet. It crossed her path slowly, slid over a small mound of soil and disappeared through the sugar cane. When she could no longer hear rustling, she took a shaky breath, exhaled and looked up at the mud hut.
With small steps Elisa moved forwards. The milky-dung smell of sheep anchored her to reality. Why wasn't there any noise coming from the hut? She stared into the dark until her sight adjusted. Through the door of the hut she could make out the outline of three bodies on straw, covered with blankets. But they were not moving.

A wave of hot nausea rose from her stomach to her head. She wanted to make a noise or say something but nothing came out of her mouth. For a long moment she stood with her palms sweating until a small, snuffling sound came from beneath the blanket.

Maria, woken by her baby, rolled over and began to push herself up into a sitting position. She looked at Elisa, who took her first full breath, just as the baby began to cry.

Maria took the baby in a bundle from the ground and put it to her breast. "Baby's hungry is always so urgent," she explained. She glanced over to check that the baby had not woken her mother-in-law who lay beneath blankets.

Elisa stumbled over the step into the hut and sat so close beside Maria that she could see the baby's closed eyes and open lips. She took Maria's hand without any thought and held onto it, as if the wind might blow one of them away at any moment.
Laman, 19.1.2007

I'm at Mrs Kadamb’s temple. I just woke from a three hour nap. Mrs Kadamb gave me warm goat’s milk and rubbed my back. I must have looked a wreck.

When I first saw Maria with her baby, I was so overcome with relief that I began to cry. I was having breathing spasms like a child, even after I’d lay down to rest.

Mrs Kadamb and Maria were looking very worried about me. I can’t imagine what they were thinking. All I could say, in between sobbing, was that I was very happy - which was mostly true.

Happy is not really the word. Seeing Maria with this cherub in her lap, fills me with music. The baby, all snugly wrapped in cotton, fusses around in her mother’s lap, while Maria sits serenely with eternal patience.

Imagine being a mother like that. Your baby wouldn’t feel frightened by talking strangers or barking dogs. She’d always have a lap to sleep on. She could lie there and think about nothing.

There are no words capable of describing this scene without sounding like Sky. The baby looks up at the roof, as if she can already see, even though she’s not supposed to be born yet. Perhaps she can see this invisible, living energy which I suddenly feel surrounding me.
When I woke in the hut next to Maria and her baby, I began to smile and hum an unknown tune. I came out here to sit among the sheep and goats so I wouldn’t wake Maria. I will go soon, back to the house. One of the goats is nibbling a hole in my dress.
Kelly had not stopped banging things around since returning to the pink house with news of Maria's baby girl. The news was delivered, as was the baby, with resentment. For Kelly, the human body was a finely formed, well-working machine. It was not supposed to be unmanageable, unattractive, nor out of control. Natural birth was unreasonable. It was not something she had wanted to experience herself, let alone assist.

Every extra minute spent in Laman was torturous. The mountains were bars around the village keeping her away from her son. She thought about how he would hug her when she got home and how everything would be better then. At least now, however, she had more facts to add to her research on the state of women in rural India. Now she had first-hand experience of their plight. They had nothing, Kelly decided – no *ambition*; there was probably no equivalent word in their language. They had no opportunities, no comforts, and no escape.

She took a deep breath at the realisation of her fortunate life and felt the sudden urge to check her aeroplane ticket and passport. They were still there, the dates were correct, she had not overstayed her visa, and she had finished packing everything. She tucked the documents away and lay down on her sleeping bag. It smelt like damp, mouldy sweat, but she had a washing machine at home. She did not have to wash it on a rock. She curled into a ball
and decided to sleep for a thousand years or at least until it was time to leave Laman.

"Don't wake her, Liz," Sky said. "It's better if she just sleeps until you both leave. I think she's lost more than her belt, if you know what I mean."

Sky stood at the door of the visitors' room holding two statues in her hands. The bright midday sun shone upon her shoulders.

"What are those?" Elisa whispered, raising her eyebrows at the statues.

"Come and I'll show you."

They left the room to stand on the porch together and admire Sky's creations. Elisa took the statue of the pregnant Maria in her hands. She turned it around lovingly, admiring it from every angle. The smooth bulge of the statue's stomach was decorated with an etching of an elephant's face. The statue was as fascinating as Maria herself. "But why is it an elephant?"

"Well, I was thinking about the creation of Shri Ganesha, the creation of a child, and divine creation. I'm not sure exactly what I wanted to show, but I'm quite happy with it."

Elisa gazed at the statue and felt something rise in her spine as it had done during the Qawwali music in Delhi, and beneath the tamarind tree. She waited for Sky to finish her speech about art and money, and about how the statues had been removed from their rightful home and left at the bottom of the mountain among the rubble of broken, crystal rocks. Then, before Sky
could delve any deeper into the subject of art's purpose, Elisa insisted that she absolutely had to buy the statue.

"What about this one though?" Sky held up the second statue of a woman wearing glasses and reading a detailed inscription written on the shell of an enormous egg which was carefully held in the woman's lap.

"That's not me, is it?" Elisa frowned.

Sky just smiled.

"I'm reading an egg?"

"I don't think you like this one."

"Why am I reading an egg?"

Sky had seen Elisa, in Delhi, reading some strange language embroidered on a punjabi dress and had wondered why Elisa would do such a thing. But instead of pursuing that subject, Sky simply said, "I think you're very good at analysing creation."
Laman, 20.1.2007

I've bought a couple of statues to show Sam. Dear Sam. He must be so tired of waiting for me to stop my endless thinking. I exhaust myself so I must exhaust him too by travelling across the world to speak with artists, feminists and academics, pregnant romantics and old moon-women, trying to develop some kind of surrendering attitude towards reality. Reality is, I've discovered, simple, non-intellectual, sweet and difficult.

"Some difficulty is meant to exist," Sky told me. "Otherwise, we become smug and then it's much more difficult for us to accept difficulty." But when I think about my future, I begin to feel like Elisa Doolittle. What's to become of me? I've been transformed into a flower girl. It's more satisfying for me to colour-in, roll dough, sift flour, dance and sing, than think.

Today is my last day in Laman. I spent the whole afternoon sketching the colours of slanted light and watching baby squirrels darting between trees. Their little hands were human. They jumped about like puppets. I saw red bark and lime-yellow leaves and the colour of earth was like the desert. Once, I only saw the swirling dust. But today I saw through it.
Living means

hearing when

there is no speaking

and seeing

the puppet strings.
EPILOGUE

On the aeroplane, someone tapped their little food table and Elisa heard Mrs Kadamb's toe-rings on the kitchen floor. Someone poured lemonade and Elisa saw large hands pouring boiling water. Later at home, Mrs Kadamb came into Sam's golden full-moon watch. Her bangles rattled every time Elisa passed the glasses on the shaky mantelpiece. In the kitchen, a coiled, clay pot took on the colour of a snake tattoo. It sat on a shelf beside a gold cowbell.

Home again, but which home? When Elisa looked through a tiny hole in her dress, she returned to a place where wet clothes were plastered onto thorny bushes, like some kind of artistic patchwork. In her lounge room, voices of children ran back to a valley somewhere beyond time – where shallots were toys, girls were mothers and soil was more precious than crystals. Where Godly people woke to the sounds of birds and ragas.

Today an old, Chinese woman smiled at Elisa in a flower shop. In broken English, the woman told of how her family grew roses at home. "No chemicals. Beautiful." She smiled Mrs Kadamb's temple smile; a Gnostic smile, twinkling with secret knowledge. Elisa started singing again. She took the tune home in her head. She thought about old people who wear enormous nose-rings and whose seventy-year-old sisters stoop down to touch their feet.
Sydney, 1.10.2007